A Closer Look at Violence in El Salvador: The Effects of Gangs and Anti-Gang Legislation

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Abstract
This essay examines gangs and anti-gang legislation in Central America. Recognizing the scope of the issue, El Salvador will be used as a case study. In order to measure the levels of violence in the region, homicide rates will be used as the violence indicator. The factors analyzed will be gang relations, domestic anti-gang policies, and international anti-gang policies implemented by the United States, with the goal of understanding whether they have an effect on the violence indicator. The essay will argue that hard-handed policies implemented in the country, both domestically and internationally by the United States, has had a negative effect on the violence indicator and will cause it to increase, and that less violent policies, like Mano Amiga and the gang truce in 2012, has had a positive effect on the violence indicator, thus proving that a more peaceful approach towards gangs is more effective. The paper will then explain in detail why the United States should care about the security situation in El Salvador, and how regional cooperation is crucial to end the gang problem. It will then provide policy recommendations on how to deal with this issue, explaining how prison and policy reform and regional cooperation is needed for success in eradicating the gang problem and decreasing violence in El Salvador.
Problem
A high level of violence in a country is always a major concern for policymakers. Violence threatens democratic stability and development, and it slows economic growth. Violence has been a major problem in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, all of which have some of the highest homicide rates in the world.\(^1\) Gangs, drug traffickers, smugglers and other illicit groups are said to be the cause of the violence in those countries, particularly as the region is home to two notorious multinational gangs, the 18th Street gang, or Barrio 18, and the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13. These gangs have emerged throughout the United States, Mexico, Central America, and have even expanded to South America and Europe. Both the Barrio 18 and the MS-13 gangs are international criminal organizations whose illicit activities has negatively affected the domestic security of the Northern Triangle nations by increasing violence and facilitating drug trafficking, among other crimes. Numerous administrations and the local population have generally supported a combative approach to eradicating gangs, which have caused policy makers, both domestic and foreign, to implement tough anti-gang policies. This approach has made the problem worse. For the sake of this paper, a case study will be conducted on El Salvador to analyze the various factors that are causing violence levels to increase.

Research Question and Methodology
This essay will examine the question: What are the reasons for the growing levels of violence in El Salvador? Being that the countries of the Northern Triangle have had similar histories and have dealt with similar issues, the three countries have taken similar steps to the escalating violence, usually adopting similar methods. This makes El Salvador a good case study because the anti-gang policies implemented there are representative of the rest of the region. Homicide rates will be used as the violence indicator because they are reliable sources of data since they are most likely to get reported.

As seen in Figure 1, the three factors being examined are gang relations, domestic anti-gang policies, and international anti-gang policies implemented by the United States. The anti-gang policies affects gang relations, which ultimately affects the violence levels in El Salvador. The paper will argue that policies that focus on the improvement of the socioeconomic issues of the country will lead to a decrease in violence.

\(^1\)(Meyer and Seelke 2015 ). Citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras rank crime as the top problem facing their countries.
The purpose of this paper is to observe how gang relations and anti-gang policies affects the homicide rate in El Salvador. Extensive research has been conducted and a sufficient amount of data has been collected in order to prove the hypothesis. That data has been collected from multinational organizations, the Salvadoran and U.S. government as well as reliable research centers including the Congressional Research Service, Justice in Mexico, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Woodrow Wilson Center, the World Bank, as well as El Salvador’s Portal de Transparencia and the Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Publica.

Literature Review
Violence is an ever-present national security problem that policy makers, government officials, and scholars all have studied and attempted to find solutions to curb the problem and bring peace back to the nations. The countries of the Northern Triangle have been plagued with civil war, poor governance, and violent gangs. Gangs have become a major security concern since they first appeared in the 1990s and are now a prevalent part of society and are a major cause of the violence the region experiences nowadays. Being that gangs participate in criminal activities to expand their area of control and to fund themselves, violence in society tends to increase.

The Salvadoran government believes that the problem of high homicide rates lies in gangs. Their approach to tackling the problem has been combative and hard-handed, and they are primarily focused on eradicating gangs.

Scholars, like Oliver Jutersonke, head of the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Graduate Institute Geneva, claim that the problem of violence is often rooted in the socioeconomic situation of the country. When the Salvadoran civil war ended in 1992, the democracy was very fragile. The government promoted economic liberalization, however, with incomplete democratization and globalization, these factors undermined the authority of the government and their ability to command over issues of the state. This reduced their role as the primary institution. Rampant urbanization in the country would lead to the growth of
uncontrollable slums, which foster criminal activity and the growth of gangs. Something that Salvador’s system could not handle.²

The legacy of the civil war in Central America should also be taken into account. Scholar Jonathan Friedman, who is a distinguished anthropologist, points to a critical change that Central America underwent over the past two decades. The civil wars of Central America were ideologically charged, with the people challenging the nature of the political system. Today, the Central American governments are dealing with daily “post-conflict” forms of brutality such as delinquency and crime.³ This is an observable shift from political violence to social violence.⁴ At the end of the civil war, the Salvadorian government did not establish itself well, lacking in legitimacy and power, which allowed gangs to continue their illicit operations causing violence to rise.

