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# Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13): The Imminent Threat Inside Our Borders and Throughout the Continent

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*Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13):  
The Imminent Threat Inside Our Borders and Throughout the Continent*

**By**

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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*After 9/11 we have come to look at stateless terrorists as our enemy and are developing ways to stymie their attacks and defeat them on an international scale in a new mode of conflict that does not lie in battling sovereign nations. I would advance to you the theory that we are facing the same challenges and threats by the transnational gangs that almost freely operate within our borders.*

(Logali, 2005)

## **Part One**

For the past decade, citizens, governments, and scholars alike have expressed ongoing concerns about the increasing rates of violent crimes committed by drug traffickers, organized criminal groups, and gangs within the United States and Central America. The gang Mara Salvatrucha, familiarly known as MS-13, arguably presents the largest threat to national and regional security. The gang's relatively recent emergence, growth, and expansion has raised serious concern. The criminal group is responsible for a multitude of crimes that directly threaten the welfare of citizens and state security from the suburbs of Washington D.C. to slums in Central American. This gang's coast-to-coast presence plagues cities and communities across the United States, claiming territory in at least 42 states. MS-13 now claims 10,000 members in the U.S. and 70,000 Latin American members across the entire American continent (FBI 2008). The U.S. government's concerns about gangs have heightened with the increasing growth of MS-13, both in membership and sophistication. Congress maintains an interest in crime and gang violence in Central America, as well as the related activities of the U.S. branches of MS-13 within our borders. Central American governments, the media, and some scholars have attributed a significant proportion of violent crime plaguing the region to the recent globalization of U.S. gang culture.

This thesis provides a current overview of the threat posed by MS-13, as well its historical origins and evolution as a criminal organization. The first half analyzes the birth of the gang in Los Angeles in the 1980s and the political factors contributing to MS-13's continental migration south over the past two decades. American criminal deportations play an important role in

the transnational nature of MS-13 and will be analyzed. Many blame U.S. deportation policies for the globalization of the gang and fueling the current gang epidemic in Central America. Subsequently, the context in which the gang operates within Central America, specifically in El Salvador is examined. Many scholars and government officials agree that the suppressive policies enacted by Central American states, specifically the *Mano Dura* (“hard hand”) laws have failed at countering both MS-13 membership and its associated crime and violence.

The latter half of this thesis focuses on the evolution of U.S. policy responses, at the international level, enacted to address the security implications posed by MS-13. The concern of this thesis is not whether the U.S. government is responding but rather if its responses are designed and implemented thoughtfully so that the limited funding is allocated effectively. Policymakers in the U.S. and Central American are struggling to find the right combination of suppressive and preventive policies to combat MS-13. Most analysts agree that a more comprehensive, regional approach to the sophisticated gang is necessary to prevent further escalation of the problems created by the gang’s illicit activity.

## **History**

### **Salvadoran Civil War**

The current and unrelenting social and gang violence that plagues El Salvador cannot be viewed independently from the country’s history. Additionally, the gang activity and violence cannot be divorced from the social and political context from which they emerge. Formed in Los Angeles, MS-13 was founded by Salvadoran immigrants fleeing from the civil war.

The 1980 assassination of influential Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero marked the beginning of El Salvador’s social turmoil. News footage depicting police opening fire on peaceful, unarmed protesters on the steps of the National Cathedral shocked the world. Fearing a leftist

takeover similar to those Cuba and Nicaragua would ensue in El Salvador, the U.S. took action. The Reagan administration worried about Communist expansion in Central America and believed the El Salvador military government could serve as a barrier against its spread. Consequentially, the administration allocated substantial military and economic aid to the Salvadoran military to fight the mounting internal conflict—a conflict that would transform into a brutal civil war. Over the next nine years, the infrastructure in El Salvador crumbled as the government harshly targeted anyone suspected of dissent. Nearly 70,000 citizens lost their lives in killings and bombing raids and the country was not any closer to peace than in 1989 when it had started (PBS).

In 1989, however, the international community could no longer ignore the atrocities and murders occurring in El Salvador—or the role the U.S. had in the conflict. Unconvinced by the by the State Department's insistence that the situation was improving, Congress assigned Congressman Joe Moakley to investigate. After trips to El Salvador, Moakley discovered an enormous cover-up—the Salvadoran military was responsible for the murders of the Jesuits. The investigation concluded the State Department was aware of the military's numerous conspiracies and lies over the past decade and prompted the international push to end the war. Both sides of the conflict agreed to peace talks with the United Nations facilitating the negotiation. In 1992, the Peace Accords were signed; The FMLN agreed to give their weapons to the U.N. and 102 Salvadoran military officers were dismissed (PBS). The Accords officially ended the twelve-year civil war.

The international community praised the accords, and the nation's goal to integrate their police force to include both governments forced and members of FMLN, the rebel coalition. Salvadorans viewed the peace accords as not only an official document to end the war, but also as a

newfound opportunity to rebuild their nation and society. Many hoped the peace agreements would begin a new chapter for the nation, including new democratic governance, rule of law, and economic growth. The peace accords did, undoubtedly, transform the political foundation of El Salvador. In 2009, for example, the first FMLN candidate won the presidency— ending an era of Republican Nationalist Alliance (ARENA) dominance. ARENA, a right-wing party, was responsible for terrorizing the nation with death squads throughout the 1970s and 1980s but has modernized its historical anti-communism platform. Likewise, FMLN has backed away from its original Marxist platform. The peaceful election marked a positive turning point in both Salvadoran's polarized history and political society (Farah, 2011, 3). Though there has certainly been slow success, the country remains politically plagued. The pressing issue of societal violence did not end along with the war.

Many argue the accords opened a new but different type of violent conflict, which has resulted in consistent political and social unrest. El Salvador serves as a transnational intersection for criminal organizations and activity; various internal and external actors operate freely in the country and conduct illegal trafficking of drugs, goods, money, weapons, and humans. The Salvadoran government's lack of rule of law hinders the country from escaping its core problems— all of which contribute to its gang epidemic. The most sophisticated of the gangs is undoubtedly MS-13, whose founding members can be traced back to immigrants fleeing El Salvador's civil war for refuge in Los Angeles, California.

### **Los Angeles Formation**

Emerging in the late 1980s in Los Angeles, MS-13 was formed by Salvadoran immigrants and today exists as one of the largest street gangs in the world. Hoping to escape the dead-

ly warfare, many refugees moved north to the United States as undocumented migrants. Estimates indicate that more than 300,000 Salvadorans had settled in Los Angeles (Johnson, 12, 2006.) In Los Angeles, an area already ridden with crime and gangs, immigrant families “not only struggled to overcome the trauma of the war but also faced culture shock, discrimination, crowded living situations, and underpaid jobs. Combined with the specter of deportation, these strains often led to tensions, child neglect, and domestic abuse” (Vigil 2002 135). Primarily linked to societal marginality, gang emergence is common in immigrant communities. “Gangs not only offer familial bonding, friendship, and excitement, but also steer their members toward criminal activities through which they can acquire the respect and status that are otherwise unobtainable” (Wolf 2012 70). Gangs typically emerge as urban manifestations and evidence suggests that up to 15 percent of youths within gang-affected communities can end up joining (Jutersonke, 2010, 5).

Though the exact origins of the gang are not agreed upon, some scholars believe MS-13 emerged directly from the prominent Los Angeles Mexican gang, *Barrio Diesiocho* or 18th Street gang in Los Angeles. In efforts to assimilate and survive against established minority gangs, Salvadorans banded with 18th Street. However, by the end of the 1980s, a second wave of Salvadoran immigrants grouped together and broke off from the gang to form their own group—*Mara Salvatrucha*. The translation of the gang’s name is also contested, but many believe “*Salvatrucha*” serves as a combination of “*Salvadoreño*” and “*trucha*,” meaning “quick-thinking” in Salvadoran slang (Jutersonke, 2010, 6). Many of MS-13’s founding members were reported to have included former guerrillas and Salvadoran government soldiers whose combat experience during the Salvadoran civil war contributed to the gang’s quick notoriety as one of the more vio-

lent Los Angeles gangs (Franco, 2007, 4). The 18th Street gang and MS-13 quickly became bitter rivals and turf wars began throughout the barrios of Los Angeles.

For the past decade, media reports describe the brutal violence, criminal pursuits and the U.S. government's determination to undermine the multinational gang. *Newsweek* deemed MS-13 "The Most Dangerous Gang in America" and *National Geographic Explorer* went even further with their documentary "The World's Most Dangerous Gang." In 2005, *Newsweek* introduced the American public to horrors committed across the nation by MS-13,

Two summers ago the body of a young woman who had informed against her former gang associates was found on the banks of the Shenandoah River, repeatedly stabbed and her head nearly severed. Last May in Alexandria, gang members armed with machetes hacked away at a member of the South Side Locos, slicing off some of his fingers and leaving others dangling by a shred of skin.

Similarly, the *National Geographic* documentary opens with the gruesome and high-profile murder of pregnant informant Brenda Paz in 2003. Paz, 17, was stabbed to death with her body dumped along the banks of Virginia's Shenandoah River after the gang caught onto her disloyalty. In the gripping documentary, reporter Lisa Ling not only accompanies MS-13 members in their daily patrols of territorial blocks in LA but also travels with members through the lawless slums and violent prisons of El Salvador.

As sign of solidarity, many members can often be distinguished through the abbreviated "MS-13" tattoos covering their face and bodies, wearing blue and white clothing, as well as the use of their own sign language. MS-13 engages in a variety of criminal activity including kidnapping, human trafficking, drug, auto, and weapons trafficking. Extortion or "war taxes" forced upon community members and business owners is a common practice, where failure to comply results in violence (Ribando, 2007, 4) In the U.S., members are known to work under larger Mexican cartels, engage in retail-level narcotics sales and human trafficking across the border.

For the last ten years, the gang has increasingly drawn the attention of the FBI and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, both of which have initiated widespread raids against known and suspected gang members. Cracking down on the gang has both pushed the gang to new areas across the U.S. and led to an unprecedented number of deportations—both aiding in the spread of MS-13’s reach.

Although street gangs are typically an urban phenomenon, MS-13 cliques have begun to emerge among disenfranchised Latino youth in suburban and rural areas across the country. According to a national gang survey, MS-13 is no longer bound to the Los Angeles region; the gang has claimed turf as far as Washington DC, Nashville, New York City, and Houston. (FBI 2008). Beyond national migration, the deportations of many MS-13 members has also aided in the globalization of the gang and U.S. gang culture in general into Central American countries.

