

**YOUTH GANGS IN CENTRAL AMERICA:**  
**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LAS**  
**MARAS IN HONDURAS AND NICARAGUA**

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of a Master of Arts degree  
in International Development Studies*

Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, N.S.

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## **DEDICATION**

To the people of Honduras; patria querida, tierra que me vio nacer.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ACJ	Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes <i>Christian Youth Association</i>
AMNLAE	Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza <i>Nicaraguan Women Association Luisa Amanda Espinoza</i>
BATFE	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
CABEI	Central American Bank for Economic Integration
CDS	Comités de Defensa Sandinista <i>Sandinista Defense Committees</i>
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICAD	Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas <i>Inter American Commission for the Control of the Abuse of Drugs</i>
CIIDH	Centro Internacional para Investigaciones en Derechos Humanos <i>International Centre for the Investigation of Human Rights</i>
CONCODOC	Conscription and Conscientious Objection Documentation
EPS	Ejército Popular Sandinista <i>Sandinista Popular Army</i>
CST	Central Sandinista de Trabajadores <i>Sandinista Workers Central</i>
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

ERIC	Equipo de Reflexión Investigación y Comunicación <i>Team of Reflection, Investigation and Communication</i>
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional <i>National Liberation Front Farabundo Martí</i>
FONAMIH	Foro Nacional para las Migraciones en Honduras <i>National Forum for Migration in Honduras</i>
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional <i>Sandinista National Liberation Front</i>
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDESO	Instituto de Encuestas y Sondeos de Opinión <i>Institute of Surveys and Opinion Polls</i>
IDIES	Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales <i>Institute of Social and Economic Investigations</i>
IEEPP	Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Política Públicas <i>Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Politics</i>
IIRIRA	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadística <i>National Statistics Institute</i>
INEC	Instituto Nicaragüense de Estadísticas y Censos <i>Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census</i>
IPEDADES	Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible <i>Institute of Education for Sustainable Development</i>
IUDOP	Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública <i>University Institute of Public Opinion</i>
M-13	Mara Salvatrucha
M-18	Mara Dieciocho
NACARA	Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act



NACLA	North American Congress on Latin America
NDIC	National Drug Intelligence Centre
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCAVI	Observatorio Centroamericano sobre la Violencia <i>Central American Violence Observatory</i>
OID	Observatorio Interamericano sobre Drogas <i>Inter American Drug Observatory</i>
OSAC	Overseas Security Advisory Council
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RROCM	Red Regional de Organizaciones Civiles para las Migraciones <i>Regional Network of Civil Organizations for Migration</i>
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SIEMCA	Sistema de Información Estadística sobre las Migraciones en Centroamérica <i>Systems of Statistic Information on Migrations in Central America</i>
UN	United Nations
UNCHS	United Nations Centre for Human Settlements
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN-HABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNO	Unión Nacional de Oposición <i>National Opposition Union</i>
UNSDRI	United Nations Social Defense Research Institute