Another competing view is from human rights organizations and non-governmental organizations, like CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, and Amnesty International. They argue that initiatives like Mérida and CARSI, both are anti-gang policies implemented by the United States, is making the problem worse and is causing an increase in violence. Alexis Stoumbelis, the executive director at CISPES, believes that the money invested by the U.S. will fuel the militarization of the security forces in the region. According to her, this will allow for state-sanctioned violence.⁵

I will be taking a closer look at each theory and see which has had a positive or negative affect on the homicide rate in El Salvador. I agree with the scholars’ view that the problem of the violence in El Salvador is rooted in the socioeconomic situation of the country, and I argue that policies that focus on the improvement of those issues will lead to a decrease in violence.

Homicides

Central America is home to some of the highest homicide rates in the world. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the countries that make up the Northern Triangle, have had particularly high homicide rates. Figure 2 shows the extent of this issue.

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²(Jutersonke, Muggah and Rogers 2009). Criminologists and sociologists also claim that urban density is largely associated with crime and narco-trafficking because a greater concentrations of people will inevitably trigger competition over limited resources.
³(Rodgers, Slum Wars of the 21st Century: Gangs, Mano Dura and the New Urban Geography of Conflict in Central America 2009).
⁴(Friedman 2003).
⁵(Lee 2016).
Comparatively, for the years 2000 to 2014, Guatemala’s and Honduras’s homicide rates have remained constant, with periods of a consistent decrease and periods of consistent increase. Interestingly, El Salvador’s homicide rate has been erratic. Its homicide rate fluctuates, but with the peaks and valleys increasing each year, minus the years from 2012 to 2014. Why is this so the case? As it turns out, from 2011-2014, the Salvadorian government implemented a series of rehabilitative and preventative programs known as Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida, targeting at-risk youth and ex-gang members. Also, a gang truce occurred from 2012 to 2014, which could also account for the dip in homicide rates. I will further look into this.

El Salvador has had a long history of violence. The country was plagued with a civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1992, finally ending with a negotiated peace agreement. Before the Salvadorian civil war, an oligarchy had concentrated wealth and political power and sponsored security forces to repress popular resistance. The guerrilla forces of the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) launched an armed struggle in 1980. During the civil war, the ruling party, which was sponsored by the elite class, was determined to hold on to their power and privileges. The elite would fund the ruling oligarchy, which would deploy extrajudicial death squads to eliminate FMLN forces. The ruling oligarchy would eventually establish their own party, the Alianza Republicana Nationalista (ARENA).

The presidential elections of 1989 brought the ARENA party to power. With the economy shattered and a stalemate between both sides, the leaders of the ARENA and the FMLN started peace negotiations which oversaw the transition to electoral democracy. The most notable changes El Salvador underwent since the 1992 Chapultepec peace agreement was the inclusion

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(Figure 2)

Homicide Rates

Source: The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: Justice in Mexico

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of the FMLN into a political party, a more open press, judicial reforms, demilitarization, and the creation of the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). 

El Salvador has come a long way, its people enjoy greater freedoms but its democracy remains fragile. The neoliberal policies put forth by the successive ARENA administrations, during post-war El Salvador, have preserved economic inequalities and cemented traditional power structures. The FMLN would assume power in 2009, however the structures established by the ARENA have proved too difficult to break. The economic elite has maintained a strong influence over Salvadorian society and policies, and has been a strong supporter of Mano Dura policies. El Salvador’s justice system has also failed to separate itself from political influence, and has lacked in legitimacy, as a result, violent crime and gangs have emerged as one of the biggest problems since the ending of the civil war.

**Gang Relations**

The two major gangs operating in El Salvador are the 18th Street Gang, or Barrio 18, and the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13. Both gangs were formed in Los Angeles, California. Barrio 18 was formed in the 1960s by Mexican youth who had trouble finding their place in society, and over the years began to slowly incorporate Salvadorian immigrants who also found it difficult fitting in. The MS-13 was formed in Los Angeles during the 1980s solely by Salvadorean who fled the civil war. By the 1990s, various neighborhoods in the city were known as “gang hotspots,” in particular the neighborhood of Pico-Union. In these gang hotspots, battles would erupt between rival gangs Barrio 18 and the MS-13. The U.S. took a zero tolerance approach to dealing with the gangs, and put many of the members in prison. As part of the effort to combat these gangs in Los Angeles, and 1996 the government passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). Through this, U.S. security agencies commenced the deportation of undocumented gang members back to El Salvador. This development not only exported the Los Angeles gang culture to El Salvador, but also created a transnational connection with gangs in Los Angeles to gangs in to the Central American country.

The expansion of Barrio 18 and MS-13 presence in El Salvador accelerated after the U.S. began to deport illegal immigrants, many with criminal convictions, back to the Northern Triangle. This had a detrimental effect to El Salvador being that the country’s democracy was fragile from the

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8(Wolf 2017). The ARENA party is a right-winged political party that stands for Salvadorean nationalism, conservatism, and republicanism, and ruled the country from 1989 to 2009. The FMLN assumed power under Mauricio Funes. Currently, Salvador Sanchez Ceren of the FMLN is President of El Salvador.

9(Wolf 2017).

10(Lineberger 2011). Majority of the Salvadorean who came to the U.S. remained in poverty due to their illegal status, with the constant fear of deportation. The Salvadorean found themselves marginalized in society. Particularly for the formation of the MS-13, Salvadorean united together to provide protection from other homegrown Los Angeles gangs.