Between 1998 and 2005 the US deported almost 46,000 convicts to Central America, as well as 160,000 immigrants without documentation. Three countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—received over 90 per cent of the deportations from the US (USAID, 2006, 18). The history and implications of U.S. deportations will be discussed in the next section, but the returning deportees typically had little to no connection with their country of origin, and in order to better adapt and assimilate, globalized Los Angeles gang structures and culture. The deportees quickly replicated the lifestyle that had earlier provided them with support and security in the United States. They founded local MS-13 cliques and recruited local youth.

Within a decade both the U.S. and Central American cliques have evolve and strengthened from first generation to third generation gangs. Using analysis of urban street gangs, gang expert John Sullivan categorizes gang growth and progression through three “generations.” According to Sullivan, through globalization, technological advances, and a multitude of other fac-

tors, criminal organizations can progress from traditional turf gangs (first generation), to market-oriented gangs (second generation), to a new third generation that includes political motives.

First-generation gangs are characterized as traditional street gangs, concerned with local, turf-oriented activities. They typically engage in unsophisticated criminal activities and operate under a loose leadership structure. Second-generation gangs are characterized as having a more organized structure similar to a business. Gang activities revolve around the drug market, cover more territory than first generation gangs, and operate under a centralized chain of command. Most gangs are classified as either first or second generation, as they tend to be concerned with local issues such and maintaining respect for its members; motives are not always entrepreneurial in nature. In addition, gang leadership tends to be short-term, with leaders replaced often and easily. Consequentially, these gangs lack adequate capital and manpower to operate as sophisticated criminal enterprises.

Third-generation gangs, on the other hand, are the most sophisticated type of gang and are characterized as organized crime syndicates, operating within complex networks like those of the notorious Italian mafia. Today, however, these gangs operate under a strong, vertical-style of leadership with serious sanctions for members who disobey orders or disrespect codes of loyalty. Third generation gangs typically conduct criminal activity on the national or transnational level. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines organized crime syndicates as any group having a formalized structure whose primary objective is to obtain money through illegal activities. (U.S., 2007). Additionally the FBI describes these organized criminal enterprises as exercising tactics of violence and forms of political corruption to maintain their authority or dominance in their realm of criminal operations. Federal crimes that organized criminal enterprises like MS-13 typically engage in are specified in statute as part of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Or-

ganizations (RICO) include drug trafficking, alien smuggling, bribery, fraud, and money laundering. State crimes include murder, extortion, and robbery (Organized Crime). These complex and sophisticated enterprises are threatening on local, national, and regional levels, as they challenging security and rule of law.

These gangs often have goals to acquire political and/or financial power and Sullivan asserts they may even “embrace quasi-terrorism or true terrorism” to achieve these goals. A group of select researchers even go as far as comparing MS-13 to terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda. They claim they share similar motives and characteristics, such as having “a propensity for indiscriminate violence, intimidation [and] coercion [that] transcend[s] borders, and target[s] nation-states.” However, no formal studies have been conducted to date to affirm such extreme claims and nothing to date indicates MS-13 has ideological motives. On the other hand, politicalization, internationalization, and sophistication have led MS-13 to acquire many of the “organizational and operational attributes found with net-based triads, cartels and terrorist entities” (Sullivan 3). The vast continental spread of MS-13 undeniably illustrates the “potential impact of third generation gangs with cliques (or cells)... demonstrating elaborate, flexible, and redundant organization and leadership, functioning as networks with extensive transnational linkages” (Sullivan, 2008, 5).

The gang thrives on the exploitation at local levels and maneuvers accordingly to maximize profit margins. The strategy has had distressing results especially in international cities, sub-national or cross-border regions, and “lawless zones” (Sullivan, 2008, 10). Such areas can range from a matter of street blocks, vast regions, to entire countries. Lawless, not necessarily ungoverned, regions can be defined as areas rules by de-facto governments such as gangs or insurgents fill the void of state institutions. These zones traditionally are associated with failed states, such as El

Salvador, but similar examples can be found in “failed communities” within the U.S. The gang continues to migrate from LA, settling in smaller, suburban and rural areas across the country not accustomed to gang activity and related crimes. Growing

MS-13 membership and increasingly brutal acts of violence have especially overwhelmed police and legal systems in Central American countries, notably El Salvador and Honduras. The gang challenges the legitimacy of states already plagued with political corruption and lack of resources, and acts as an alternative government—often imposing taxes on individuals and businesses. In addition, reports exist of the gang targeting police and NGO institutions to further their goals and expressing political aims. “Exploiting seams in law enforcement and judicial structures, immigration (often forced by deportation), and technologies that foster communication, third generations gangs have also become de facto global criminals, threatening local stability and potentially fueling broader networked conflict” (Sullivan, 2008, 10).

Though all acknowledge the cross-border existence of MS-13, not all scholars agree it is a transnational gang network operating under a single chain of command. Dispute exists regarding the level of coordination between the cliques, as analysts have been unable to trace a clear leadership structure within the whole of the gang. While some scholars believe MS-13 coordinates activities from a hierarchal and cross border command, others suggest the network of gang cliques are only loosely connected, united only under symbolic and normative behavior (Cruz 2007 377). According to the ITAM’s El Salvador study consisting of gang member interviews regarding the transnational communication among cliques, there was no evidence linking a systematic or institutionalized command structure between the U.S. and Central America (Wolf, 2012, 17). In addition, some analysts view what may appear to be new branches of MS-13 to perhaps be nothing more than young wannabes copying the notorious larger gang in order to ap-

pear more legitimate. Though this debate exists regarding a clear operational structure, many scholars agree the “cloning” of cliques across borders is a unique threat to regional security and stability in the Americas. The transnational nature of MS-13 challenges states authority and rule of law and poses a complex public and national security threats in both Central America and the United States.

### **U.S. Deportation of Gang Culture**

Public intolerance to illegal immigrants increased in the early 1990s. U.S. immigration legislation became more restrictive and consequently, an unprecedented number of U.S. gang members were repatriated to Central America. The majority of scholars view U.S. deportation responses and El Salvador’s *Mano Dura* policies to combat the gang as ineffective and actually facilitating MS-13’s transnational spread. According to a UN report, “There is a widely held belief in both Central America and the Caribbean that recent crime troubles can be tied directly to criminal deportees” (2010). Prior to the 1990s, Central American countries like El Salvador and Honduras had no sizable gang problems; however beginning in the late 1990s, the U.S. greatly increased deportations of illegal immigrants, especially criminal deportations. This has overwhelmed Central American governments and led to regional instability.

According to Kevin Kozak of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, 30% of gang members picked up by his agency are arrested and criminal charges are placed against them, while the other 70% are deported (*Economist*, 2006). Due to their illegal status in the U.S. however, and a lack of evidence to prosecute them, deportation is a fairly routine route in the career of MS-13 members. When analyzing El Salvador, the country receives an average of five planes of 100 repatriates a week from the U.S., with one of the planes full of convicted

criminals (Arnson 2011 19). As a result, deported MS-13 members return to their native countries, recruit new members, and conduct gang activities more openly,

“If even a self-admitted gang member gets off a plane in San Salvador or Tegucigalpa, but there is no evidence to try him for a crime, he has to be allowed to walk free... In most cases, therefore, the *marero* freshly deported from Los Angeles is free to organise on his home turf—with all the prestige, preparedness and sophistication he has picked up in the United States.” (*The Economist* 2006).

The federal response to MS-13 has largely involved the enforcement of criminal and immigration laws, including the deportation of alien gang members. The sharp increase in deportations of MS-13 gang members from the U.S., primarily to Honduras and El Salvador beginning in the mid-1990s, instilled the widespread belief that the U.S. is to blame for the “exported” Los Angeles gang deportees and the transnational growth of MS-13,

Critics from both the United States and Central America contend that deportations have helped perpetuate a revolving door of gang members who move back and forth between north and south, bringing other illegal immigrants, including more gang members, to the United States through Mexican smuggling routes, hence negatively affecting everyone’s gang problems. (Lopez, *Los Angeles Times*, 2005)

Both the media and Central American officials alike attribute a large portion of the region’s violence and crime on gang-deportees from the U.S. and contend the U.S. flooded Central America with criminals who brought with them both a Los Angeles gang lifestyle and syndicate-like criminal techniques they learned in U.S. prisons. From there, the gangs recruited new members from among the local populations and social turmoil now plagues the region. The validity of the correlation between U.S. deportations and MS-13’s transnational growth will be examined in this thesis.

Policymakers in Central America have expressed ongoing concerns that increasing U.S. deportations of individuals with criminal records are worsening the gang and security problems in the region. The Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have

received the highest numbers of U.S. deportations (after Mexico) for the last several fiscal years. Despite the large numbers of deportees repatriated to the region, the Central American countries have typically received a lower percentage of individuals deported from the United States on criminal grounds than other top receiving countries like Jamaica or the Dominican Republic (see Table 1).

**Table 1. U.S. Deportations to Top Receiving Countries: FY2010-FY2012**

(Including Annual Percentage of Individuals Deported on Criminal Grounds)

Country	FY2010	% Crim.	FY2011	% Crim.	FY2012	% Crim.
Mexico	279,687	54.7%	286,893	59.1%	289,686	60.0%
Honduras	25,635	41.5%	23,822	47.5%	32,464	43.7%
Guatemala	31,347	31.3%	33,324	37.9%	40,498	35.2%
El Salvador	20,830	41.4%	18,870	47.3%	19,694	46.1%
Dom. Republic	3,853	61.1%	3,380	65.0%	3,262	69.4%
Brazil	3,321	16.3%	3,634	17.0%	2,804	18.1%
Colombia	2,617	49.6%	2,273	49.8%	1,681	66.7%
Ecuador	2,559	29.8%	1,991	40.4%	1,976	41.4%
Nicaragua	1,975	42.4%	1,693	45.5%	1,507	51.6%
Jamaica	1,548	79.1%	1,572	82.0%	1,362	89.0%
Haiti	344 <sup>a</sup>	39.8%	731	34.1%	758	74.9%

**Source:** Prepared by CRS with information provided by the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Office of Enforcement and Removal. Figures include "removals" (deportations), but not voluntary departures (returns). FY2013 figures are not yet available.

