

PANDILLEROS Y POLÍTICOS: Cyclical Violence in El Salvador

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Abstract: El Salvador is one of the most violent countries on the planet. MS13 and Barrio 18, gangs notorious for their brutality, control a large portion of the nation. Scholars often look to the impact of United States immigration policies when it comes to explaining how these gangs came to be in El Salvador. In this paper, I build on that history to explore why MS13 and Barrio 18 can maintain control over an entire country. Immigration policies of the United States have left a stain on modern-day El Salvador, but it is the failings of the Salvadoran state that encourage the persistent violence of gangs. Societal stigmas, institutional weaknesses, and an unwillingness to address past violence push El Salvador deeper into the cycle of violence. Today, the United States provides aid to El Salvador, but encouraging punitive action and military-level training only serve to exacerbate the conflict between the government and the gangs. However, a path beyond cyclical violence is on the horizon; Nicaragua has successfully implemented community-based programs that have dramatically decreased gang presence and murder rates within the country. With the help of the United States, El Salvador could do the same.

Introduction

The particular brand of societal instability and rampant violence that is commonplace across Central America is, in part, a product of the United States. The fingerprints of US economic policies and military intervention stain the region, from locks that span the Panama Canal to pristine ocean reefs surrounding Belize. El Salvador, a nation with fewer than seven million citizens, continues to suffer from the repercussions of the United States' policies. In Oscar Martinez's *A History of Violence*—a work that

will be referenced frequently throughout this piece—he explains, “We are the product of certain American politicians...we are the product of your policies of deportation,” (“Preface”, par. 9, 2016). I initially set out to analyze how specific United States immigration policies have contributed to the high levels of gang violence within El Salvador. However, I have discovered there are a myriad of other factors that play a role in sustaining instability. There is a correlation between immigration policy in the United States and social unrest in El Salvador, but as many a social scientist might

say, correlation does not equal causation. In order to provide any form of solvency for gang violence in El Salvador, we must examine the synergy between the continued failures of the Salvadoran state while acknowledging the larger history at play. I will look beyond institutional failings and inefficient policy in order to better understand the consequences for everyday citizens. Ultimately, we will learn that there is no easy answer as to what El Salvador's next steps should be.

In 2015, El Salvador was named the deadliest country outside of a war zone (Brigida 2021). At only 13,000 square miles, roughly the size of New Jersey, it is home to an estimated 60,000 gang members (Martinez 2016). These gangs operate in an astounding 247 of El Salvador's 262 municipalities, meaning 94% of the country is controlled or occupied by active criminal organizations (Human Rights Watch 2020). The Armed Forces of El Salvador (AFES) only has about 22,000 active troops. For every active military member, El Salvador contains roughly three gang members (CIA 2019). According to the National Institute of Justice, a gang is defined as an association with a group identity that uses said identity to create an atmosphere of intimidation and engages in violent acts and criminal activities. Gangs may use identifying features, exercise control over a particular geographic area, and/or have rules for joining and maintaining membership (National Institute of Justice). Mara Salvatrucha-13 (commonly known as MS-13) and Barrio 18, the primary gangs in El Salvador, were both founded mere blocks away from each other in Los Angeles. The deportation of these gang members in 1990, many of whom had fled the violence of the US-sponsored civil war in El Salvador, caused a spike in crime that has only generated further chaos. While violence

has reduced in recent years, it is not due to the strength of government institutions or effective anti-crime policies. Gang violence remains a major driver of emigration from El Salvador. Corruption has shadowed the presidential office and the tug of war between political parties has created further mistrust and instability. El Salvador's current leader, President Nayib Bukele, has followed the global trend of leaders who reflect the egotism and brutish rhetoric of former United States president, Donald Trump. These trends of gang violence, instability, and decreasing levels of government transparency in recent years are simply adding to nearly a century of chaos. By examining the roots of gang violence and the role of the United States, the plague of collusive impunity within the nation, and exactly how and why its institutions are failing, we can begin to look towards solutions in repairing the socioeconomic status of this small Central American country.

Violence as both a unifier and a divider is a prominent theme in El Salvador's legacy. The violence of the United States' extractive capitalist practices in the late 1800s set the stage for El Salvador's economic and political instability. The violence of the civil war gave way to the violence of today's gangs, fueled by the deeply violent immigration policies of the United States at the same time. And, today, it is violence that maintains these gangs, that forms their identities. It is by violence that individuals gain stature and rise in the ranks of these organizations. When we discuss violence in El Salvador, it is easy to dehumanize the members of the gangs we regard as perpetrators of said violence. It is crucial to recall that members of these organizations are often young, impoverished, and lacking other options. They experience violence at the hands of the organizations

they deem their communities. Members who have never killed or stabbed anyone are regarded as lower down on the totem pole and considered less masculine. The few women who join these gangs are often subject to sexual violence, both as an initiation process or as punishment for breaking rules (Hume 2007). This violence is cyclical, and we cannot directly fault any organization or government entity for its continuation as we look for solutions. The purpose of this is not to condone those who commit violent acts in the name of a particular gang or social group, but to recognize that dehumanization is yet another act of violence.