11(Lineberger 2011). Many of the Barrio 18 and MS-13 members were thrown into prison and served sentences for drug offenses and violent crimes, however that did not lessen the violence on the streets. Instead, prisons acted more like a finishing school for gang members.

12(Cruz, et al. 2016): The Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA; P.L. 104-208). Under this Act, non-US citizens who have been sentenced to over a year in prison were sent back to their country of origin. Also, foreign-born American felons could lose their citizenship and be deported after serving their prison sentence.
twelve year civil war. The government had the virtually impossible task of trying to manage the influx of people, many with criminal records. The data in the Figure 3 shows the extent at which the United States sent back immigrants, a large percentage of them having criminal records. There is no correlation to the number of deportees and the homicide rate in El Salvador, however, what this shows is the amount pressure put on the system that is unable to handle an influx of people.

Figure 3

![Deportees Graph]


The United States has not waned on sending immigrants, with or without criminal records, back to El Salvador. In 2015, the U.S. sent back 21,471 immigrants back to El Salvador, 7,115 of them with criminal records. The U.S. used the IIRIRA to export the gang problem. Many of the deported gang members felt like foreigners in their country of origin because they had come to the U.S. as young children. They also found few job opportunities, being that they did not speak Spanish and had gang tattoos on their arms, faces and necks. Unsurprisingly, they would seek out fellow gang members. The gangs used impoverished neighborhoods that had little police and government presence, as their home and would prey on the vulnerable youth living there. It is reported that by 2012, El Salvador had 8,000 Barrio 18 members and 12,000 MS-13 members. According to UNODC, between the three Northern Triangle countries, El Salvador has the highest concentration of gang members, with about 323 gang members for every 100,000 citizens, nearly double of what Guatemala and Honduras has.

14(Bruneau, Dammert and Skinner 2011): UNODC. This is an estimated number of gang members in El Salvador. Absolute numbers of gang members in Central American is difficult to obtain. Official record-keeping is problematic due mainly to under-reporting, deficient data collection and political interference.
15(Seeleke, Gangs in Central America 2016): UNODC.
Why People Join Gangs

After the end of the Salvadorian civil war, the government failed to address the structural causes of the war and failed to construct effective democratic institutions. A legitimate government that properly addresses the socio-economic issues of El Salvador was not established, and less than favorable policies were put forth. For example, through trade agreements like the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the Salvadorian government promoted foreign investment and labor-intensive exports, shifting its dependence away from its agricultural sector.\textsuperscript{16} Growth in the export sector was not as expected, it was slow and caused displacement of rural populations who depended on the agriculture sector. The Salvadorian economy suffered because of this. Also, throughout the 1990s, the government reduced its expenditures on social services, which limited young people’s opportunities to live decent lives. This meant that the conditions in El Salvador were ripe for gang activity, especially in the marginalized communities where many of the youth came from poor families, broken homes, and had little opportunity to make an honest living.\textsuperscript{17}

For gangs, these marginalized communities are breeding grounds for recruitment. Gangs target at-risk youth, and evidence shows that up to fifteen percent of youths within marginalized communities end up joining.\textsuperscript{18} These youths are poor, socially excluded, have family problems, and have limited to no educational or job opportunities. To them, gang life fulfills their basic needs, such as income and social ties, and gaining respect and status through crime and violence.\textsuperscript{19} In a way, gangs are a form of social inclusion.

Why do Gang Relations Matter?

Gangs matter because they are strategic actors that effectively choose whether to use violence or not. There is a vicious cycle of violence that gangs get caught up in. For example, as a violent dispute escalates between rival gangs, any of the leaders or members who do not respond with a certain amount of force risk appearing weak to members of their own gang and to members of rival gangs, which can have consequences.\textsuperscript{20} So to appear strong, gang members usually resort to violent behavior.

So on the one hand, policies that target the socioeconomic issues of the country do not account for the behavior of gangs. And on the other hand, the Salvadoran government neglects the fact that combative anti-gang polices have adverse effects, leading to an exacerbation of the issue.

\textsuperscript{16}(Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador 2016). CAFTA was ratified in El Salvador in December 2004. It was a free trade agreement between the United States and the smaller developing economies of Central America, which includes Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. CAFTA is meant to promote stronger trade and investment ties to encourage growth in prosperity and stability throughout the region.

\textsuperscript{17}(Perez 2015). Soon, El Salvador became increasingly dependent on remittances from abroad.

\textsuperscript{18}(Jutersonke, Muggah and Rogers 2009).

\textsuperscript{19}(USAID 2006). Other motivations to joining gangs is fun, an identity, a sense of belonging, friendship, and understanding.

\textsuperscript{20}(Wolf 2017).
Domestic Policies

In El Salvador, the government believes that the problem of violence lies with the gangs, and their policies have reflected that belief. The Salvadoran government has enacted tough anti-gang laws that specifically targets gangs. To carry out these laws, the Civil National Police (PNC) gained more power, and the government also deployed military forces to help the PNC. The anti-gang laws were a reactionary response to the rising violence in El Salvador, rather than thoroughly constructed strategies to strengthen citizen security. As this section will analyze, these policies have not been successful, and have failed to lower homicide rates. Aside from that, these policies have also brought negative unintended consequences, like a rising prison population. Seeing the failure of the tough laws, El Salvador attempted to correct it by revamping programs like Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida. This section will analyze the different initiatives El Salvador has carried out to control the gangs.