*Note: Criminal deportees have been convicted of a crime in the U.S. that makes one eligible for deportation under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1996. Not all individuals who have been deported on criminal grounds are gang members or violent criminals; Low level drug convictions and some non-violent offenses may result in a removal on criminal grounds (explained later).*

Without doubt the cultivation of MS-13's transnational operations in El Salvador and neighboring countries accelerated after the United States began deporting illegal immigrants,

many with criminal convictions, back to the region after the passage of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996. Though criminal deportations have served as a cornerstone in U.S. policy against the gang, it is difficult to pinpoint it as one of the key factors directly affecting the growth and spread of MS-13.

U.S. deportations of MS-13 members certainly aid in MS-13's transnational reach but direct proportionality among the two is difficult to measure without reliable data. In 2007, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime conducted a study that questions U.S. deportations as the driving force for the explosive growth of MS-13 and gangs in general in Central America, "there is no denying the effect gang culture from the United States has had on Central America's *Maras*... but more research is required to determine the extent on which deportees become involved in crime on their return" (UNODC, 2007). Much of the information tracing Central America's gang problem with U.S. criminal deportees is anecdotal. Until 2007, the deportation process was conducted under a strict privacy policy, in which U.S. agencies did not inform receiving Central American governments about their criminal records of deportees (Gyves, 2011, 182). As a result, local Central American judicial and prison systems unable to monitor deportees and existing information is largely collected by gang members themselves accounts or law enforcement which are not always credible sources, "Having learned from its immigration policy mistakes of the 1990s and early 2000s, combined with a new emphasis on terrorism prevention post-9/11, the U.S. is now trying to bolster information sharing partnerships, both domestically and abroad" (Gyves, 2011, 194). Today various programs, that will be discussed later, aim to adequately notify and prepare countries receiving criminal deportees.

## **The Presence of MS-13 in Central America: An Focus on El Salvador**

This section is divided into three parts. First, the widespread issues of violence and crime within El Salvador specially will be illustrated to provide context for the grounds in which trans-national cliques of MS-13 operate. Secondly, the various social factors exacerbating the reach of MS-13 in El Salvador will be examined. Finally, the Salvadoran government's national anti-gang responses, beginning with the harmful and ineffective *Mano Dura* laws leading up to current strategies will be evaluated for their success in combating MS-13.

### **Societal Violence**

Central America faces significant security challenges. Criminal threats, fragile political and judicial systems, and social hardships such as poverty and unemployment contribute to widespread insecurity in the region. One of the most visible expressions of Central American violence is undoubtedly MS-13 and rival gangs. Although gangs as a social phenomenon have long existed in Central American societies, their growth and influence over the past two decades is unprecedented. In an effort to address the social disorder, national and regional policy-makers have sought to link gangs with the exponential rise in urban chaos and violence. Although gangs are unquestionably a major concern in Central America, a closer examination of sensationalist claims is necessary.

Acquiring reliable information about the presence of MS-13 and Central American gangs in general is difficult. Data is scarce and even the data that does exist can prove problematic. Many Central American countries lack sufficient data collections and the resources to conduct them, and often times political interference hinders significant progress. As a result, basic consensus on the size and scale of gang membership is difficult to establish. Some official statistics

report 69,000 gang members operating throughout the region, while estimates from scholars claim that the number could be as high as 200,000 (UNODC 2007) Regardless, however, the numbers are unprecedented and to put them into perspective, “even the lower estimate implies that there are more gang members than military personnel in Central America: Nicaragua and Honduras register approximately 12,000 soldiers each, while El Salvador and Guatemala report 13,000 and 27,000 military personnel respectively” (UNODC, 2007).

Despite quantitative inconsistencies, numerous qualitative studies reveal how gangs, especially, MS-13, play a crucial role in the urban violence across the region. MS-13 has found the region to be a prime location for recruiting and illicit operational activities. Estimates of the number of gang members in Central America vary widely, but the United Nations pins the number around 70,000, with the majority of these gang members residing in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Ribando, 2007, 3). Though this estimate does include *pandillas* members, the vast majority represent either of the two larger *mara* gangs, *Barrio Dieciocho* (18th Street Gang) or MS-13—the more sophisticated of the two. There is a tendency to speak about Central American gangs generically, but an important linguistic difference exists between the terms “*maras*” and “*pandillas*” when analyzing the situation. Many scholars define *maras* as gangs with transnational operations with specific migratory patterns. — a relatively new phenomenon. There are reportedly just two *mara* groups, MS-13 and rival gang *Barrio Dieciocho*. *Pandillas*, on the other hand, refer to more localized youth gangs that have long been part of Central American societies.

The World Bank estimates that the overall economic costs of crime and violence average 7.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) in Central America (Berthet, 2011). The persistent lack

of security in Central America not only threatens regional governments and civilians alike, but it also presents a variety of threats to the United States' national security.

The U.S. has a compelling strategic interest in reinforcing our partnership with Central America to combat MS-13 and thus curb illicit activity in throughout the region. Regional Central American cliques of MS-13 are involved in drug trafficking, violence, crime, and human smuggling that directly afflict many areas within the United States. Domestic and regional arms and cash flows routinely move south across our border and through Mexico and sustain the gang. MS-13, in addition to drug traffickers and other criminal organizations in Central America, has grown in size and sophistication over the last decade, allowing the gang to become a major social actor, especially El Salvador. Salvadoran leaders and civilians have deemed the surge in gang crime and violence as a national emergency requiring urgent regional cooperation and response. The international community is increasingly linking gangs to recent internal conflict in so-called 'weak' and 'fragile' states such as El Salvador. The US Army War College described the region's gangs as constituting a "new urban insurgency" with the goal "to depose or control the governments of targeted countries" through "*coups d'street*" (Jutersonke, 2009, 5).

While most scholars view the U.S. MS-13 cliques as highly structured and hierarchial in terms of structure, less consensus exists regarding the organization of Central American cliques. Some analysts instead assert that cliques in Central American do not operate under a single chain of command nor represent an organization capable of transnational sophistication. The Central American members instead possess an "umbrella nature that is more symbolic of a particular historical origin than demonstrative of any real unity, be it of leadership or action"... more of a social morphology than a real phenomenon, based on the fact that the steady flows of deportees from the US share a common language and reference points" (Jutersonke, 2010, 7).

Despite disagreement on the structure of MS-13 and to what extent the gang is responsible for the heavy violence that plagues the region, little doubt is cast that MS-13 frequently engages in dangerous activities. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports that somewhere between 545 and 707 metric tons of cocaine are shipped to the U.S. each year from Colombia and that 90% of the drug passes through Central America and Mexico.

(U.S. Department of Justice National Drug Threat Assessment 2009, National Drug Intelligence Center). A long and unguarded Pacific coastline in addition to loose borders with Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua allow for advantageous land and sea transit routes in El Salvador; consequently, El Salvador serves as a prime drug, human, and weapons trafficking location between South and North America. According to the State Department report in 2009, the country disturbingly seized less than 1% of the 4 metric tons of cocaine that passed through its borders (U.S. Department of State, 2010 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report Volume 1, Country Report: El Salvador).

Rarely are gangs involved in transnational narcotic wholesaling or smuggling; however there is an increasing amount of evidence suggesting that MS-13 members are hardly removed from the widespread drug trafficking, “The broader political economy of violence, particularly the widespread availability of firearms and strategic location of El Salvador on the international drug-smuggling route, have a bearing on the types of activity the gangs undertake” (Hume, 2007, 741). Drug shipments passing from Colombia to Mexico, for example, pass between smaller Central American cartels that keep a percentage of the load and profit. Members are known to provide local protection for the smaller cartels or engage in street-level distribution of drugs and in extortion rackets. Some reports go so far in claiming MS-13 may also be involved in higher-level criminal drug distribution. Regardless of their exact role, MS-13 members and their rela-

tionship with drug traffickers have infiltrated the police and judiciary sectors of government and exercise power through a range of operations (Arnson, 2011, 9).

This increased involvement in the drug industry over the past decade has led MS-13 towards assuming more violent norms (FBI, 2011). An interview with a female member of MS-13 revealed that because firearms are fairly easy to obtain in El Salvador, Salvadoran cliques are “better armed and more deadly than their U.S. counterparts, and it is not unusual for gangs to possess heavy weaponry;” Members travel armed with legal and illegal firearms, homemade firearms such as grenades, and knives (Hume, 2007, 742) A heavy combination of transnational criminal activity, gang activity, and violence makes citizens fearful, “Arguably the most shocking indicator of the depths of the criminality and security challenges facing El Salvador is its homicide rate, which is routinely among the highest in the world” (Farah, 2011, 5).

Additionally, gangs have increasingly been involved in extortions of residents, bus drivers, and business owners in major cities throughout El Salvador. Failure to pay often results in harassment or violence by gang members. The events in September 2010 serve as a prime example of how the gang has become a prominent social actor in the country. In protest of recent anti-gang legislation, the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs jointly issued a threat for public bus drivers to stay home for three days or face consequences. Fearing for their lives, bus drivers obeyed and stalled country’s transport system (*Governments*, 2010). Rebeca Grynspan, the author of United Nation Development Program’s report of Human Development in Central America, commented in 2009 on the violence, “Apart from its economics costs, which are concrete and indisputable, one of the main reasons why this is a crucial issue is that violence and crime are affecting the day-to-day decisions of the populations, making insecurity a clear hindrance to human development...One of the most difficult costs to quantify is that of lost freedoms.” (UN Development

Program, “Central America: Respect for the rule of law is most effective remedy against violence,” October 2009 [content.undp.org/go/newsroom](http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom)).

Public opinion, media, many and Central American officials have blamed MS-13 and other gangs for a large percentage of violent crimes committed in those countries. However, a sizable portion of analysts assert that many of these claims are exaggerated. In 2007, UNODC, for example, found limited evidence linking gang members to increased incidents of violent crime. This tendency to blame gangs can be attributed to the fact that gangs are often more visible than other criminal groups. UNODC instead suggests increased regional violence with increased drug trafficking routes (Seelke, 2014, 4). In either instance, most agree gang violence is only one, although sizable, part of a broad spectrum of violence in Central America. El Salvador’s transnational and local crime and gang-related violence pose a serious threat to the nation’s democratic governance and state legitimacy. The complex problems that exacerbate gang membership and activities must be approached and analyzed at the state and regional levels; without targeting the underlying factors that allow MS-13 prosper in the region, the instability in El Salvador will persist.