El Salvador's Civil War and the Formation of Gangs

Beginning in the 1960s, conflict began to stir between the government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), a paramilitary group. From 1980 to 1991, the small country was cloaked in extreme violence that “left an estimated 75,000 Salvadorans dead and forced hundreds of thousands to flee to neighboring countries, the United States, or elsewhere.” (Cavallaro 2010, p. 5). This war, however, did not occur due to internal tensions alone. Though it is referred to as a civil war, implying it was composed entirely of intrastate actors, the reality is that the conflict between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN was a proxy battle within the larger scale of the Cold War. The Union of Soviet Social Republics, or USSR, had allied itself strongly with the Sandinista forces that had overthrown the ruling power of the Somozas in Nicaragua. Soviet aid to Nicaragua, which came in the form of economic support and military weaponry, totaled over 150 million dollars in 1984—more than 600 million in 2021 dollars (Kinzer 1984). The Sandinistas, in turn,

supported the ideologically similar FMLN in their fight against the Salvadoran government. In response, the United States funneled billions of dollars to the Salvadoran government. Despite the US Congress stating that aid was conditional based on the upholding of international human rights standards, human rights organizations at the time said that the United States continued to provide aid even in the face of blatant human rights violations (Cavallaro 2010). During the civil war, clandestine groups began operating on behalf of the government to carry out targeted killings. These plain-clothed hitmen, otherwise known as “death squads”, blurred the lines between state and non-state actors (Cavallaro 2010, p. 4). Death squads set the stage for the collusive impunity, or when state and non-state actors become inherently linked and make achieving legitimate justice difficult, that El Salvador suffers from today. Death squads, rebranded as social cleansing groups, have grown in the 21st century, often targeting low-income neighborhoods and gang members (Cavallaro 2010).

There are two critical elements to draw from this. Firstly, the United States' use of El Salvador as a pawn during the Cold War has permanently interrupted the nation's already fragile stability and helped create the gang crisis that El Salvador suffers from today. Secondly, El Salvador has never dealt with its past in its entirety. There was no accountability for government officials involved in the human rights violations, and the violence of the civil war continues to occur via gang killings and social cleansing groups. La Sombra Negra, a secretive vigilante group composed of ex-military and police officers, was first founded in the early 1990s. There is speculation that the group has resurfaced. La Sombra Negra graffiti tags reappeared in 2015, and rates of multiple-victim homicides have increased (Morales

2016). The group responds to the violence of the gangs with the same level of violence: an eye for an eye. And the Salvadoran state isn't opposed to these extrajudicial killings. In 2019, the head of El Salvador's National Assembly told *La Prensa Grafica* that he "[supports] this type of expression...people are tired of the wave of delinquency." (O'Reilly 2019). Just as the FMLN and the state faced off for so many years, various gangs and *La Sombra Negra* continue the battle.

Civil strife in El Salvador during the 1970s and 80s forced many families to leave their home country and resettle in the United States. Los Angeles has long been a beacon for immigrants, and this was no different. With street gang culture already pervasive throughout the city, Salvadoran youths new to the city often sought protection through established gangs or by creating their own. The pre-existence of gang culture is a factor separate from US policy or the Salvadoran state. However, we will later discuss how the geographic leanings of Salvadoran immigrants played a role as to why they experienced such high levels of deportation. *Mara Salvatrucha 13* and *Barrio 18* (or the 18th Street Gang) are believed to have originated as one gang as far back as the 1960s. Its primary objective was the protection of El Salvadorans from Mexican gangs, but the two organizations splintered. The resulting rivalry continues today. Despite the violence this rivalry cultivates, it is crucial to the survival of both gangs (PBS, 2006). These gangs are social organizations first and criminal organizations second. Built on the idea of a shared community, the sense of unity established by both gangs relies on a common enemy. That common enemy is a critical factor for why these massive gangs can maintain a somewhat unified identity. Modern day El Salvador is a chaotic, violent

place. Having a role and an objective in that society, even if through a violent entity, can be a stabilizing force in an otherwise mercurial world (MS13 in the Americas 2018, par 13). Gangs and the violence associated with these organizations have become a sort of "common sense" for young Salvadorans, "both as a form of political interaction and as an expression of identity" (Hume 2006, p. 742).

Mara-Salvatrucha 13

MS13 has no singular leader. There are focal points of power, namely Los Angeles, where it was formed, and San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. But, unlike prominent cartels or international criminal organizations, neither MS13 nor *Barrio 18* have a singular person at the helm. MS13 "is a federation with layers of leaders who interact, obey and react to each other at different moments depending on circumstances" (MS13 in the Americas, 2018, p. 5). Early in the formation of the organization, members divided themselves into "clikas," or cliques, based on geographic location. This practice continues today, with each clique applying rules inconsistently and creating chaos. Some cliques have more power than others. For example, the *Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha* clique, originally formed in Los Angeles, has a frightening reputation in El Salvador. It was the birthplace of a prominent MS leader, *Borromero Henriquez*, and was the home clique of the *Hollywood Kid*, an infamous hitman. Due to these associations, *Hollywood Locos* can exert more influence than other, lesser-known cliques (Martinez, 2016). In Los Angeles, many cliques are subservient to Mexican jail mafias. In El Salvador, leaders tend to be in jail and unable to hold members accountable (MS13 in the Americas, 2018). These imbalances and lack of a central power structure keep MS13 from becoming a

powerful, wealthy organization like Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel or the expansive los Zetas gang (Gimean 2009). Whereas powerful transnational criminal organizations typically have one or two singular leaders with control and respect across the organization, the geographic separations between MS13 members and its leaders prevent a singular mogul from emerging. Geography is important, both to MS13 and Barrio 18. Most cliques draw their names from particular neighborhoods and being in the right barrio can mean the difference between life or death. With leaders outside of a clique's territory, the power vacuum isn't left empty for long. And so, MS13 is impoverished and disorganized, relying mainly on extortion for revenue.