Mano Dura

El Salvador began its “war on gangs” in July 2003 with Mano Dura, which when translated to English is hard-handed. President Francisco Flores of ARENA unveiled this new plan to restrain the growing power of gangs and to reduce the high homicide rates. The stipulations of this policy was to imprison gang members simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs in public. This “crime” became punishable with up to five years in jail and applied to gang members as young as the age of 12. This policy was put in place in response to popular demands of the people and media pressure for the government to do something about the country’s gang problem and rising crime rates.

Between July 2003 and August 2004, when Mano Dura was declared unconstitutional by the Salvadoran Supreme Court, 20,000 gang members had been arrested. However, due to it being declared unconstitutional, 95 percent of those who had been arrested were released without charge. The tough anti-gang policy was effective short term, and early public reactions were very positive. However, long term effects were very disappointing. Most of the youths who were arrested then released were recruited into gang life while in prison. Studies have shown that gang leaders in El Salvador, and other Central American countries, have used prisons to recruit, and increase discipline and cohesion among their ranks. In prison, gangs become so powerful that they can control the entire facility, to the point where the prison guards are afraid to enter it and only guard it from the outside.

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21 (Meyer and Seelke 2015).
22 (Roberts 2016). Francisco Flores died on January 30, 2016 of a brain hemorrhage. By the time of his death, Flores was facing charges of embezzlement. He was under house arrest since November 2014. His reputation in office was damaged due to failed policies, two earthquakes and a drought. He also adopted the U.S. dollar to El Salvador’s official currency, which was very unpopular.
23 (Rodgers, Muggah and Stevenson, 2009).
24 Ibid. Official numbers vary.
25 (Meyer and Seelke 2015).
26 (Moss 2015).
Super Mano Dura

As a result of Mano Dura being deemed unconstitutional, El Salvador’s President Elias Antonio Saca,27 of the ARENA party, pushed for the Super Mano Dura package of anti-gang reforms, and at the end of August 2004 it was brought into effect. The difference between Super Mano Dura and Mano Dura was that Super Mano Dura targeted gang leaders. The government stiffened the penalties for gang membership to five years in prison for gang members, and nine years for gang leaders. It also enhanced police power, more anti-gang task forces were deployed and the PNC aimed to dismantle gangs through the arrests of the leaders.28 Through Super Mano Dura, El Salvador’s prison population increased dramatically, most of which being gang members. Figure 4 shows the alarming rate at which the prison population in El Salvador increased.

Figure 4

The anti-gang legislation in El Salvador did not have the desired effect of eliminating gang violence or reducing recruitment. Instead, gangs adapted to the policies and made themselves less visible. For example, some government agents claim that they were able to infiltrate the Barrio 18 structure and were able to understand their codes and language, and according to the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP), in response to the Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura policies, Barrio 18 established new modes of operations and goals.29 These laws made the problem worse and have had negative consequences, pushing the Salvadoran government to find other ways in curbing the rising homicide rate.

27(BBC News 2016). In October, ex-President Saca, along with six former officials, were arrested over accusations of embezzling millions of dollars of public funds.
28(Seelke, Gangs in Central America 2016).
29(USAID 2006): The CNSP was one of the institutions tasked with the implementation of Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida initiative, the other being the Secretaría de la Juventud (SJ).
Mano Amiga y Mano Extendida

While the authorities continued with the tough anti-gang laws to suppress gang activity, the government rolled out new prevention and rehabilitation programs in El Salvador. Mano Amiga, Spanish for friendly hand, was aimed at prevention, targeting at-risk youth, and Mano Extendida, translated as extended hand, worked to reintegrate gang members back into society. The institutions tasked at implementing both initiatives were the Secretaría de la Juventud (Youth Secretariat, or SJ) and the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (National Council of Public Security, or CNSP).  

Established in 2004, the SJ was to carry out the presidential program JóvenES and promote the development of young people. It carried out nationwide surveys of youths’ needs, yet it revealed little useful information about the difficulties facing youth Salvadorians and had a weak foundation on which to build any effective public policy. Due to the fact that the SJ yielded little results it was eventually closed in 2011. The CNSP was more actively engaged in gang prevention and rehabilitation than the SJ. It was established in 1996 under former President Armando Calderón Sol, who ran the country from 1994-1999. The CNSP would produce important reports, yet its recommendations were rarely implemented, pointing to the government’s lack of commitment to crime prevention and rehabilitation. The CNSP was closed by ex-President Carlos Mauricio Funes Cartagena in 2011, and was replaced by the Consejo Nacional de la Juventud and in the following year the Instituto Nacional de la Juventud. 

Although little data is recorded on the effects of these new institutions, interestingly, from 2011-2012 there is the largest drop recorded in the homicide rate of El Salvador. The homicide rate went from 72.2 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011 to 42.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012. 

It is difficult to show how Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida had an effect on the homicide rate in El Salvador being that they were instituted around the same time as Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura. The data gathered at these institutions were also problematic. It is evident that the Mano Amiga and the Mano Extendida were underfunded and ineffective, and usually were located at the bottom of a president’s agenda when it came to combating the gangs in El Salvador. However, the relaunch of the initiatives seemed to yield positive results.