### **Factors Exacerbating the Growth of MS-13**

El Salvador would eventually adopt zero-tolerance policies in attempts to curb the violence and gang trouble. The nation’s responses will be evaluated later in this section, but extensive research suggests their repressive approach appears to have actually exacerbated the problem, “Repression cannot remedy the underlying societal contradictions that generated the gangs in the first place, and are instead contributing to the escalation of more organised—and in some cases, flagrantly violent—crime” (Jutersonke, 2009, 14) There are a myriad of factors why the appeal of MS-13 membership continues to grow, especially in Central America. Many research-

ers point to broad social and economic phenomena such as poverty and social exclusion, a lack of educational and employment opportunities, and social stigmas as the key determinants in shaping the current gang epidemic in Central America. When analyzing El Salvador especially, some researchers point to fundamental and "deep-seated issues such as the long legacy of war, machismo, and the availability of small arms in the region...increasing (regional and national) inequality and exclusion" (Jutersonke, 2009, 14) as underlying reasons for MS-13's growing prominence. These factors perpetuate the tendency of at-risk seeking gang membership, and until addressed, will most likely persist.

Societal stigmas against MS-13 members and gang-deportees from the United States have made the process of leaving a gang extremely difficult and perpetuate the cycle of crime—leaving members with the notion they have no alternative choice. Many organizations that work with former gang members, particularly those with criminal records, say that offender reentry is a major problem in many countries. Ex-gang members report that employers are often unwilling to hire them. Tattooed former gang members, especially returning U.S. deportees whose first language is English, have had the most difficulty finding steady employment. Some gang members have gone through complete tattoo removal, a long and expensive process, which many believe is necessary in order to blend into society better (Ribando, 8, 2007).

Numerous studies have also pointed to sensationalist media coverage of the gang phenomenon in Central America as a major factor actually perpetuating the problem. The media has contributed to a sense of insecurity in the region and may have inadvertently enhanced the reputation of MS-13 and made it seem more appealing to at-risk youth. Exaggerated media reports may have also contributed to the popular perception, which has been backed by politicians, that MS-13 and other gangs are responsible for the majority of violent crime throughout the region.

This sentiment prompted much of the public to support tough law enforcement measures against gangs, hire private security firms, and, in isolated cases, take vigilante action against suspected youth gang members (Seelke, 1014, 6).

### **National Anti-gang Efforts in El Salvador**

As previously outlined, MS-13 serves as an undeniable social actor in El Salvador and other Central American countries in which it takes up residency. The government contends MS-13 and rival gangs responsible for the majority of social violence and public insecurity. In efforts to regain control, El Salvador has issued various national responses that have legitimized and justified the incarceration and persecution of MS-13 members. Unfortunately, scholars and officials cast these national movements, most notoriously the *Mano Dura* legislation, as failures in curbing gang activity, homicide rates, law enforcement corruption. Many contest that anti-gang efforts have in fact contributed to the region's social insecurity.

For the past two decades various Salvadoran administrations have wrestled with how to control the gang violence within the rule of law. The government initially responded harshly to the threat posed by MS-13 and rival gang insurgency by implementing the "*Mano Dura*" or "strong-hand" approach. Enacted in 2003, the repressive response advocated the immediate imprisonment for up to five years of individuals as young as 12 years old who displayed gang-related tattoos or flashed gang signs in public. The tough law enforcement reforms initially proved to be a way for leaders to show that they were serious about combating the gangs. Early public reactions to the tough anti-gang legislation were extremely positive, as media coverage thrived demonizing the activities of tattooed delinquents. Other Central American states followed El Salvador's approach; Honduran authorities implemented "*Cero Tolerancia*" ("Zero Tolerance") laws in 2003, Guatemalan authorities adopted "*Plan Escoba*" ("Operation Broomsweep")

in 2004, and Nicaragua continued to enforce anti-gang initiatives that had been enacted in 1999. However, the majority of studies challenge their effectiveness.

The police discriminatorily rounded up thousands of young Salvadorans based on their appearance, associations, and address, and in its first year, roughly 20,000 individuals were arrested, the majority without charge, under the legislation. Some researchers assert the marginalization of the country's youth inadvertently led to increased solidarity and MS-13 recruitment. Many argued that "The legislation [was] highly subjective regarding the criteria that identify someone as a gang member, leeway that gives the Salvadoran police the authority to question and ultimately arrest young men and women without due process of law" (Bruneau, 2011, 15). Subsequently the laws were declared unconstitutional by the Salvadoran Supreme Court for violating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and about 95 percent of the individuals arrested in the first year were eventually released without charge (Hume 2007). However, Tony Saca was elected as president El Salvador in 2004 largely on the basis of his promises to continue the crack down on gangs and crime.

In 2004, the country passed the "*Mano Super Dura*" package of anti-gang reforms. The reforms extended previous provisions and stiffened the penalties for gang membership by lengthening prison sentences. The new law required the police obtain proof of active delinquent behavior prior to the arrest of an individual and also provided some protections for minors accused of gang-related crimes. However the reforms enhanced police power to search and arrest suspected gang members and stiffened penalties for convicted gang members (Seelke, 2014, 9). Massive MS-13 member sweeps continued under the new law and caused the country's prison population to double; from 2003 to 2008, inmates in El Salvador doubled from 6,000 to 12,000, with about 40 percent of who are allegedly gang members (Hume 2007).

Already notoriously ridden with inadequate space, lack of staff, and unsanitary conditions, prisons in El Salvador were further overwhelmed of suspected gang members. With MS-13 members placed alongside rival 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang members, huge riots initially ensued with hundreds of fatalities. Desperate, the Salvadoran authorities separated the two gangs in different prisons, “a de facto nod to their increasing power and a de facto admission that the state was relatively powerless to stop them...Leaders of these gangs had more time to organize, strategize, and plan their activities” (Arnson, 2011, 21).

More recently, in December 2012, the country had 27,038 inmates who were being held in facilities designed to hold a maximum of only 8,328 individuals. Approximately 10,212 of those 27, 038 inmates were reported as current or former gang members (DOS, 2012). Inside, the prisons serve as operational safe-zones where MS-13 members can strategize and plan without fear of law enforcement or rival gangs. Due a lack of staff and the prevalence of corrupt officials, the gang members are typically able to continue with criminal activities while locked up (DOS 2012). Studies have shown that, similar to in the U.S., gang leaders within the prisons are able to increase the discipline and cohesion among their ranks. In 2008, for example, U.S. law enforcement found evidence suggesting that MS-13 leaders jailed in El Salvador were ordering retaliatory assassinations of individuals in the Washington, DC, metro area, as well as designing plans to unify their cliques with those in the United States (DOS 2008).

In efforts to adapt to the discriminatory police sweeps, MS-13 members today are changing their behavior to avoid detection. Contrary to common identifying elements, many members are hiding or removing their tattoos, changing their clothing, and forgoing the use of hand signals (Cruz, 2010, 14). Forced to operate more discreetly, MS-13 has also begun to recruit members from different demographics of society. According to some studies, the gang is transitioning to-

wards recruiting non-traditional members in efforts to evade the common young male ridden with tattoos stereotype. The gang is approaching white-collar workers and professional women for example, who can blend in better in society,

Not only can they operate more covertly, but the new members have also brought with them valuable business skills. The well-educated rookies now teach white-collar crime skills to the veterans, enabling the gangs to extend their tendrils into more lucrative arenas like fraud and to enhance the profitability of their traditional criminal activities. (Gyves, 2010, 195).

While El Salvador has slowly backed away from promoting the *Mano Dura* policies, official reports maintain the harsh anti-gang initiatives generate significant reductions in criminal violence. According to Salvadoran officials, even though many suspects are eventually released, gang detainees provided law enforcement officials with invaluable sources of intelligence information that those officials have since used to design better anti-gang strategies. (DOS 2008). However, the majority of evidence and researchers indicate that positive effects are temporary and tenuous. Many analysts assert that the policies reinforced gang territoriality and unity, “On the one hand, territorial strategies became more refined, ensuring gang sustainability and leading to the emergence of new territories. On the other hand, zero tolerance reinforced emotional ties and a sense of belonging to the gang, especially in prison where imprisoned members perceived the gang as a transnational community” (Riveria, 2010, 2). Initially, the crackdowns were exceedingly popular with the general public but were vigorously opposed by human rights groups. In 2005, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International presented disturbing evidence to the U.S. State Department of the existence of paramilitary death squads in El Salvador that deliberately targeted youth gang members of which the state authorities were aware (Jutersonke, 2009, 9). Although the *Mano Dura* policies have largely been phased out, thousands of military troops remain deployed around El Salvador to assist their underpaid and poorly equipped police carry

out public security. It is unclear when the deployments will end.

On a positive note, the Salvadoran government was praised in 2012 by the international community by facilitating a historic albeit risky truce involving MS-13 and their bitter rival, the 18th Street gang. The truce contributed to a large reduction in homicides, before beginning to unravel in recent months. The truce carries risks for the Salvadoran government that will take office on June 1, 2014, such as what might happen if the gangs were to walk away from the truce stronger than before and/or if the truce were to end abruptly and prompt an escalation in intra-gang violence.

In 2011, Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes appointed David Munguía Payés as his defense minister. As a retired general as Minister of Justice and Public Security, most assumed he would continue with a repressive approach to combating the gangs. Upon entering office Munguía Payés did restructure the Salvadoran police force and create a new elite anti-gang unit that has received U.S. training. However, Payés surprised many analysts in 2012 by supporting a MS-13 and 18th Street gang truce facilitated by a former guerrilla fighter and congressman and a Catholic bishop. Munguía Payés agreed to transfer high-ranking gang leaders currently serving time in prison to less secure prisons in order to facilitate negotiations for a truce between the gangs. Though neither side agreed to ceasing control of their territories, they agreed to the establishment of “peace zones” in municipalities across the country; in these zones, gangs pledged to stop criminal activity and the government promised to withdraw the military. The gang leaders agreed not to forcibly recruit children, perpetrate violence against women, and turned in small amounts of weapons. (Martínez 2012).