Barrio 18

Barrio 18, or the 18th Street Gang, is MS13's main rival, formed roughly around the same time in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles. Barrio 18 is known for being significantly more violent than MS13, with murder as punishment for members who do not follow rules (Serrano 2020). Barrio 18 ended up in El Salvador in the same way MS13 did; changes in immigration law in the 1990s sent thousands of members back to countries they had fled twenty years prior. In El Salvador, Barrio 18 is significantly more structured and economically focused than MS13. A 2005 split turned Barrio 18 into two factions: los Revolucionarios, and los Sureños. Both operate with canchas (courts), which cover neighborhoods and cities, as well as tribus (tribes), which operate at the regional level (Serrano 2020). Barrio 18 is more violent and profitable with the crimes they commit and is, therefore, able to be more versatile. Barrio 18 has also been known to partner with drug cartels and La eMe, the Mexican Mafia, an interesting contrast to the subservient role MS13 may

take on with these organizations. The gang's relationship with La eMe may have played a role in the split, as "Sureños" pays homage to the Southern California roots of the organization. There is some speculation that due to the organization's close relationship with La eMe, it may also work with los Zetas, as well as the Sinaloa Cartel, to traffic drugs across the United States border (InSight Crime 2018). It is nearly impossible to exit the gang. The accountability and violent punishments mean that surviving is rare, and as a result, information as to how the gang truly functions is difficult to encounter.

The Impact of United States Immigration Policy on El Salvador

These gangs were formed and gathered strength on the streets of Los Angeles. The United States' role in curating violence in the Salvadoran Civil War of the 1980s then created the flood of refugees into the United States that pushed these gangs beyond the boundaries of their neighborhoods. And it was changes in United States immigration policy that took this home-grown violence and transplanted it back in El Salvador in the 1990s. However, the pervasive crisis of violence in El Salvador is also a result of the failures of its own government. Though the gang violence epidemic in California filled state prisons up beginning in the 1980s, the United States chose not to deport Salvadorans while the civil war continued. Once peace treaties were signed in the early 1990s, the government wasted no time in beginning deportations, "moving so quickly that [the United States] often didn't bother to send deportees' criminal records to the Salvadoran authorities." (Blitzer 2017). While peace had technically been made between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN, it didn't involve any agreements or programs to lift the war-torn country out of poverty. It

was simply a means to allow the FMLN a seat at the official government table, doing little to improve the socioeconomic realities of the state. El Salvador remained an impoverished country with few opportunities for employment or education. But the United States government did not see an ailing, wounded nation; it saw a receptacle for any border crossers it deemed unsavory. In today's gangs, being a deportee from the United States earns you a special title (veterano, or veteran) and higher status within a gang or clique. Veterans are considered key informants for planning operations, due to a perceived familiarity with the techniques used by the police in the United States, regardless of allegiance to a particular gang (Cavallero 2010). Something must be said about the irony of this situation; while citizens of the United States often look down upon Central America for its instability and violence, citizens of Central America assume that their denizens forced out of the United States will return home transformed into gangsters.

The Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility (IIRIRA) Act of 1996 only sped up the deportation process and created many of the mechanisms spurring the immigration crisis of today. Under this legislation, unauthorized migration was reframed as a criminal act, and the legal grounds for which an immigrant could be deported were expanded significantly (Kerwin 2018). The repercussions were swift and devastating. Despite being born in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, Eddie Anzora grew up in South Central Los Angeles. Many of his friends joined the various gangs that roamed the city, but he never did. He was arrested once for possession of marijuana in 1997. He

had a green card, and it was his first criminal offense, so the consequences were minimal—at first. An immigration lawyer called him up a few days later and informed him he would be deported. After being told by his lawyer that there was no way he would win his case, Anzora threw out his social security card and did his best to drop off the grid. In his twenty years in the United States, he had only been back to El Salvador once. He could barely speak Spanish. In 2007, he was caught and deported. Anzora explained to the *New Yorker* that deportees in El Salvador are hugely stigmatized. People associate deportation with gang membership and high-level criminality, but Anzora was guilty only of possessing an ounce of marijuana (Blitzer 2017). Despite the decriminalization of marijuana in California in 1996, Anzora's green card status meant that the law held him to a different status than it did naturalized citizens. Despite having grown up in Los Angeles and even starting a small business, Anzora was sent back to a country he barely even knew. This was the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in practice.

Not only did the IIRIRA make the deportation of undocumented immigrants and green card holders much easier, but it also fundamentally changed the process of allowing immigrants to remain in the United States. Previously, undocumented immigrants received “suspension of deportation” at relatively high rates, if they had lived in the United States for seven years, had good moral standing, and could prove deportation would cause serious hardship to themselves or their families (Kerwin 2018, p. 194). The IIRIRA shifted “suspension of deportation” to “cancellation of removal,” (p. 194). This meant that non-citizens facing deportation may be allowed to remain in the country if they have lived in the United States

continually for ten years, had no criminal convictions, and could prove that deportation would not just cause hardship, but “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship.” (Kerwin 2018, p. 194). Not only was the required residential period increased by three years, but a single conviction could result in deportation, despite good moral standing. Essentially, in the span of just a few years, the United States broadened qualifications for deportation, while shrinking the few doors that remained open for citizenship. To further put this extremity in perspective, in 2020 Salvadorans seeking asylum in other countries were relatively successful. Other Central American nations accept up to 75% of Salvadoran asylum seekers, and Mexico frequently accepts upwards of 35% of Salvadoran asylum seekers. Compared to Central America and Mexico, the United States has significantly more land, a more stable political system, and greater economic opportunities. And yet, the United States government rarely accepts more than 18% of asylum seekers from El Salvador (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Increased deportations of Salvadorans from Los Angeles can be tied directly to today’s gang violence through more than just inference. Nicaragua, just south of El Salvador, suffers from significantly higher rates of poverty. Despite Nicaragua’s proximity to the gang-infiltrated Northern Triangle, gang membership and violence remain incredibly low. Unlike immigrants from El Salvador, who flocked to the West Coast, many Nicaraguans chose the East and settled in Miami. Political lobbying in Miami resulted in refugee status being granted to a significant population of Nicaraguans. Miami also lacked the violent gang culture of Los Angeles (Viswanathan 2018). Meanwhile, as the IIRIRA made it easier for deportations to occur, gang suppression efforts in Los

Angeles led to increased numbers of arrests. The early 1990s was also the first time that Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) worked closely together, creating an even greater likelihood of deportation due to arrest (Johnson 2006). This allowed police in the United States to provide INS with information regarding detained undocumented people. Today, Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the world. It also has one of the lowest intentional homicide rates out of Latin America and the Caribbean (Statista 2021). Choosing Miami over Los Angeles was partially responsible for Nicaragua’s avoidance of an extreme influx of refugees following the passage of the IIRIRA. Nicaragua also continues to use methods of community policing and disarmament instead of accepting U.S. aid and military training for police officers (Viswanathan 2018). Given the difference in gang membership and rates of violence between Nicaragua and the countries of the Northern Triangle, the impact of U.S. immigration policy is clear.