2012 Gang Truce

The most successful factor in reducing homicide rates in El Salvador came from the 2012 gang truce. Many saw the hard handed approach to dealing with the gang problem in El Salvador as a failure. Homicide rates are still high, gangs seem to be unchecked and widespread, and the PNC has come under attack from human rights groups for corruption and using violent means against gang members. As an alternative, some policy-makers and activists have suggested a gang truce rather than reliance on the police. A gang truce is a nonviolent resolution to larger conflicts between gangs with the goal of reducing or even eliminating violent conflict between the gangs. The negotiations are usually handled by a third party.

30(Wolf 2017).
31 Ibid.
32(United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) 2007): Justice in Mexico. See Figure 4.
33(Katz, Hedberg and Amaya 2016).
A gang truce is believed to stop the cycle of violence, as mentioned before, between rival gangs. A gang truce is believed to be capable of ending this cycle of violence because it provides the disputing gangs with a cooling-off period where less harmful behavior can be established, leading to peaceful negotiations.

El Salvador attempted a gang truce between Barrio 18 and MS-13 in 2012 during the Mauricio Funes’ presidency. Funes was a member of the FMLN, and his election in 2009 broke the twenty year reign of ARENA. During his presidency, the minister of defense, David Munguía Payés was moved to be the head of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security. A Catholic bishop and a former legislator were also solicited to broker a secret truce between Barrio 18 and the MS-13. It is important to note that this was a secret negotiation, and that it was solely a negotiation between the two gangs, not between the gangs and the government. In March 2012, high-ranking gang leaders who were serving time in maximum-security prisons were transferred to less secure prisons to further the negotiations. Munguía Payés had full knowledge of this, and even agreed to it, however, he has denied his role in facilitating the truce.

Since the time the negotiations began in 2012, the homicide rate in El Salvador decreased dramatically. Gang leaders allegedly agreed to not forcibly recruit children and to not commit violence towards women. Disarmament also occurred during this period, with gang leaders turning over small amounts of weapons. They also agreed to continue to engage in broader negotiations. This initial success of the gang truce in El Salvador prompted other nation in the Northern Triangle to follow. The Honduran government considered a similar gang truce initiative.

There were plenty of skeptics, and even opponents, to this agreement, as some maintained that forced disappearances increased after the truce began. According to the skeptics, the gangs benefitted from the truce by garnering media attention and political power. Despite the disarmament and vow to not recruit children or to commit violence towards women, gangs continued to conduct other illicit activities like extortions and giving up territories. Several officials that were involved in facilitating the truce have been accused of providing gang leaders and their affiliates with as much as US $25 million in bribes. Those officials are currently under investigation. The truce began to unravel in mid-2013 when then-president Funes withdrew support for the truce mediators and reduced communication between imprisoned gang leaders.

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34 Ibid.
35 (Wolf 2017).
36 (BBC Mundo 2016). Funes received political asylum in Nicaragua in September 2016. He fled El Salvador after being accused of embezzlement. Funes states “Since I left the Presidency of the Republic I knew that the oligarchic right was going to aggravate the political persecution against me.” During his presidency, Funes was able to cancel a personal debt of more than US $200,000 and save US $150,000. With Funes gone, it complicates the civil process that does not imply jail time.
37 (Seelke, Gangs in Central America 2016).
38 Ibid.
39 (Farah 2016).
40 (Avalos and Avelar 2016).
41 (Seelke, Gangs in Central America 2016).
By 2014, the gang truce completely fell apart and the homicide rate in El Salvador increased dramatically. The average murder rate had risen to about nine murders per day, and gang attacks on police were occurring more often.\textsuperscript{42} The trend worsened in 2015, as El Salvador posted the world’s highest homicide rate at 103.1 per 100,000 inhabitants (See Figure 5). Confrontations between gang members and law enforcement agencies escalated after the government returned the gang leaders involved in the truce to maximum-security prisons in early 2015. Also, the police are currently being investigated by the Salvadoran attorney general in allegations of involvement in extrajudicial killings that took place during an apparent massacre in March 2015.\textsuperscript{43} The current administration of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, of the FMLN, opposes negotiating with gangs nevertheless, church leaders have voiced support for renewed dialogue with them given the 2012 precedent. Since the end of the gang truce, both the Barrio 18 and the MS-13 became more fragmented, making them more difficult to target and eliminate, and the Salvadoran government has struggled to bring down the violence level.

\textbf{Figure 5}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{el_salvador_homicide_rates.png}
\caption{El Salvador Homicide Rates}
\end{figure}

Source: UNODC: Justice in Mexico

\textbf{International Policies}

The security threat coming out of El Salvador, and Central America in general, has been a growing concern of the United States. Central America’s geographical position, makes it a natural corridor for transnational criminal networks to utilize (namely drug trafficking coming from South America en route North), which means that Washington has provided significant

\textsuperscript{42} (Seelke, Gangs in Central America 2016).

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. Adriana Beltrán and Carolyn Scorpio, “Turning a Blind Eye to Police Abuse and Extrajudicial Executions?” WOLA, August 16, 2016.
amounts of economic and military assistance to regional allies to counter those threats. Central America was a major focus for the United States during the Cold War because of the Communist threat, but that fear declined in the 1990s when the Soviet Union fell. Also during that decade, the many civil wars in the Central American region came to an end. Rising levels of violence and increased levels of immigration in the past two decades have caused the U.S. to refocus its attention on the region. Two initiatives aimed at Mexico and Central America that the United States has invested heavily in are the Mérida Initiative and the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Since 2008, Congress has allocated about US $1.2 billion for the seven countries comprising Central America.