By January 2013, the first four municipalities participating in the “peace zone” plan had been announced, one governed by the leftist FMLN party and the other three governed by the

conservative ARENA party. Today a total of 11 municipalities are participating, but there are many complaints that they have not received the support they were promised from the government. A nonprofit has been established to coordinate international efforts to support the truce, including the “peace zone” plan, and the European Commission is supporting development and conflict resolution programs in the “peace zone” communities. The coordinator of U.N. programs in El Salvador has said that the truce presents a unique window of opportunity for the country to find a long-term, integral solution to violence and criminality, and U.S. human rights groups have also praised the truce as shifting the focus and attention from suppressive action against gangs towards prevention and rehabilitation programs.

While some have praised the truce and “peace zone” plan, others, however, have expressed doubts about the gangs’ commitment to ending all crimes and the government’s ability to ensure that the “peace zones” will continue to be supported and patrolled. U.S. officials have made few public comments about the truce; in August 2012, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Mari Carmen Aponte reportedly said that the truce had reduced crime, but that policies must “address the root causes [of crime] in order to be effective and for any reduction [in crime] to be sustainable.” (Bureau of Consular Affairs 2012). A State Department Travel Warning for El Salvador issued on January 23, 2012, stated that the truce “contributed to a decline in the homicide rate ... [but] the sustainability of the decline is unclear, and the truce [has] had little impact on robbery, assaults, and other violent crimes” (Bureau of Consular Affairs 2012). The most recent government Travel Warning issued in April of this year warns, “Although Salvadoran police statistics show a decrease in annual homicides during 2012 and 2013, the homicide rate has been rising steadily since August 2013. From mid-February through April 2014, El Salvador has experienced an average of almost 10 people killed per day - the highest homicide rate since 2011”

(Bureau of Consular Affairs 2014).

Regardless if one views the truce optimistically or skeptically, the Salvadoran government has recognized MS-13 and rival 18th Street Gang as legitimate political actors. By recognizing their demands, many argue the government has taken a hefty risk. If the truce fails, the gangs could emerge even more powerful and organized after taking advantage of less restrictive prison conditions (Farah, 5, 2012.). The strength of MS-13 and culture of violence that surrounds the gang is aided by consistent setbacks in the judicial branch in El Salvador; it is vital all affected countries wage positive regional relationships and strategies in efforts to combat the transnational nature of MS-13,

As such, arguably the single biggest obstacle to developing a coherent approach to urban gang violence in Central America is the deeply entrenched oligarchic nature of the societies in the region... Put another way, it seems that gangs have become convenient scapegoats on which to blame the isthmus' problems and through which those in power attempt to maintain an unequal *status quo*. At the same time, however, they also simultaneously embody the risks of violent social action that will inevitably erupt in the face of attempts to preserve an unjust society. (Jutersonke, 2009, 15).

U.S. policymakers are striving to coordinate anti-gang efforts and have allocated millions of dollars in foreign assistance to not only combat the gang but also to deter political impunity and corruption in Central America. The next part of this thesis will examine the impact and effectiveness of these various U.S. regional policies.

## Part Two

The vast majority of policymakers and experts view the evolution of MS-13 into a trans-national enterprise as a significant threat. Once loosely organized as a first generation gang primarily focused on illegal drug trade, MS-13 is expanding their illicit repertoire to include a new, more complex range of activities including money laundering, extortion, and counterfeiting. The U.S. has long been involved with Colombia's fight against crime and drug trafficking. However, today in the U.S., political concern is mounting over the lawlessness and violence in Central America and Mexico along with the potential spill over consequences they present. Analysts predict that illicit trans-border gang activities may accelerate illegal immigration and trafficking of drugs, persons, and weapons to U.S. soil. Additionally, others maintain that gang violence will increase in the United States as a result of the international contact and coordination of gang activity.

The continental threat is prompting experts and policymakers to question whether current U.S. policies are effective. The first section described the punitive *Mano Dura* laws enacted by Central American governments to suppress gang violence and crime. Widespread agreement exists the policies were not only ineffective in their mission but arguably also contributed to the proliferation of MS-13 in the region. The U.S. has also focused anti-gang policies, both domestically and abroad, around a suppressive framework—relying heavily on law enforcement strategies. The first part of this section will provide an overview of the effectiveness of federal U.S. policies. The U.S. policy approach against MS-13 has centered upon the convergence of criminal and immigration law resulting in deportations of gang members, the development and coordination of domestic intergovernmental anti-gang strategies, and active support for regional anti-gang efforts.

However, after a decade of U.S. political investment, MS-13 persists and thrives, especially in Latin America. This has caused many experts to question the U.S.'s overwhelming suppressive approach towards eradicating MS-13 and instead explore measures more preventative in nature. The preventative approach to gang violence addresses the underlying social inequality and lack of educational and employment opportunities for youth tempted by gang membership. The second part of this section explores international and national preventative approaches aimed at reducing MS-13 membership. A variety of programs led by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Central America provides promising and long-term alternatives to gang membership to the region's large population of high-risk youth. Domestically, youth delinquency prevention programs, such as G.R.E.A.T. and the Boys and Girls Club, are proven and successful way to mitigate gang membership; universal and selected programs target the country's at-risk youth by bringing them off of the streets and fostering positive and productive environments.

The underlying societal factors, that U.S. suppression policies have largely ignored, have allowed MS-13 to continue to gain members and strength in the politically unstable streets of Central America. In addition to current law enforcement strategies, increased federal funding for preventative programs would provide a necessary agent in the long-term fight against MS-13.

	<b>Domestic</b>	<b>Foreign</b>
<b>U.S. Suppression Policies</b>	FBI: MS-13 National Gang Task Force (MS13 NGTF); ICE: Operation Community Shield, criminal deportation; U.S. Treasury: MS-13 designation as a TCO	FBI: Transnational Anti-Gang Initiative (TAG), Central American Fingerprinting Exploitation (CAFE); DOS:Merida Initiative/CARSI
<b>U.S. Prevention Policies</b>	Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach (GPTTO)/The Boys and Girls Club; Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.)	USAID: Partnership for Growth (PFG) programs

### **U.S. Suppression Efforts**

There are three key elements to the U.S. suppressive approach against MS-13: (1) increasing the number of crimes deemed as felonies and thus subjected to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (deportation), (2) the development and coordination of domestic intergovernmental anti-gang strategies, and (3) active support for anti-gang efforts in foreign countries, especially the Merida Initiative/CARSI.

### **Deportation**

In the early 1990s, Congress began passing legislation federalizing certain gang-related crimes and providing additional penalties for individuals convicted under these laws. According to Mathew Coleman and Austin Kocker, “the criminalization of immigration—that is, the treatment of immigration as a criminal problem, as well as the infiltration of criminal law statute into immigration law” dates back to the late 1980s (Coleman, 2011, 230). The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 included an aggravated felony charge originally directed to ensure the detention and de-

portation of drug lords facing the courts for various felony charges; however, the charge was substantively expanded throughout the 1990s to include a wider range of crimes (both present and past convictions) to be deemed as felonies and grounds for deportation. Many of the crimes added to the list would not hold as “aggravated” or felonies for U.S. citizens. After the enactment of the 1990 Immigration Act, a steady stream of laws passed and lawmakers hacked away at the possibility for court scrutiny of deportation hearings.

In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IRIRA). The Act expanded the categories of illegal immigrants subject to deportation and made it more difficult for immigrants to get relief from removal. IRIRA expanded the term “aggravated felony” to include infractions previously deemed as minor crimes or misdemeanors. IRIRA makes even documented immigrants deportable and includes language that criminalizes a wide range of behaviors. For example, an immigrant worker with questionable citizenship could be charged with aggravated felony for using borrowed Social Security numbers in order to work. By the end of the 1990s, a significant number of deportation cases were by definition exempt from thorough judicial review beyond a basic hearing before an immigration judge within the Department of Justice” (Coleman, 2011, 230). Policies of the new millennium would further the treatment of immigration law as a criminal issue.

The September 11th attacks brought unprecedented attention to terrorism and national security. With the passing of the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, the government intensified the trend of merging the realms of immigration and criminal law. The government made the transition towards immigration law instead of criminal law to detain and deport suspected terrorists without exercising the criminal justice system. After the attacks, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) now known as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was moved under the

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in efforts to combat terrorism. Since the early 1990s, criminal deportations have served as a cornerstone of U.S.'s strategy to suppress gangs.

In the summer of 2013, *Christian Science Monitor* reported that ICE arrested 361 people during a nationwide sweep targeting members of MS-13. The operation, referred to as "Project Razor's Edge," had the motive to "combat the national security and public safety threats posed by MS-13 members and associates and to ultimately identify, target, arrest, and prosecute MS-13 members and associates as well as their rival gangs," according to a statement by ICE. Since 2005, Homeland Security Investigations reports that it has arrested more than 30,672 gang members, with 4,265 of them belonging to or associating with MS-13 (Scott 2013). As described earlier, many of these arrests led to criminal deportations back to Central America. Shifting away from the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) used throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, recent federal efforts have focused on prosecuting gang members under the Racketeer Influence and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statute. Critics argue deportation is simply not a valid longterm solution against MS-13; many continue to point to evidence that suggests these deportation policies simply result in the gang's "revolving door" migratory pattern of members' repeat illegal reentry into the United States (Franco, 2008, 17).

### **Development and Coordination of Domestic Intergovernmental Anti-Gang Strategies**

The federal government has taken an active role in helping state and local jurisdictions develop anti-gang responses through support for gang research and grant programs to help jurisdictions develop effective gang suppression and prevention strategies (Franco, 2008, 20). Today, various federal agencies are directly involved in the fight against gangs through the enforcement of criminal and immigration laws. The FBI and DHS have taken serious suppressive action against MS-13. In 2005, the FBI created the MS-13 National Gang Task Force (MS-13 NGTF)

and established a National Gang Intelligence Center, both of which are designed to provide support to law enforcement and facilitate information sharing between federal, state, and local agencies. The MS-13 NGTF provides information to help law enforcement agencies identify trends in gang activities and, according to Department of Justice, the MS13 NGTF is designed to manage the flow of information nationally and internationally to help coordinate investigations. MS13 NGTF facilitates the flow of intelligence between international law enforcement agencies about the transnational gang. The agency's establishment of a liaison office in San Salvador is especially useful in dealing with regional MS-13 cliques. Before the task force was created, a central partnership between countries or agencies did not exist; as a result, regional cooperation in law enforcement operations was rare. Arrests made by other various groups and organizations, have not produced results comparable to those of MS13 NGTF. The task force serves as a positive collaborative suppressive strategy against the gang.