Chepe Furia and Collusive Impunity

Fewer Salvadorans being granted legal access to the United States combined with accelerated deportations created a disaster for El Salvador. For Chepe Furia, legally known as Jose Antonio Teran, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. Officially deported from the United States in 2003, Furia traveled between the United States and El Salvador for several years. The founder of the Fulton Locos Clique of the MS13, Furia built the clique from a small group of neighborhood teens into a powerhouse of assassins. He lured in recruits with promises of a “big family” and “stories of battles against the great enemy, Barrio 18.” (Martinez 2016, p. 18). His marketing tactics painted a facade of a better life for these

underprivileged, impoverished teens. Furia wasn't just a criminal and a mobster; his relationship with the community and state demonstrates the complicated connections between El Salvador and the gangs that run it. His connections were everywhere. Furia was friends with lawyers, prosecutors, police, and criminals alike. He incited violence and sponsored hitmen, but he also repaired neighborhood potholes, maintained fences, and kept soccer fields well-groomed (Martinez 2016, p. 24). Furia exacerbated many of the issues the state dealt with daily: gang wars, drug trafficking, violence, corruption. But he also supported the community in ways the government could not. Officials sometimes turned a blind eye because of this, refusing to acknowledge that selfless community leader Jose Teran had a much darker side to him. The story of Chepe Furia reveals just how deeply the hypocrisy of El Salvador's government runs; stigma and discrimination against low-level gang members are extreme. But, when a gang leader has enough money to make things happen in the community, government officials' ability to blindly dehumanize gang members miraculously disappears. Furia only rose to notoriety following his deportation from the United States, but the weakness of the Salvadoran state, not the immigration policies of the United States, is what enabled him to do so. Only when he could focus on capitalizing on the sense of hopelessness among Salvadoran youths did Furia gain power. The situation with Furia, a known gang leader, involved in so many facets of the state without repercussion, it is safe to say that El Salvador is stuck in a cycle of impunity and collusion. Impunity is defined as exemption from punishment or consequences (Merriam-Webster, 2022). When used with a human rights lens, it means that perpetrators are not brought to justice and the rights of victims are denied.

Collusion occurs when states or individuals secretly work with criminal organizations, a partnership that is detrimental to accountability (Merriam-Webster, 2022). When the leader of a highly powerful gang clique can entrench himself in nearly every facet of a nation's government, the state has willingly agreed to cooperate with these criminal organizations on some level, and therefore, not hold them accountable for crimes committed. This does not mean that El Salvador is an inherently bad nation. It does mean that El Salvador lacks the state capacity, or ability to maintain rule of law, without the assistance of criminal organizations. Gangs like MS13 and Barrio 18 are a menace to Salvadoran society, but the country cannot survive without their cooperation. Collusion has, in essence, become part of the foundation of the state's shaky democracy. Current President Nayib Bukele proved this to be true when El Faro, a Salvadoran news site, published intelligence reports exposing the Bukele administration for negotiating with MS13 leaders. Bukele provided the imprisoned gangsters with perks and special treatment, and in exchange, they kept El Salvador's murder rate slightly lower (The Economist, 2020). But this puts the state at the mercy of the will of the gangs. Bukele's clandestine agreement may have temporarily halted violence, but at what cost?

State Responses to Gang Violence

Not all of El Salvador's leaders chose to make secret deals with powerful gangs. To say that El Salvador easily succumbed to criminal collusion would be misguided. To curb the rapidly rising levels of gang violence in the early 2000s, El Salvador implemented Mano Dura, or Iron Fist, anti-gang policies. These policies allowed the government to construct a tough-on-crime façade but were proven to have deadly consequences. One academic even referred to this style of policy

as “a crisis in El Salvador’s fledgling democracy” (Hume 2007, p. 793). Mano Dura policies have typically allowed for increased sentencing for gang members and punishment for illicit activities (Seelke 2016). This paved the way for greater ease of incarceration without sufficient evidence, especially for youths. Simply being a suspected gang member was enough to land someone in jail. While this initially seemed like an effective tactic, prison populations swelled, and extreme levels of stigma were only intensified (Seelke 2016). It doesn’t keep people from reoffending, either. In 2014, the recidivism rate for gang members was as high as 90% (Pávon 2018). However, Mano Dura policies are one of the few areas where El Salvador’s two major political parties, the FMLN and ARENA, are able to agree.