USAID

United States Agency for International Development

USCIS

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

## **ABSTRACT**

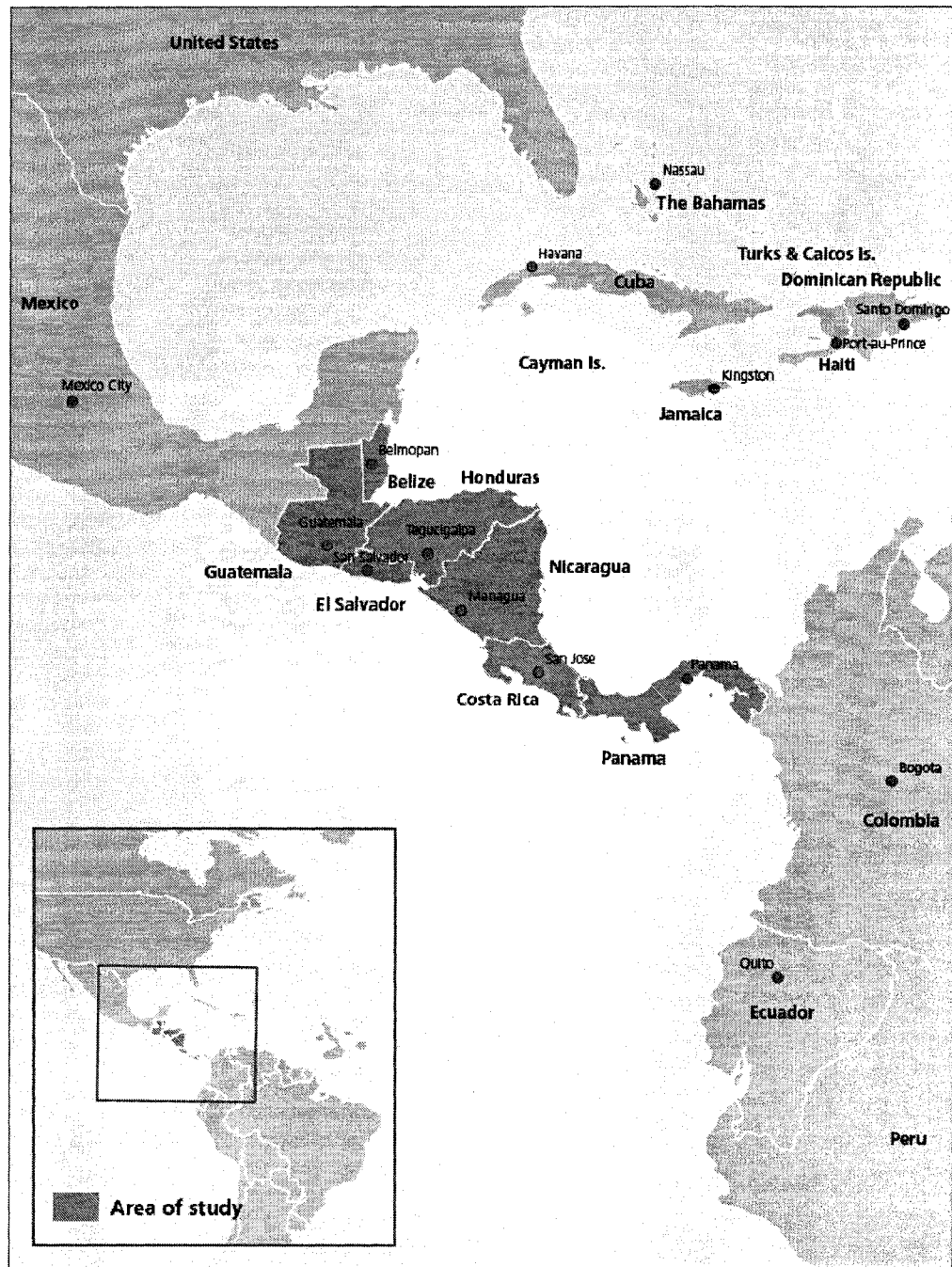
**Brenda Christine Estrada**

### **Youth Gangs in Central America: A Comparative Analysis of Las Maras in Honduras and Nicaragua**

October 1, 2008

For the last two decades, Central America has hosted a particular form of gang organization called *Maras*. This research compared four factors to analyze the extent in which Honduras and Nicaragua are different in their hosting of the Mara phenomenon: Migration and deportation trends; the state of the drug and arms trafficking; government approaches to youth gangs; and the role of obligatory military service. The data suggests that two of these factors, migration and deportation patterns, as well as government approaches to youth gangs, play central roles in determining the difference between Honduras' problem with Maras and Nicaragua's lack of it. Furthermore, the other two factors serve to aggravate an already precarious situation. Conclusively, this research suggests that countries need to implement indigenous prevention policies and strategies that commence at a domestic level, rather than relying on repressive methods suggested by foreign institutions.

## MAP OF CENTRAL AMERICA<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> (a) Map of the region published in the UNODC study “Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire”, May 2007. ISBN 978-91-1-030038-4.

(b) This map cannot be employed for any commercial use without the strict permission of the UNODC.

(c) Authorization granted on August 20, 2008 from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for Mexico- Central America & the Caribbean.