The partnership between U.S. and Salvadoran law enforcement is another key component to suppressing MS-13. The FBI enacted the Transnational Anti-Gang (TAG) initiative in 2007. TAG targets MS-13 by positioning two FBI agents permanently in the notoriously dangerous city of San Salvador. FBI agents work directly work alongside and provide technical assistance to Salvadoran police and investigators, while conducting joint investigations and sharing intelligence. In addition to expertise, U.S. agents provide localities with specialized equipment such as computers, software, protective gear, radios, and vehicles. The goal of the initiative is to provide technical assistance to "aggressively investigate, disrupt, and dismantle violent gangs whose activities rise to the threat of criminal enterprises, and who pose the greatest transnational threat, while enhancing the capabilities of the law enforcement agencies involved" (Merida, 2010, 10). Increased partnerships and initiatives that foster fluid avenues for anti-gang intelligence such as

these are vital in dismantling MS-13.

Similarly designed to facilitate regional cooperation against the gang, the FBI also created the Central American Fingerprinting Exploitation (CAFÉ) program to merge criminal records from Central American law enforcement partners. CAFE aims to improve the identification, tracking, and apprehension of gang members with criminal histories. According to the FBI, more than 100,000 sets of fingerprints have been entered into the database, and of those, 20,000 cases have come to the attention of law enforcement agencies in the United States (FBI 2007). Both analysts and Latin American governments approve this development and contend the U.S.'s past privacy policies regarding deported gang members contributed to the migration of MS-13 across the region.

Many scholars criticize the U.S. "culture of privacy and information protection" in the early 2000s as aiding the globalization of MS-13 (Gyves, 2010, 193). After Central American immigrants served time in U.S. prisons for gang crimes, many of these gang members were deported back to their countries of origin. However, immigration policy stipulated that officials could not disclose an individual's criminal history when deporting that person back to his country. Experts argued the U.S. mission to protect individual privacy left Central American governments in the dark about the danger these individual deportees posed; once in-country, the new arrivals established MS-13 cliques that quickly took,

The U.S. policy of withholding information not only hurt Central American societies but also injured U.S.-relations with its neighbor governments, which squarely blamed the U.S. for this new criminal scourge. While Central American governments deserve their fair share of criticism for the endemic corruption and inept policies that have allowed the *Maras* to flourish, the fact remains that an atmosphere of openness and cooperation between all the hemisphere's governments, unfettered by finger-pointing, would go a long way to mitigate the *Maras*' growth." (Gyves, 2010, 193)

To adapt to MS-13's migration and facilitate regional cooperation and intelligence sharing, the State Department and DHS signed an agreement to expand the Criminal History Information Sharing (CHIS) program in January 2014. The program has been used to increase information shared on certain criminal deportees with Mexican law enforcement and now extends to information sharing with Central American countries (Seelke, 2014, 8).

Immigration law enforcement has also been a key component of the Department of Homeland Security's suppressive efforts to combat MS-13. DHS has assigned a major portion of the task to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. In February 2005, ICE launched "Operation Community Shield" an anti-gang initiative that uses the agency's immigration and customs authority to dismantle and prosecute violent organizations like MS-13. ICE created the program after the agency's 2003 assessment of violent street gang activity in the United States. The assessment identified MS-13 as a street gang "having a presence across the United States, a significant foreign-born membership and history of violence." The initiative allowed ICE officials to use their immigration authority to detain and deport gang members of MS-13 from the United States, and it also allowed them operate in overseas offices to coordinate with foreign governments. ICE coordinates all of its gang targets with the FBI and its MS-13 National Gang Task Force prior to arrest. Initially the initiative focused on the cities of Los Angeles, Miami, Baltimore, Newark, and Washington, DC. However, since recognizing that the gang problem is transnational, ICE has since begun collaborating with counterpart agencies in Central America. In its first two years, Operation Community Shield led to the arrest of more than 4,800 gang members and associates have been arrested from over 350 different gangs, including 1,374 MS-13 members (Franco, 2008, 21).

In October 2012, the Obama Administration, with the assistance of ICE and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) declared MS-13 to be a transnational criminal organization (TCO) and started an unprecedented crackdown targeting the finances of the gang. The Treasury Department formally designated MS-13 as the first criminal street gang to be designated as a TCO whose assets are now targeted for economic sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13581. Obama's executive order enables the Treasury Department to block the assets of members and associates of designated criminal organizations and prohibit U.S. citizens from engaging in transactions with them. The department aims to freeze MS-13 out of the U.S. financial system and seize what is an estimated millions of dollars in criminal profits from drug and human smuggling and other crimes committed in the U.S. ICE Director John Morton described the landmark move as a "powerful weapon" for his agency's effort to take down the gang. However, the designation proved a contentious decision; critics argued that while the group may play a peripheral role in international crimes such as drug trafficking, MS-12 remains a loose network of street gangs (CBS 2011).

In June 2013, the Treasury imposed sanctions on six Salvadoran leaders of MS-13 and accused them of directing and participating in drug trafficking, money laundering, extortion, and murder. The move meant that any of their U.S. assets would be frozen and U.S. citizens and businesses were prohibited from doing business with them (Treasury 2013). What affect, if any, the Treasury's decision to designate MS-13 as a significant TCO has had on anti-gang efforts is calls for further examination. U.S. officials are striving to coordinate anti-gang initiatives on both the domestic and international fronts, taking into account their likely impact on domestic security, on the one hand, and on foreign relations with the countries of Central America and Mexico, on the other.

### **Active Support for Foreign Anti-Gang Efforts: Merida Initiative/CARSI**

The Merida Initiative/CARSI, a multiyear security assistance program in Mexico and Central America, is the largest piece of U.S. policy enacted to combat MS-13 and transnational crime. Passed by the Bush Administration in 2007, the Mérida Initiative enables the U.S. to provide \$1.4 billion in assistance to Mexico and Central America aimed at combating drug trafficking, gangs, and organized crimes. Both Mexico and Central America face issues of “police corruption and human rights abuses by security forces that have hindered the performance and reputation of their law enforcement and judicial systems” (Seelke, 2009, 2) that undoubtedly contribute to increasing crime and violence in the U.S. and region. The Merida Initiative is the largest foreign aid package for the Western Hemisphere since Plan Colombia and greatly depends on all countries involved, including the U.S., to accept responsibility to address domestic problems contributing to regional drug trafficking and transnational crime (Seelke, 2009, 2). The concern is that without a coordinated regional policy, success in a specific area or country may simply shift the problem to adjacent areas or neighboring countries, given the gang members’ transnational nature (Matei, 2011, 199).

The Department of the State manages the Initiative and various U.S. agencies play vital roles in its implementation. In Mexico, the funding is directed specifically against drug trafficking and violence, and in Central America, the Initiative focuses on the public safety threat posed by transnational gangs, especially MS-13. Funds go towards law enforcement equipment such as aircrafts, boats, inspection equipment, and canine units. In addition, technical advice and training is included to strengthen justice and law enforcement institutions (Merida, 2010, 3). By passing

the substantial piece of legislation in 2007, Congress acknowledged the gang's extremely violent nature, its increasingly sophisticated criminal operations, and its rapid regional expansion.

The Mérida Initiative has made sporadic progress over the past six years in implementing programs, administering training, and delivering equipment in Mexico and Central America to combat MS-13. While the Initiative clearly outlines its mission, strategic goals, and resource plans, the Initiative is not reaching its full potential. According to a GAO study, crucial elements necessary for a \$1.6 billion plan, such as clear timelines for expected program and equipment deliveries, clear accountability and management specifications, and clear performance progress measurements, are largely absent (Merida, 2010, 1). Political instability also constantly challenges the Initiative's implementation and the bill's improper balance between suppressive and preventative programs fails to provide long-term solutions to in reducing gang membership and crime.

The success of the Merida Initiative and its related programs are difficult to quantitatively evaluate. Lack of outcome-based measures make it difficult to monitor the Initiative's progress and assess its effectiveness. The GAO found that measurable performance targets and indicators are key components for program success and would allow policymakers to "identify strengths and weaknesses in programs, identify the factors that may be contributing to any problems, and adjust processes to address the problems" (Merida, 2010, 20). U.S. and Central American officials have also criticized its slow execution due to weak interagency cooperation and confusion. Numerous program components are being carried out by a variety of U.S. agencies—FBI, USAID, DHS, ICE, DEA, etc—under the leadership of the State Department, "Each federal agency tends to have its own mission, priorities, and operating style. Instead of working together to implement a particular policy or initiative, agencies often engage in "turf battles" as they

compete for leadership roles and budgetary resources” (Seelke, 2009, 16).

The Initiative also lacks concrete and comprehensive program deadlines. Program time-lines would create expectations, promote efficient planning, and eliminate the confusion among both administering agencies and receiving governments that has hindered substantial progress in the first few years of the bill. In 2010, the Obama Administration re-launched the Central America portion of the Mérida Initiative as the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) in efforts to address the mounting public unrest in Central America that the initial Merida Initiative failed to suppress. Extending beyond the initial focus original focal point of narcotics trafficking, CARSI has an even more broad take on regional security measures. Similar to the Mérida Initiative, the U.S. has appropriated support to law enforcement and security assistance in the region with the slogan “Meeting the threat – Building Capacity.” Additionally, increased financial support has been allocated towards the development of good governance and safe communities in the nations involved (CSIS). The State Department outlines the goals of CARSI in five points: (1) Create safe streets for the citizens in the region, (2) Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband within and between the nations of Central America, (3) Support the development of strong, capable and accountable Central American governments, (4) Re-establish effective state presence and security in communities at risk, and (5) Foster enhanced levels of security and rule of law coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region (CSIS 2011). From FY2008-FY2013, Congress appropriated \$496.5 million for Central America through Mérida/CARSI. The Obama Administration allocated \$161.5 million for FY2014 (Meyer, 2014, 2).

However differences in national priorities as well as the sheer breadth of the situation still present challenges for its implementation, “Central American countries have expressed apprecia-

tion for the funds provided, but they have also asserted that the assistance could better respond to host country priorities and is insufficient given the scale of the region's challenges" (Seelke, 2012, 2). Communication and logistical setbacks among the various U.S. agencies continue to persist. Officials from International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) and the Narcotic Affairs Section (NAS)—two key agencies implementing Central America's anti-gang measures—assert they were not adequately staffed for the expansion and were unable to process funding while also managing initial administrative tasks. "The State has since hired more staff and promised to do so until resource needs are better balanced" (Merida, 2010, 15). Since Congress appropriated funding geared towards combating MS-13 and transnational gang crime almost a decade ago, experts continue to question the effectiveness of the Mérida Initiative/CARSI. It remains to be seen if CARSI and millions of dollars associated with it (CISI, 2013) will meet the prescribed objectives defined by the State Department or lessen the daily gang violence and crime that consume the streets of Central America.