Just as MS13 and Barrio 18 maintain their strength by preaching community and family, Mano Dura harnesses societal support by cultivating an “us” versus “them” rhetoric. To effectively implement such forceful and punitive policies, the state must first dehumanize anyone suspected of gang association. Mano Dura policies allow police to imprison people they simply suspect to be engaged in illegal activities, even without sufficient evidence. This essentially does away with the right to a fair trial, a key barrier against impunity and a foundational piece of democracy. It is also tinged with irony. While the Salvadoran state puts low-level suspected gang members behind bars by the dozens, it bargains directly with the leader of the gangs, offering shorter sentences and a more comfortable life in prison. Mano Dura does not work to address the roots of gang violence; it merely treats the symptoms. The emphasis is not on rehabilitating former gang members or providing economic and social opportunities

for advancement and inclusion but to fill jail cells and tell citizens the streets are growing safer. In essence, Mano Dura policies allow El Salvador’s legacy of violence to continue (Hume 2007). These policies see young gang members only as perpetrators of new violence, and not as products of the years of bloody war and political destabilization. Just as El Salvador signed a treaty with no steps for improvement in 1992, Mano Dura policies address the issue of violence at face value instead of looking at the causes. This explains why these policies have continued to fail, time and time again. The violence between the state and the FMLN mirrors the conflict between the modern-day government and the gang members it seeks to lock away. By drawing a line in the sand between the violence of the civil war and the violence of modern-day gangs, El Salvador has rendered itself unable to effectively address and move past either of these traumas or the cycle of violence.

Though increased incarceration of suspected gang members created a temporary improvement in levels of societal violence, El Salvador’s prison system was not meant to house tens of thousands of individuals. For example, in late 2015, over 30,000 El Salvadoran prisoners were being held in a facility meant to house no more than 10,000 (Seelke 2016). Moreover, when organized crime is a significant problem, placing offenders in the same location with close to nothing to do all day can be reductive to anti-crime efforts. InSight Crime refers to Latin America’s jails as “incubators of organized crime” (Bargent 2017, p.1). Mano Dura policies pushed gang members from different regions into the same facilities and provided these organizations with the space and time to further organize and strengthen. Before Mano Dura policies, the horizontal structures of MS13 and Barrio 18 prevented

growth. Inside prisons, the gangs had time to adapt, recruiting and initiating new members behind bars and creating a better-established hierarchy of leadership. Falling back into the trends of collusion and impunity, corrupt jail staff have been known to facilitate gang communication. Some academics refer to these jails as “finishing schools.” (Seelke 2016, p. 9). El Salvador does not have the resources to divide prisoners by crime, so a fledging member serving time for selling drugs might encounter and learn from a more senior member, serving time for murder or extortion. With El Salvador’s prison system serving as an incubator for more sophisticated, better-organized gangs, Mano Dura policies managed to achieve the opposite of what they were intended for. As one Barrio 18 leader explains, “the system has united us...we cannot look at things individually, because they have not treated us individually, nor have they pursued or locked us up individually.” (Pávon 2018, p. 29). In 2004, El Salvador’s Supreme Court ruled several facets of the Mano Dura legislation implemented during the administration of President Francisco Flores Pérez were unconstitutional. Not only were these policies ineffective, but they also violated the right to equality before the law and justified unlawful arrests (Cavallaro 2010). The Supreme Court’s attempts to maintain constitutionality were soon rendered useless by the next administration’s implementation of Súper Mano Dura policies that only expanded the criminalization of suspected gang members.

Mano Dura policies initially allowed for suspected gang members to be taken into custody based on their appearance, how they dressed, or because of tattoos. This transformed societal stigma into institutionalized police profiling and discrimination, especially for deportees. The anti-gang laws implemented by the Pérez and

Saca administrations in the early 2000s emphasize using tattoos and appearance to identify engagement in “illicit associations”, while pushing for arrest over investigation (Cavallaro 2010, p. 132). People sporting tattoos report police violence, denial of admission to schools, and extreme employment discrimination. The perception of tattoos is so inherently tied to gang culture that non-gang members with artistic tattoos frequently seek tattoo removal. This is in sharp contrast to popular culture in the United States, where 40% of the population under the age of 35 sports at least one tattoo (Hunter 2020). Deportees often face enhanced stigma within society as a result of these anti-gang laws. Mano Dura policies explicitly singled out those deported from the United States, calling for arrest and detention upon arrival. Despite only one-third of deportees having a criminal conviction, politicians in El Salvador often depict them as hardened criminals, further contributing to the isolation faced by deportees (Cavallaro 2010). The consequences of this ostracization can be lethal. According to the authorities of El Salvador, the deportees at the highest risk of gang violence are alleged gang members who may be killed by their own gang, a rival gang, state actors, or death squads (Human Rights Watch 2020). “Alleged” is key in this situation; it frequently does not matter if the deportee does not have an actual connection to any gang. The status of their gang membership as observed by the police and active gang members is enough. Societal and political stigma means that any gang members wishing to choose a different path in life upon their deportation immediately hit a dead end. They are forced into a violent and deadly way of life, regardless of their capacity to change. Mano Dura policies have created an oppressive and self-sustaining culture of surveillance in which police and gang

members alike are trained to assume that death is always around the corner.

Institutional Weakness in El Salvador

The permeation of gang violence in El Salvador is due to more than ill-informed policy choices and criminal collusion. The nation's institutional integrity was largely overlooked in the 1992 peace treaty signed by El Salvador and the FMLN. Political institutions are the "underlying rules of the game." (North 1990). Institutions are the mechanisms through which laws are created and enforced. They exist to protect the integrity of a nation and safeguard the interests of its citizens. Institutions encompass everything from the judiciary to political parties to even religious organizations. Institutions are unique to the nation and government that they serve, but every institution has one thing in common: a weak institution can jeopardize the stability of a country. El Salvador struggles under the weight of multiple failed institutions. It lacks an effective, well-funded judicial system, leaving detectives unable to gather evidence or protect key witnesses. The educational system has long struggled to provide for the swelling population and maintains a complicated relationship with gangs. Corruption surrounding the executive branch has buried any chance of citizens feeling as though they can trust or rely on their country's leader. Without strong institutions, El Salvador's chances of breaking its cycle of violence remain slim.