The Mérida Initiative and CARSI

The United States finally turned its attention to the region in 2008 with the introduction of the Mérida Initiative, a counter-drug and anti-crime assistance program that focuses primarily on Mexico, but a portion of it was allocated for Central America. In March 2007, former President George W. Bush traveled to Mexico and Central America to meet with regional leaders. During these meetings, concerns were raised over the drug trade and the rise in crime and violence.

Throughout these meetings, the Bush administration developed a framework for a new regional security partnership with Mexico and several nations of Central America. This soon became the Mérida Initiative, a security assistance package that was designed to aid Mexico and Central America in the fight against organized crime and the illicit activities that come from it. The plan lent money to improve communication among the various law enforcement agencies, and to ensure the long-term enforcement of the rule of law and protection of civil and human rights.

Then in 2010, under the Barak Obama administration, Congress revamped the Central American portion of the Mérida Initiative, and dubbed it the Central America Regional Security Initiative, or CARSI. The improved initiative addressed a wider range of security concerns. The Mérida Initiative focused primarily on the prevention of the narcotics entering the United States, whereas CARSI aims to not only stop the narcotics flow but also to strengthen the ability of governmental institutions to address the security challenges and the socioeconomic issues that contribute to violence.

To fund the initiative, the Obama Administration requested US $286.5 million in 2016. This was part of a broader $1 billion request to implement a new “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America.” Due to the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016, CARSI would not receive the full amount requested. However, US $750 million was provided for the region, including US

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44(Meyer and Seelke 2015 ). El Salvador’s civil war lasted from October 1979 – January 1992. Guatemala’s civil war lasted from November 1960 – December 1996. Honduras was relatively stable, however, in the 1980s it was a key base for the Reagan administration’s response to the crisis the rest of the region was facing. Honduras became a U.S. military base where large military exercises were held and thousands of Salvadoreans were trained.

45(Meyer and Seelke 2015 ). The seven countries of Central America are as follows: Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.


47 Ibid. The Mérida Initiative was named after the location in Mexico where President Bush had met with President Calderón.

48(Meyer and Seelke 2015 ).
$348.5 million specifically for CARSI.\textsuperscript{49} Prior to 2012, the money allocated for CARSI was evenly distributed between all countries of Central America, with 22.5 percent allocated to Guatemala, 17.3 percent allocated to Honduras, and 16.3 percent allocated to El Salvador. Non-Northern Triangle countries received a bit less, but were still accounted for. Case in point, Panama received 10 percent, Costa Rica received 6.9 percent and Belize and Nicaragua together received 3.9 percent.\textsuperscript{50} Since 2012, the State Department has not officially disclosed the exact breakdown of CARSI assistance to the countries of Central America, but various reports state that a majority of the funding today goes primarily to the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.\textsuperscript{51} The obvious reason for this is the particularly alarming security situation in these countries.

The Mérida Initiative and CARSI are designed to support U.S. security concerns in Mexico and Central America. U.S. agencies provide security equipment, technical assistance, and training to aid in the regions’ law enforcement agencies and military to disrupt the drug trafficking routes and criminal networks that operate in the region, all to create a safer communities in the region.\textsuperscript{52}

**Implications**

It is evident that El Salvador has a major security issue caused by gangs, particularly the Barrio 18 and the MS-13. These gangs are the main sources of violence and crime in the country nowadays. Over the years different administrations have tried different methods to control the gang problem. Since the end of the civil war, each presidential administration has taken a zero-tolerance approach in controlling them, showing little attention to the socio-economic and structural issues that the country had. Figure 6 shows the effects that different anti-gang legislations had on the homicide rate, or violence indicator, in El Salvador.

**Figure 6**

\textsuperscript{49}(Meyer and Seelke 2015 ).
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51}(Eguizabal, et al. 2015).
\textsuperscript{52}Ibid.
The aforementioned graph clearly demonstrates how the Mano Dura initiative, even though short-lived, had a strongly negative effect on the violence indicator. The homicide rate was at 37.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, and shot up to 46.8 per 100,000 inhabitants by the time it was deemed unconstitutional. What is also represented is the prison population rate, which was also negatively affected by the initiative. The Super Mano Dura implemented by the Salvadorian government had some success, however, a spike in homicide rates occurred between the years of 2008 and 2009. The direct cause of the spike cannot be accounted for, but since it occurred during the years of Super Mano Dura, it can be considered that the initiative partly contributed to it. The prison population rate also continued to climb since the implementation of this policy.

The Mérida Initiative and CARSI, the two international policies implemented by the United States, had little to no effect on the violence indicator. Mérida focused primarily on eradicating gangs and illicit networks, and had a more combative approach towards gangs. CARSI focused more on the structural problems of the political and economic systems of El Salvador. One fact worth mentioning is that CARSI was implemented in 2010, a year before the drop in homicide rates. Nevertheless, we cannot conclude that it was the factor causing the sharp decrease because Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida were both revamped in 2011.