The political instability in Central American countries elaborated on in the first part of the thesis is also an undeniable obstacle in the successful implementation of the Merida Initiative. Due to this historic insecurity, U.S. agencies must deal with outside factors such as changes in government and inconsistent public administration employees. In Mexico, also plagued with similar rates of violence and crime, one agency provided training totaling nearly \$250,000 to a squad of Mexican investigators only for the team to suddenly disband. Similarly frustrating, the 2009 roll out of a new government in El Salvador required the relevant Mérida training and equipment plan to be renegotiated (Merida, 2010, 18). The U.S. should shift the emphasis of its security funding away from highly-technical assistance, such as digitized fingerprinting, and toward programs focused on improving basic crime enforcement skills, increasing police profes-

sionalism, and building linkages between security forces and the nonprofit organizations engaged in gang prevention work. Political setbacks such as these create barriers for program progress. Addressing the social factors exacerbated political unrest is crucial in order to achieve reliable help in implementing any regional policies.

Additionally, many question the unbalance between suppressive and preventative measures in the Merida Initiative. The Initiative's overwhelming one-dimensional and suppressive direction fails to address the underlying causes of the region's violence and gang problems causing the political instability (Seelke, 2009, 10). Although goals to improve police capacity are certainly indispensable to the mission to reduce regional gang crime, the overwhelming majority of U.S. resources are spent on security initiatives. Changes to the law, more efficient enforcement, and increased regional cooperation targeted at gang crime and gang members are undeniably useful suppressive actions, they are relatively isolated. The large law enforcement focus of the Merida Initiative lacks a comprehensive anti-gang strategy that incorporates necessary localized elements of prevention. Current U.S. funding priorities strike an improper balance between enforcement initiatives and preventative programs. Measures that are preventative in nature contend with the underlying socioeconomic issues that lead to gang membership. This leaves insufficient resources for other priorities with arguably equal or more proven success.

With significant funding for suppressive measures, the efficacy of the programs on the Central American gangs, especially MS-13, deserves equal oversight and examination. In conjunction with increased law enforcement accountability and transparency, the U.S. should increase investment in community-based programs focused on gang prevention both to increase the reach of their work and to help them to implement evidence-based approaches. At minimum, at least an equal emphasis on preventative policies is necessary for a long-term and vested approach

towards combating MS-13.

The impact of the U.S.'s costly suppression policies on gang crime is difficult to assess. After the 2012 truce between MS-13 and 18th Street gangs, described in part one, the gangs agreed to stop killing each other and perpetrating attacks against civilians and security personnel. El Salvador's murder rate immediately dropped from approximately 13 to 5 per day for the next year. In May 2013, however, the Salvadoran government withdrew support of the gang truce and cut off communication. The country's murder rate has been trending upward for the past year and is now at its highest since the truce was announced in March 2012 (Allison, 2014). CQ Researcher reports the most recent and deadly wave of gang violence erupted the last weekend of May 2014, as six MS-13 members wearing road worker uniforms boarded a public bus and opened fire, killing six – including three law-enforcement officials who were likely the targets. Over the weekend, the murders increased to 81 (Robbins, 2014). The newly elected President, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, assumed office June, 1, 2014 and uncertainty remains whether El Salvador, along with the assistance and involvement of the U.S., can find a strategy to contain the gang violence that has terrorized citizens and appears to be directed at the state itself.

### **Prevention Efforts**

Most experts agree that a holistic approach, one addressing underlying social, political, and economic conditions, is vital in reducing further MS-13 growth and expansion. However, disagreement exists as to what mix of preventive and suppressive policies need to be enacted domestically and in Latin America and who is best suited to oversee those anti-gang efforts. Proponents of suppressive, or law enforcement, strategies believe the FBI and DHS should provide assistance and training to Central American law enforcement officials who “lack the capacity and the resources to target gang leaders effectively, conduct thorough investigations that lead to

successful prosecutions, and share data” (Ribando, 2007, 15). Proponents of prevention-based interventions point to successful national and foreign anti-gang programs that tend to center on the community level. Rather than law enforcement-only approaches, education, employment, and social services offered to at-risk youth and ex-gang members have prove more effective in reducing gang activity (Green, 2007, 93).

As explained in Part One, in the years following the end of the civil war in 1992, El Salvador has made significant democratic, social, and economic progress. Indicators such as improved literacy and infant mortality are positive signs, but substantial issues of poverty and inequality of opportunity have actually increased as problems. Criminal activity, particularly gang related violence led by MS-13, has also increased dramatically. Leaders of El Salvador’s MS-13 and 18th Street gangs signed a truce in 2012 to reduce societal violence. The gang leaders maintained that economic disparities and a lack of jobs are main factors that initially steer youth to gang membership (Altschul, 2012).

The economic situation plays a crucial role in the El Salvador’s current tumultuous state of affairs. A 2007 Global Study on Homicide, published by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), notes that the legacy of armed conflicts and violence, chaotic urbanization, high income inequality, a high proportion of youth, local gang structures, organized crime, and drug trafficking all contribute to high levels of violent crime in the region. Additionally, the 2011 UNODC Global Study on Homicide suggested a clear link between violent crime and development. The United Nations Development Program also reported that El Salvador is trying to respond to a double crisis in the sense that insecurity creates limits to economic recovery and the economic situation worsens the security situation.

Crime and insecurity negatively affect the legitimacy of the authority and institutions of

the government. Because the state has failed to combat and prevent gang crime, citizen confidence in the government has decreased. As a result, it is vital that respective governments overrun by MS-13 have access to the resources required to fight the gang. In order to protect and provide for citizens, a shift towards institutional and economic development advancement is necessary. In addition of suppressive tactics, effective programs led by USAID focus on community-based programs and keeping youth from joining gangs entirely on prevention.

USAID aims to address the underlying social factors that have allowed gang activity to flourish and strengthen in the region. According to the agency, El Salvador faces three major challenges, “poor education quality, resulting in a growing number of youth leaving school without basic skills mastery; limited access and inequity for disadvantaged groups such as indigenous girls, urban and rural poor, and minorities; and unemployed youth who are highly susceptible to gangs, crime, and poverty.” As a result, USAID leads a variety of programs in the country ranging from the health care field to the judiciary sector. The agency’s focus on community and economic development has proven especially successful in terms of preventive action to combat MS-13. Over the past six years, Congress has provided \$196.8 million to the USAID for rule of law efforts and crime and violence prevention programs (Seelke, 2013, 15). EVIDENCE

The Obama administration’s Partnership for Growth (PFG) Joint Country Action Plan, implemented by USAID, addresses the important link between economic and social issues that are fueling MS-13 activity in the region. Lasting from 2011-2015, the plan puts into practice the principles of President Obama’s September 2011 Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development to promote economic growth in emerging markets like El Salvador (Embassy, 2011). Since its creation, the project has supported 50 municipalities in El Salvador to strengthen their competitiveness in order to stimulate job creation and business opportunities and contribute to

sustainable economic growth. There are three important components, or programs in this case, under PFG that serve as long-term models for U.S. involvement and investment: Program to Improve Access to Employment, SolucionEs, and SEED.

Improving Access to Employment, operating from 2009-2013, was a key component of PFG. The program sought to increase the El Salvador's productivity through the employment of its youth. The program helped create 14,622 jobs for Salvadorans in the last four years. USAID's total investment amounted to \$7.5 million for a period of four years, in which 14,622 people obtained a job thanks to the program. In addition, about 17,000 people were trained in different areas and more than 27,000 people across the country received career counseling (Embassy USAID 2013). U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Mari Carmen Aponte, described the achievements of the program as a "huge success," and reiterated that "by working focused on the same goal, we are seeking to create a stronger economy in El Salvador where all people have access to opportunities to succeed and move forward." The program built sustainable relationships with government institutions, private companies, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations, in order to ensure the continuity of different projects beyond the USAID program (Embassy USAID 2013).

The PFG initiative has identified security (i.e. crime and violence) as one of the main barriers to economic growth and another USAID program aimed at promoting development to reduce community violence and gang membership is SolucionES. In February 2013, USAID committed to contribute \$20 million to SolucionES, a new and innovative focus on prevention of youth crime and violence in Salvadoran communities through a partnership between the private organizations and municipal governments. A partnership between Salvadoran businesses and NGOs will match the USAID funds with \$22 million they will raise from "foundations, busi-

nesses, municipalities, and civil society.” The program will last five years and focus on youth development in 50 communities across five high-risk municipalities (Embassy 2014). Although the effectiveness of the program will not be known for the next few years, projected outcomes for youth in the Ciudad Arce, one of the five largest municipalities, over the next three years include:

- The participation of 130 students daily in extracurricular activities focused on leadership development
- Training of 1,920 youth in conflict prevention
- Training of 125 youth in entrepreneurship
- Youth leadership and life skills through participation in soccer leagues
- Training of 192 parents on supervision, leadership, motivation, conflict resolution and parenting, as well as their participation in the soccer leagues as coaches or representatives
- 1,680 youth are expected to participate in a series of workshops to develop life plans focused on goals
- 81 youth are expected to participate in an intensive program of community development, which will aim to prepare the next generation of leaders in crime prevention.
- 20 teachers will receive training on stress management, leadership, conflict resolution and emotional intelligence, among others.
- 600 youth will receive a program to reduce alcohol consumption among youth.
- Finally, 10 grants will be awarded to organizations in Ciudad Arce to implement programs focused on family and youth.

Another potentially promising preventative program funded by USAID is the Scholarships for Education and Economic Development Program (SEED). Georgetown University’s Center for Intercultural Education and Development oversees the program and provides promising Salvadorans opportunities for study in various colleges across the U.S. SEED promotes economic and social development throughout Central America by training future leaders. “The

scholarships provide training to youth and community leaders from economically disadvantaged and historically underserved populations, including women and ethnic/indigenous groups, to become key protagonists in their home countries' development" (Georgetown 2012).