Acquiring evidence and finding witnesses is often the very first level of prosecuting a crime. The process begins before the courts are even involved. In *Introduction to Criminal Investigations: Processes, Practices, and Thinking*, author Rod Ghel explains that the first two steps of a criminal investigation are investigative tasks

and investigative thinking. Investigative tasks are similar to Hollywood dramatizations of detectives, involving interrogations and gathering evidence. The collected information is then analyzed through a process known as investigative thinking (Ghel 2017). Completion of these first steps is a prerequisite to pursuing a criminal case. As it stands, El Salvador's judicial and law enforcement institutions barely possess the resources to take these initial steps. Criminal cases rarely make it to court. Even very public cases face difficulties completing adequate investigations. Oftentimes, investigative forces fail to make it past the first hurdle of investigative tasks, lacking the time, resources, or manpower to effectively document crime scenes. A report by the National Commission for Citizen Security and Peace proposed that El Salvador's rising crime rates were not the fault of an inefficient judiciary, but instead of deficient criminal investigations (Cavallaro 2010). In essence, consequences for crimes committed in El Salvador are minimal, if at all present.

Why does El Salvador struggle with the basic steps of criminal investigations? One reason is the sheer lack of manpower. As Oscar Martinez explains in *A History of Violence*, El Salvador has one forensic criminologist working for the attorney general's office. His name is Israel Ticas, but he's called "the Engineer." In November of 2010, two members of different MS13 cliques come forward with converging stories. Separately, they turn against their respective gangs, revealing that beneath a well, outside of the town of Turín, there are bodies. Though Ticas is still working through a backlog of bodies from the civil war nearly thirty years prior, he makes the excavation of the 45 meter well a priority. The Ministry of Public Works provides him with a backhoe and some dump trucks, and he gets to work.

In a mere 24 days, he digs ten meters down. Less than a month into the excavation, Ticas encounters his first roadblock. The MPW needs their backhoe returned. But, don't worry; they insist it will only be for a bit. One year later, and Ticas still hasn't been able to use their backhoe. The Civil Engineers of the Armed forces provide him with their backhoe, but now, he's without dump trucks. Ticas and the government of El Salvador know that there are bodies beneath this well. These bodies could provide critical information for missing person crimes and prosecuting gang members. These bodies could provide closure and solace to grieving families. Ticas made ten meters of progress in the first 24 days. Had the government provided him with the necessary supplies, he would have been done in a mere 108 days, roughly three and one-half months.

As of 2021, the well still has not been excavated. Several alleged gang members were held, with their official sentencing contingent on the retrieval of the bodies that lay at the bottom of the well. But, with Ticas unable to make progress, these very likely murderers were released back into society without so much as a slap on the wrist. El Salvador's prison system may not be effective, but allowing known criminals to go unprosecuted only worsens the situation. The story of Israel Ticas and his well reveal the complex web of impunity that entwines the government of El Salvador. Gang affiliations, political parties, and minimal resources create an environment of confusing allegiances and negligible accountability. This phenomenon, however, is not unique to El Salvador in the 21st century. In order to understand the frustrating system, we first must look back to the end of the Salvadoran Civil War.

The influx of violent gangs into El Salvador did not create the lack of

institutional accountability. In fact, it could be argued that gangs were only able to successfully take root because of that lack of accountability. As Professor Cath Collins explains, "in El Salvador, there has been virtually no discernible accountability movement since the U.N. sponsored peace accords of 1992." (Collins 2008, p.28). What Collins is referencing is the state's role in the Civil War and the impact that it continues to have on El Salvador. The state was responsible for 90% of crimes against civilians between 1980 and 1993 (Collins 2008). This includes El Mozote, a massacre of nearly 1,000 citizens at the hands of the state that is frequently still denied or ignored by government officials (Zablah 2017). Following the peace accords, a UN-sponsored truth commission was established. The commission named perpetrators from both sides and released a list of people never to be reinstated in a political office. Then, the state passed a mass amnesty law, rendering the findings of the truth commission useless and ensuring that "the justice system was not only irrelevant to but actively collusive with human rights violations." (Collins 2008, p. 29). In other Latin American countries, independent human rights organizations and religious institutions put pressure on the state and fight against repression. These external organizations serve as a bulwark against impunity. In El Salvador, religious groups were often targets for violence, and human rights organizations restricted themselves to administrative roles. The FMLN, former paramilitary group and current political party, is the largest opposition to the dominant party in El Salvador. But it can't, or won't, push for accountability. Because of its role in the civil war, the FMLN would likely also be indicted for human rights violations. The fight for accountability in El Salvador is non-existent.

It isn't just forensic investigators struggling to fulfill their roles. Law enforcement institutions in El Salvador are also at a breaking point. As of 2017, The National Civil Police (PNC) had only 26,000 officers for a country with a population of 6.4 million (Andrade 2020). Though the PNC was designed to be community-oriented, gang violence in El Salvador is so extreme that officers often don't have the time or the resources to engage in community policing measures. Instead, they must opt for armed raids and direct confrontation (International Crisis Group 2017). With police forces spread so thin, the military has stepped forward to fill in the gaps, blurring the boundaries of the military's jurisdiction. Gang violence has forced a shift in military focus from public security to crime prevention, violating its constitutional purpose (International Crisis Group 2017). Police officers in El Salvador are asked to put their lives on the line for pay that is barely above the poverty line. They receive little support from other government institutions, and the PNC has a tenuous relationship with state prosecutors. Most disturbingly, human rights organizations have made allegations against members of the PNC, accusing them of excessive use of force, sexual assault, extortion, and more (International Crisis Group 2017). El Salvador's frontline response to gang violence is not only deeply underfunded and under-protected but suffers from its own brand of internal corruption and lack of accountability.