Both Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida were policies that focused primarily on prevention and rehabilitation. The rate of people living below poverty line in El Salvador is also represented. This is an estimate of the percentage of the population falling below the poverty line, which is $1.90 per day. This is a good indicator of poverty levels because it gives a quick overview of how many people do not make enough money to supply their basic needs. The population living below poverty lines remains relatively constant, however, with the revamp of these policies, those that lived in poverty decreased. This supports the scholars’ theory that policies that focus to fix the socioeconomic issues of the country does decrease violence levels.

The gang truce in El Salvador has proven to be the most successful project in bringing down the violence indicator. From 2012 to 2014 El Salvador had a relatively low homicide rate as compared to previous years. However, when ex-president Funes withdrew all support for the gang truce, it fell apart. Soon after, the homicide rate in the country shot up to historic highs. Currently, President Céren opposes negotiating with gangs, but with the evidence presented, it would be wise of him to reconsider his stance. Church leaders, who served as mediators in the first gang truce, have voiced support for renewed dialogue with the gangs. President Céren should capitalize on this opportunity and initiate another gang truce and support it until negotiations are complete.

Why Should We Care?
Currently, the countries of Central America are facing a security crisis that threatens the Western Hemisphere. Rising crime rates and violence and the growth of organized crime pose a direct threat to regional security. The United States should care about the security situation in the region because leaving these threats unchecked will continue to make the problem worse. There are three reasons why the U.S. should care about Central America. First, it is a transnational issue. Second, the region is in a crucial geographic location for illicit trading routes. Lastly,

53 (The World Bank n.d.)
gons have disrupted the way of life for citizens in the area, bringing violence to their homes causing internal displacement which has exacerbate the problem regarding migration towards the U.S.

**Transnational Issue**

The rising crime rates and homicide rates in Central America are in large part due to illicit activities, like drug and human trafficking. The drug trade is a transnational issue being that the largest drug consumer is the United States and the biggest drug producers are in South America (namely cocaine-producing Colombia). Hence, given geographic considerations, Central America and Mexico are a crucial transshipment route from the cocaine-producing areas to the consumers. These activities are facilitated by gangs, drug traffickers and other illicit groups. The U.S. has recognized this because it declared a War on Drugs in the 1980s. Of all the countries in the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. is best equipped to take the lead on the issue. Due to the legacy of civil war, the fragile governments of the Central American countries lack the sufficient resources to be able to take the lead in organizing an effective approach against the threat.

**Geographical Position**

Central America is in a unique geographical position in the Western Hemisphere. It is the gateway from South America to North America, making it geographically advantageous. The region has access to the large consumer markets of the North as well as the Pacific Ocean and Atlantic Ocean, by way of the Caribbean. This makes Central America crucial for drug trafficking organizations and other transnational criminal organizations, thus making this a security priority for the United States.\(^54\) The illicit transnational organizations operating in the region that traffic drugs, arms, humans, and are also involved in money laundering, exploit the regions geographical position and use it to their advantage.\(^55\)

**Migration Issue**

The rise of violence in Central America has caused internal displacement, forcing thousands of people to flee their homes in search of a better life. The destination is often the United States, making this a major issue for the United States. Gangs play a large role in fueling internal displacement. The mixed migration flows to the U.S. have included families, and unaccompanied children. Who are seeking asylum.\(^56\) The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has stated that gang violence is contributing to a “refugee-like” situation in the northern triangle.\(^57\) Ignoring this problem in Central America is not an option for the United States.

These are important issues the United States has to face. The situation in Central America will not get any better, and the governments in this region are not equipped to handle the problem without the help of the U.S.

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\(^54\)(Stephens 2011)  
\(^55\)(Meyer and Seelke 2015).  
\(^56\)(Seeke, Gangs in Central America 2016)  
\(^57\)(The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees 2016)
Policy Recommendations

Prison Reform

The Mano Dura policies implemented in El Salvador brought high prison rates. Nevertheless, while such a policy did succeed in putting gang members behind bars, one unfortunate consequence has been that prisons are past their maximum capacity of inmates. This is problematic as living conditions in the country, and the rest of Central America, are generally harsh, with severe overcrowding, poor sanitation, and staffing shortages. The country also segregated the members of the Barrio 18 from the members of MS-13 to lessen the violence committed between the two in prison, with some prisons exclusively filled with members of one gang. Many facilities in the country that were already overpopulated have been filled with thousands of suspected gang members more, making the problem worse.58

Case in point, the Penal de Cuidad Barrios, a prison in the Las Victorias district of San Salvador, is exclusively for members of the MS-13. This prison is built for 800, but is currently filled with 2,600 inmates who are able control the entire facility because the prison guards are too afraid to enter. Inside this prison, the prisoners run their own bakery, have workshops that make furniture and toys, and even a hospital that they staff themselves. Aside from these activities, the minimal security in the prison had allowed gang members the ability to carry out criminal activities, sometimes with the assistance of corrupt prison guards and officials.59 Indeed, Salvadoran prisons have actually become schools and recruiting grounds for gang members, where first time offenders often deepen their involvement within the gang. This is where rehabilitation programs should be instituted, where gang members are most vulnerable, however, the poor conditions have helped gangs to become larger, better organized, and more cohesive.

End the Deportation of Gang Members

The United States should no longer deport gang members or immigrants with criminal records back to El Salvador and the rest of Central America. By doing this, the U.S. only shifts the burden of combatting Barrio 18 and MS-13 to El Salvador, a country incapable of handling the issue. The country has a history of armed conflict, a large portion of people in El Salvador live in poverty, hence the current socio-economic realities have created an environment that is ripe for gangs to flourish. To minimize the threat of gangs, the U.S. should lend financial, law enforcement, and intelligence assistance to Salvadorian agencies attempting to control the gangs, which it has increasingly begun to do through CARSI.