In July 2013, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Mari Carmen Aponte, awarded the SEE scholarships, valued at more than \$1.3 million, to 53 students. Though 53 is a small number of students, the invaluable experience these individuals receive and bring back to their communities result in substantial individual and societal gains. The participants will participate in study programs that range from six months to two years covering a variety of useful subjects such as building primary education reading skills, strengthening education for middle school at-risk youth, small and medium business management for women, and entrepreneurship and leadership for youth development (SEED 2013). After completing the educational program, scholars return to their home countries to apply their newly acquired skills. In the larger sense, SEED "enhances public diplomacy efforts of the U.S. government by ensuring that participants learn firsthand about the fundamentals of civil society and free market economy" (Georgetown 2012).

Simultaneously, a few small yet notable NGOs in Central American have had success in youth prevention programs. USAID signed a Cooperative Agreement with Alliance for the Prevention of Crime (APREDE), a Guatemalan organization also working to prevent youth gangs and violence. Led by a former gang member, APREDE engages in prison outreach and street education programs. Within its initial months of implementing crime prevention programs, the organization established working relationships with governors, mayors, police commissioners and other leaders on crime prevention councils (Pratt 2010). *Homies Unidos*, "United Homies," is another influential organization. *Homies Unidos* operates transnationally, much like the gang it aims to combat; the organization has been serving the San Salvador and Los Angeles communi-

ties since the late 1990's. The organization offers programs for the prevention of youth violence and rehabilitation, including alternative education, leadership development, and tattoo removal. Over the past 10 years, *Homies Unidos* has reached over 5000 youth and families with our violence prevention presentations and programs and over the past 5 years, the organization has removed more than 300 gang related tattoos (Homies 2012).

Policy analysts and international and local organizations operating in Central America attest that law enforcement or suppressive and prevention programs ought to receive equal emphasis and funding. The imbalance between the U.S. funding for law enforcement agencies receive and that of prevention-oriented agencies like USAID is certainly large—about 2:1. Of the \$803.6 million of U.S. assistance spent since 2008 in Central America, Congress has provided \$196.8 million to the USAID for their various crime and violence prevention programs (Seelke, 2013, 15). An extensive report conducted by USAID regarding U.S. gangs operating in Central America concluded that social services provided to at-risk youth were far more effective than law enforcement strategies in preventing gang crime. The study shows that if youth have the ability to leave the gang for available educational or employment opportunities, they often do leave the gang and have a “lower risk of last repercussions later in life” (Barcaly, 2010, 224). Despite significant international (mainly European) donor support for national and regional level gang prevention programs, Central American governments have “tended not to take an active role in ensuring that funds are well-coordinated and strategically invested” (Seelke, 2014, 14). National political priorities centered on gang prevention are not typically what law enforcement, policymakers, and the general public rally around so this must also be countered in the process.

Consequently, Financial support from overseas is unlikely to increase before respective Central American governments demonstrate more political will and accountability. To ensure

adequate funding to continue existing programs and to create more, some scholars recommend national tax reforms to increase the revenues or the promotion of public-private partnerships such as those molded by USAID (Seelke, 2014, 14). Using the innovative approach towards community public-private partnerships demonstrated by USAID, the gains are widespread; local businesses receive positive press for giving back to their communities, while involved international donors and organizations can assure their benefactors/taxpayers that their money is efficiently being used towards crime prevention and economic development in the region.

### **Domestic Prevention**

A first step in preventing gang membership is preventing delinquency. To prevent gang membership, state and local officials should consider implementing prevention programs proven effective at reducing delinquency, “Juveniles with a history of delinquency are more likely to join gangs and, once in the gang, to engage in higher rates of criminal activity than they would have otherwise” (Muhlhausen, 2007, 8). Universal prevention programs, those that-target an entire population of youth such as in a classroom or neighborhood setting, have produced promising results. Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach program, operated by Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and the G.R.E.A.T. program are effective models of youth gang prevention programs.

Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach (GPTTO) is a national gang prevention program that attempts to intervene with youths at risk of gang involvement on a community level. The program has four objectives: community mobilization, recruitment, mainstreaming/programming, and case management. Local implementation of the program begins with mobilizing community leaders and Boys and Girls Club staff, who discuss local gang issues and design a strategy to prevent gang involvement. Then, police departments, schools, social service

agencies, etc recruit at-risk youth into Club programs in a “nonstigmatizing way through direct outreach efforts and a referral network that links local clubs with courts” (OJJDP 2012). Once in the Boys & Girls Club, youth participate in programs based on their individual interests and needs. Multiple evaluations of Boys and Girls Clubs indicate that the programs have considerable success in reducing delinquency that can lead to gang membership. Evaluations of youth behavior after participating in the GPTTO program for one year suggested that more frequent Boys and Girls Club attendance is associated with a decreased tendency for the youth to start wearing gang colors and become involved with the juvenile justice system. In addition to expressing fewer delinquent behaviors, the youth have demonstrated academic improvements and increased positive peer and family relationships (OJJDP 2012). In another evaluation, although dated, “housing projects with Boys and Girls Clubs in the neighborhood had lower incidences of criminal activity, property damage, and drug-related activity than did housing projects without the clubs” (Schinke, 1992, 118).

The Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program is another proven and effective domestic gang prevention program. Aimed at the middle school level, law enforcement officers instruct classroom curriculum geared towards preventing delinquency, gang membership, and violence. The G.R.E.A.T. lessons focus on providing life skills to students to help them avoid delinquent behavior and violence and to solve problems. Operating below the U.S. Department of Justice, the program is administered by the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) and depends on grant funds from annual appropriations from Congress (G.R.E.A.T., 2014) for financial support. The University of Missouri-St. Louis, as directed by the National Institute of Justice, commissioned a long-term evaluation of the G.R.E.A.T. programs across the country from 2006-2012. The study analyzed the program’s effect on youth gang membership and on a num-

ber of risk factors and social skills often associated with gang membership, “Results one year post program showed a 39% reduction in odds of gang joining among students who received the program compared to those who did not and an average of 24% reduction in odds of gang joining across the four years post program” (Finn, 2012).

A combination of activities, including research, evaluation, training and technical assistance, and demonstration programs, is necessary in preventing at-risk youth from joining in gangs. Tailored strategies to reduce gang activity in targeted neighborhoods must incorporate a broad spectrum of research-based measures to address the range of individual, family, and community factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency and gang activity. It is imperative federal agencies and organizations receiving adequate funding to develop and evaluate community-based anti-gang programs that coordinate a holistic and long-term approach.

## **Conclusion**

Gang violence is worse in Central America today than it was ten years ago when the U.S. began enacting policy. The majority of experts contend the role of the U.S. in helping Central America overcome its security challenges will continue to be an extensive and long-term investment. Currently, there is no clear and “winning” solution in how to go about suppressing MS-13 activity and/or preventing MS-13 membership. Systematic and sustained research is necessary to understand MS-13 and its unique transnational operations. Efforts to prevent, intervene with, and suppress the gang must also be systematic, sustained, and focus on localized need and knowledge. As Congress continues to evaluate budget priorities and debate effective approaches, it is recommended they continue to examine the scope and underlying causes of the security problems. Gang proliferation in Central America is linked to deep-rooted issues such as regional civil wars and drug trafficking, but the gangs are also the consequence of increasing societal ine-

quality and marginalization.

The factors that lead youth to join gangs are related to socio-economic conditions and the failure of U.S. and respective countries to effectively deal with these underlying structural factors fuel the power of MS-13. The gang typically dominates the most marginalized urban areas. The climate of desperation—a lack of basic services, recreational activities, education and employment opportunities—drives gang membership. The gang offers an alternative means to acquire goods while also offering social acceptance to these otherwise marginalized youth (Perez, 2013, 229). It is imperative U.S. policy addresses the underlying socioeconomic factors that are currently allowing the transnational gang to thrive. In order to effectively counter the regional threat posed by MS-13, it is essential the U.S. reevaluate the improper balance between suppressive and preventative policies. Both approaches are necessary for addressing current MS-13 operations while also preventing future organizational expansion.

In terms of suppressive strategies, U.S. policymakers must maintain momentum on regional judicial and law enforcement reform. Addressing the crucial elements hindering the success of the Merida Initiative/CARSI such as providing clear timelines for expected program and equipment deliveries, clear accountability and management specifications, and clear performance progress measurements can ensure the billion-dollar investment reaches its potential in reducing and eradicating MS-13. However, U.S. policymakers must also dedicate increased funding to civil society. It is imperative they put at least as much effort into preventing youths from joining gangs in the first place, by facilitating educational and employment opportunities. Programs aimed at providing gang and violence prevention, education, and employment are all beneficial in the long-term development of secure societies.

Facilitating access to educational and employment opportunities for at-risk youth can

greatly reduce gang membership crime, while benefiting both young people and society as a whole. Access to both have shown to correlate with lower crime rates, “If, as research has found, educational failure leads to unemployment (or underemployment), and if educational failure and unemployment are related to law-violating behavior, then patterns of educational failure over time and within specific groups may help to explain patterns of delinquent behavior” (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). Research has also shown that successful anti-gang efforts involve governments working in close collaboration with civil society, the private sector, and international donors in order to leverage limited funds.

Successful anti-gang programs often develop at the community level as a response to local problems. Capacity-building programs, like those modeled by internationally by USAID and domestically by the Boys and Girls Club and G.R.E.A.T. include citizens, businesses, and leaders within the community who develop goals and work towards achieving measurable and sustainable results. These programs generally require financial assistance as well as non-financial support, such as “training, information sharing, leadership, or simply the provision of a dedicated space for programming or meetings” (Cruz, 2007, 23). The U.S. must allocate adequate funding toward capacity-building programs that can be overseen and/or carried out by federal agencies, receiving governments, or NGOs. By steering the future generation of potential MS-13 members in a more positive direction, the U.S. and its partners can mitigate the security threat posed by the gang and slowly erode their societal infrastructure and influence.

*The Western Hemisphere’s gang problem has been described as long-term, and one for which there are no magic solutions...This is a truism for Central America, given the region’s violent history, deeply ingrained official corruption, and chronic poverty. As is the case for combating crime or preparing for natural disasters, both of which require unremitting preparation and vigilance, fighting gangs is also an endless anticipative, strategic and preparative process, aimed at minimizing to the degrees possible the levels of violence, crime, and loss of life and property (Florina Christina Matei, 2012, 210).*

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