When Ticas was asked to excavate the well, it was on behalf of the state prosecutor's office. In El Salvador, that office is charged with constructing and presenting the state's case in any criminal prosecution (Collins 2008). In most countries, this would be beneficial for Ticas. The state would be on his side. In El Salvador, however, the state

actively impeded his progress, ensuring that he did not have the supplies needed to complete the task at hand. The state prosecutor's office is separate from the judiciary. The key difference is that the head prosecutor is an appointed position, meaning that the sitting president has the power to choose who serves in that role. Every individual who has held the role of head prosecutor since the 1992 peace accords has not just ignored the importance of government accountability but expressed "open...hostility to accountability efforts." (Collins 2008, p. 30). The state is actively working against accountability, and there is a dearth of independent actors willing or able to put pressure on leaders. As such, the cycle of violence is allowed to continue unhindered.

Every nation relies on its unique institutions. In El Salvador, many of those institutions are unable or unwilling to serve their intended purpose. Religious and non-profit organizations, typically seen as protectors of the voices and interests of citizens, remain traumatized by the violence inflicted upon them during the civil war. The police force is woefully understaffed, and the military is forced to defy its constitutional purpose in an attempt to support the areas where the police fall short. The judicial system struggles to obtain evidence for even the most prominent cases, leaving prosecutors powerless and rendering consequences for crimes obsolete. Finally, presidential appointee state prosecutors refuse accountability for war crimes of the past, ensuring that none will be taken in the future. The institutional foundations of El Salvador are crumbling. If they are to fail completely, so will the nation's last shreds of democracy.

Steps Forward

El Salvador's situation is a catch-22. The government refuses accountability, but opposing political parties cannot press for accountability or they too will face indictment. Swelling gang populations increase violence, but for many young people, refusing gang membership is a death sentence. The government needs witnesses to effectively prosecute current gang members but cannot protect those who risk their lives in the name of justice. There are laws in place to put away perpetrators of violent crime, but prisons allow criminal organizations to grow stronger. Gangs respond to the state with violence, the state responds to the gangs with violence, and so on. In an interview with *The New York Times*, the widow of an MS13 murder victim stated, "talking to the police is a death sentence. But it is good to have the police...if they weren't here, we wouldn't be alive." (Watkins 2018). United States immigration policy did not curate this situation entirely, but it helped plant the seeds. Now, the United States is trying to rebuild El Salvador from the ground up to create a self-sufficient justice system.

Through the US Strategy for Engagement in Central America, roughly 411 million dollars have been allocated to El Salvador since 2016 to address the drivers of migration (Seelke 2020). During the Trump administration, despite threats of withdrawal, aid continued to be provided. Initially, I believed that this practice could cause further harm to El Salvador if the nation were to develop a reliance on the economic support of the United States. *The New York Times* reported in 2018 that officials from El Salvador believe ending these financial contributions would be disastrous. However, the United States is not simply handing El Salvador a blank check. The aid is used to train police officers, build

new prisons with expanded capacity, and teach detectives how to investigate crimes using DNA and blood samples (Watkins 2018). Though the American government maintains that its involvement in actual arrests is advisory, there is speculation about police misconduct. The State Department also refused to comment on what weaponry is being provided to El Salvador's police. With the country bordering on an all-out war between police and gang members, further militarizing either of these organizations does not seem like a wise course of action. And, with police violence being the leading cause of death for young men in the United States, perhaps El Salvador should ask its northern neighbor to step back (Edwards 2019). Punitive action is not an effective strategy for crime deterrence or decreasing recidivism rates (NIJ 2016, par. 5). Though the United States should fund efforts to end El Salvador's crisis, almost as a form of reparations, it should be contained to providing more labs to process evidence and funding for more detectives, not arming policemen and building prisons. People are deterred from crime when they understand that they will almost certainly be caught and punished for their actions, not when they are locked up.

Reform in El Salvador by the state government and the United States seems focused on the criminal justice system, punitive legislation, prison expansion, and persecuting gang members. However, I argue that the focus should instead be on ensuring that all citizens have access to their basic needs and feel empowered to defend their rights, especially the right to education. According to the National Institute of Justice, a critical factor of gang prevention strategies in schools is keeping children and teens enrolled in educational programs. Once minors have stopped attending class, only

show up part of the time, or have dropped out, being able to effectively target them becomes unlikely (NIJ, 2013). According to a report by the United States State Department, “El Salvador’s labor force has lacked adequate education and vocational training to align with labor-force needs.” (Seelke 2020, p. 11). Moreover, a significant portion of the workforce is employed in small- to medium-sized businesses, which are more susceptible to gang violence and extortion. Education and economic opportunity are closely related and very important. The cyclical nature of gang violence cannot be slowed, much less ended, without a serious commitment on the part of the Salvadoran state to provide citizens with education and economic opportunities. Many youths in El Salvador cannot even attend school, whether for geographic or economic reasons. In January of 2021, President Donald Trump rescinded temporary protection status (TPS) for over 200,000 Salvadorans residing in the United States (Bonner 2018). With populations of migratory individuals destined to increase as immigration protections weaken, it is more important now than ever that the United States funnel any funding for El Salvador into infrastructure and institutions. Refugees returning to El Salvador need homes, schools, and functioning government more than they need armed and military-trained police officers.