El Salvador is incapable of physically containing and rehabilitating Barrio 18 and MS-13 members in detention facilities as local prisons are already overburdened. Prisons are overcrowded, the country lacks the financial resources, and the police are unable to deal with high crime rates and are resorting to violent measures to control the gangs. The deported gang members establish a network stretching from their country of return to the United States, further deepening transnational illicit networks.60 Because of this, the U.S. should reconsider its flawed policy of exporting gang members.

58 (Moss 2015)
59 (Moss 2015)
60 (Fogelbach 2005).
Reincorporation of Gang Members into Society
Better prisons and tougher policing can only go so far in correcting the gang problem in El Salvador. The government must address the root problems that cause the youth to join gangs. El Salvador should further develop prevention and rehabilitation programs, targeting youth and ex-gang members by reincorporating them back into society.\textsuperscript{61} Such rehabilitative programs should offer alternatives to gang life. A better education, the opportunity to learn hobbies like music, arts, and youth sports, can fulfill some sociological aspects of a youth’s life that they would otherwise seek in gang. The Salvadoran government needs to function better, and not allow gangs to control the country. The government cannot allow the citizens to live in fear. Without addressing the socio-economic issues of the country, gangs will continue to flourish.

Regional Cooperation
Regional cooperation is key in controlling the gang problem in Central America. The transnational threat posed by gangs have led to greater security cooperation among the United States and Central America. Most governments agree on regional cooperation to tackle the security issues faces they face, but normally clash on how to go about combatting the issue. Also cooperation between countries have been hindered by unrelated disputes between countries.\textsuperscript{62}

Mano Amiga policies are more cooperative in nature, and focus on the socio-economic aspects of the gang problem. They promote education and public health initiatives, focusing on at-risk youth in poor neighborhoods. These types of polices are being more promoted by multilateral agencies on the national level, but should expand to the international level. Examples include the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericano (SICA), and the Red Centroamericana para la Constricción de la Paz y la Seguridad Humana (REDCEPAZ). The former is an organization between multiple governments and the ladder is a network that consists of multiple non-governmental organizations active throughout Central America. They manage a variety of activities that reduce weapons supply, promote activities for youth and advocate for policies associated with violence reduction.\textsuperscript{63} These policies are a step in the right direction, however, being relatively new, there is little evidence and data to show that they have been effective. However, it is evident that regional cooperation is required to solve and international gang problem.

Conclusion
El Salvador has had a long history of violence. It endured a bloody twelve year civil war, and now it is enduring a battle with two largely and particularly violent gangs, Barrio 18 and Mara13. These gangs prey on at-risk youth and thrive in poor marginalized communities. After a series of failed economic policies the government implemented, these poor, marginalized communities have grown. The Salvadorian government also failed to establish legitimacy and control over its people after the 1992 peace accord that put an end to the civil war. El Salvador’s homicide rate is high, causing for a real security concern. Recognizing this, the government implemented a series of anti-gang legislation, both hard-handed and rehabilitative. On the international level, the

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62}(Boraz and Bruneau 2006).
\textsuperscript{63}(Jutersonke, Muggah and Rogers 2009).
United States also recognizes this security threat and has implemented anti-gang initiatives to combat gangs in the region of its own.

This essay has explained how domestically, the combative policies the Salvadorian government implemented, namely Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura, had a negative effect on the violence indicator. On the other hand, the preventative and rehabilitative programs Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida were also analyzed but were found to be inconclusive. There is evidence to show that when these policies were revamped in 2011, they had a positive effect on the violence indicator, yet it cannot be definitively proven since these policies were originally implemented in 1996. The gang truce had the most positive effect on the violence indicator, and should be reconsidered by the current Céren administration.

Finally, the policies analyzed at the international level are the U.S.-sponsored Mérida Initiative and the Central American Regional Security Initiative. The evidence shows that these initiatives, which mainly focused on policing and security, generally had a negative effect on the homicide rate in El Salvador. However, these initiatives are constantly under review and hopefully future projects will give more attention and resources to addressing, the socio-economic issues of El Salvador and other Central American nations. The United States is taking the lead in combating gangs on the international level, but it is evident that greater regional cooperation is key in combating the gang problem.

Currently, the security situation in El Salvador is alarming, and it will only improve if the government reconsiders how it tackles the problem. It is clear that the tough anti-gang policies only exacerbate the issue and will continue to cause the homicide rate to increase. Through the findings in this paper, policies that focus to improve the socioeconomic issues of the country do have positive effects on the homicide rate and will cause it to decrease. The current President of El Salvador supports and will continue to support programs like Mano Amiga and Mano Extendida, which will contribute to an improved security situation in the country in the years to come. A gang truce has shown to be effective in curbing violence and should be reconsidered, unfortunately, the Salvadoran President opposes to facilitate another truce. There is hope for the country’s future. There is clear evidence on what policies work and what policies do not. El Salvador can only learn from their past mistakes and grow from it. The socioeconomic issues of the country can only improve if the right policies are put forward, and that will lead to a decrease of violence, which will eventually lead to peace and prosperity in El Salvador.
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