The relationship between El Salvador, the United States, and gang violence is convoluted and hard to fully understand. It has a cyclical nature, a chicken or the egg situation if you will, that makes it difficult to pinpoint how it truly began and why it continues. Additionally, this paper has only looked at a small sampling of the long history between El Salvador and the United States, and only briefly. Considering the cultural

impact of the Trump Administration’s inflammatory rhetoric or the economic disparities of colonial El Salvador could reveal further links between the two nations in this perpetual cycle of violence. I began this process expecting to emerge with the United States as a villain, a malicious chess player with Central America as its pawns. And yet, there seems to be no singular nation responsible for the crisis that El Salvador is enduring. Immigration policy played a significant role in transplanting gangs from the streets of Southern California to El Salvador, but in a different country with greater accountability and education opportunities, the gangs may not have accelerated so rapidly. With the FMLN established as a legitimate political party, MS13 and Barrio 18 filled the role of the armed guerilla group that was left open. And, when the most important government officials are not made to answer for their human rights violations, it gives the green light to any citizen wanting to take advantage of a war-torn nation. In the early 1980s and 1990s, violence had become part of daily life in El Salvador. It was such a common experience, so widespread, that people almost forgot to consider themselves victims (Blitzer 2017). Those who had lived in El Salvador transitioned from the everyday violence of the Civil War to gang violence—the same conflict, but under a different name. The United States’ role today, especially with the aid provided to El Salvador, is well-intentioned. The government is eager to absolve the refugee crisis that is creating political turmoil in the United States. Doing so in a punitive way is very on-brand for the United States, but not the most effective path to solvency. It could very likely even be prolonging the crisis in El Salvador given the known failures of punitive punishment and the extensive control that gangs have.

Though it sounds counterintuitive, the only way to begin to end the violence may be to work directly with these gangs. As discussed earlier, a significant drop in homicide rates was attributed to a clandestine deal between the sitting president and MS13. That deal was more effective than the judicial system, or *Mano Dura* policies, or even *Súper Mano Dura* policies. Tough on crime doesn't work, especially when that crime has more power than the average lawmaker. MS13 and Barrio 18 are not wealthy organizations. They maintain control through fear, threats, and extortion. Some members are forced to join, but others join because they are promised food, shoes, shelter, or a community. Gangs provide resources and structure where the government does not. And, occasionally, they help the communities they control. When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit San Salvador, it was the gangs that imposed curfews and stay-at-home orders (Martinez 2020). Local grocery stores established opening and closing times, with only one member of a family allowed inside at a time. Some Barrio 18 cliques even stopped charging "la renta", the extortion fees that make up the majority of the organization's income, because of the financial hardships so many were facing (Martinez 2020). With greater control and more respect than the government, El Salvador's gangs were intent on limiting the spread of Covid-19. While their methods may have been less than savory, they were more effective and responsive to their communities than the government would or could have been. As vaccine distribution continues, and we begin the long journey back to 'normal,' it will be interesting to see if MS13's and Barrio 18's strict enforcement of lockdowns will have political implications. The government may choose to strike another partnership with the organizations or regard them with enough humanity to

incorporate members into the conversation moving forward. When it comes down to it, members of MS13 and Barrio 18 are people who have been put in terrible situations, with or without their consent. When we allow government policies and legislation to dehumanize gang members, it is an act of violence. It feeds into the cycle. Rehabilitation programs, educational opportunities, support groups: non-punitive action and humanization are key to restoring peace.

Nicaragua, despite its poverty, is an example on which the countries of the northern triangle should build. With a soft approach on crime, the Nicaraguan government has made progress in reducing gang presence and the violence in its streets. In place of military-trained, aggressive police officers and a punitive approach, Nicaragua uses a much different system of community policing. Though Nicaragua has not had to confront refugees streaming back across the border, it has successfully implemented a system that keeps its citizens safe and keeps the transnational gangs that run neighboring nations at bay. It wasn't always so peaceful. Nicaragua used to be *el país donde el plomo flota y el corcho se hunde*--the place where bullets float and cork sinks. Community based policing (COP), a policy that "emphasizes dialogue with the community over a reliance on technology or strong-arm solutions" has changed that (Ehrlich 2019, p. 7). COP aims to deal with the causes of crimes, instead of punishing offenders. It came about through the integration of the Sandinistas, Nicaraguan revolutionaries, into the political system. Just as the FMLN became a political player in El Salvador, so did the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The situation in Nicaragua is unique. The program has been developed over a long period of time, building off of pre-existing revolutionary values. But, at its core, the model is

adaptable. The program combines volunteer watch groups with trained police officers, as well as a second group of volunteers that works towards providing at-risk youths and other vulnerable populations with resources to avoid falling into the cycle of violence (Tinelli 2014). COP focuses on empowering citizens, building relationships between police officers and the communities in which they serve, improving social services, and generating better crime statistics (Ehrlich 2019). New non-profit organizations have risen in the wake of community policing, dedicating more attention to domestic violence, mental health, and drug addiction. Community conversations with gang members even occurred. After a team-building game of soccer, members of rival gangs and people from the community could talk in a mediated environment to reduce stigma and work towards a more peaceful society (Peralta 2014). The idea is that everyone works from the community, for the future of the community as a whole. The values of COP (communitarian, proactive, and preventative) are integrated throughout every facet of Nicaragua's policing system (Ehrlich 2019). And, with the lowest homicide rate and smallest police force in Central America, Nicaragua's reformative approach seems to be working.

El Salvador's story is brutal and bloody. Ultimately, however, it is one of

perseverance. The people of El Salvador have lived in the tumult of violence for far too long. The stories of Eddie Anzora, Israel Ticas, and Chepe Furia represent the lack of control citizens of El Salvador have over their day-to-day lives, and the ways in which cyclical violence replaces the rule of law. The web of political collusion, American intervention, and failed institutions is woven in far too complex a manner for any one solution to fix. What initially began as an exploration into the complicated relationship between international gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18 and US immigration transformed into a nuanced exploration of where violence takes root and the factors that make breaking the cycle so difficult. Gangs are perpetrators of significant violence in El Salvador. Rivalries between cliques have made the nation one of the most dangerous in the world. But gangs are a symptom of far deeper wounds within a nation. The infestation of gangs within El Salvador is a distorted, violent solution for a war-torn, impoverished nation with little accountability. There are many sides to this story: everyday citizens of El Salvador, rival gang members, politicians, police officers, and even policy makers thousands of miles north. Dehumanizing individuals does not result in progress, and the wrongs that each side of this conflict has committed must be acknowledged and worked through before El Salvador can expect to see a brighter future.

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