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*“The quality of human existence is the ultimate measure of development”*  
*Alan Berg.*

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### ***INTRODUCTION: YOUTH GANGS AND VIOLENCE, A GLOBAL CRISIS***

Life in Latin America is becoming increasingly crippled by violence and crime. Its history of military rule combined with armed revolutions, guerrillas, and death squads, is a testimony to the violence the region has experienced over many years. Today, although rebel movements are still present in a number of countries in Latin America, the violence that has become notorious is of a different kind. It is no longer revolution and the fight for freedom and justice; instead, criminal violence has become the alternative option for many individuals to overcome exclusion, poverty and marginalization.

Over the years, Latin America has become one of the most violent regions in the globe. Its cities are considered the most unsafe in the world (Manrique, 2006). By 1990, 74.5 percent of inhabitants of major cities were victims of some type of criminal act (Ibid). Studies carried out by the United States Congress show countries like Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela and El Salvador as epicentres of violent criminality (Ribando, 2005). The rate of homicide per 100,000 habitants is one of the standard international indicators used to measure violence (UNDP, 2002 in Gaborit, 2005). For example, PAHO (2002) published tables of statistics comparing homicide rates between 1990 and 2000 in the Americas. Accordingly, Colombia witnessed a rate of 69.4 per 100,000 in 1996; Brazil experienced, in 1998, 26 homicides per 100,000, and Mexico reached a rate of 17.8 homicides per 100,000 in 1992. However, by the year 2003, data on homicides in the Americas reported that the highest homicide rates were experienced by Colombia with 65 homicides per 100,000 habitants and Honduras with 55 per 100,000. Meanwhile El

Salvador had 45 and Jamaica had 44 per 100,000 (PAHO, 2003). However, by 2004 the numbers changed; according to Gaborit (2005), Brazil reported a homicide rate of 25 per 100,000 by 2004, while Honduras was estimated to be 45.7, compared to Nicaragua with only 10.3 homicides per 100,000. Although the rates of homicide appear to fluctuate, increasing for some countries and decreasing for others throughout the years, it is evident that the region still experiences a high level of homicide rate and violence compared to other parts of the world.

In the last two decades, Central America has hosted an aggressive and extremely violent form of gang organization called **Maras**. The Maras have created terror and social fear which have unquestionably hindered development for many local communities. This has affected elements of social capital such as the trust citizens have among their community members, building tensions and leading to the deterioration of social relations and interactions. As of 2007, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador were home to the largest numbers of *mareros*, with memberships ranging from 36,000, 14,000 and 10,500 (United Nation, 2007) individuals respectively. Nicaragua and Costa Rica have significantly fewer gang members with 4,500 and 2,260 youths each. More importantly Nicaragua, although the poorest country in the region, it is considered one of the safest (Ibid). However, gang violence is a global problem that is not limited to the Central American region. For instance, Brazil deals with *quadrilhas*, which are primarily drug-trafficking gangs of male youths between 13 and 25 years old. In Colombia, youth crime is responsible for the high levels of violence in the country. Their gang formations, most commonly known as *sicarios*, are highly involved with the drug cartels. By 1990, there were approximately 120 youth gangs in Medellín, which involved an average of



3,000 youths in drug-related activities (Rodgers, 1999). Evidently, within the Latin American context, the manifestations of youth crime vary considerably, regardless of the generality of causes attributed to crime and violence specific to the region. This thesis intends to provide some insights into the unique phenomenon occurring in Central America called Maras.

Central America began to experience the first manifestations of Mara gang activity in the early 1990s as a result of events in the United States. Following the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, a task force formed by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service deported nearly 1,000 gang members from the United States back to El Salvador (Walker, 2004; United Nations, 2007; Rodgers, 2007; Reisman, 2006). Gang activity mushroomed and spread since to the neighbouring countries of Honduras and Guatemala, but it has not plagued Nicaragua to the same extent, despite similar socioeconomic conditions and geographic proximity. In addition to this increase in Mara activity in Central America, recent years have also witnessed a variety of new activities in these countries. Some are criminal in nature, for instance, the drug and firearms trafficking activities which have expanded across the region. Others are social such as the increase in illegal migration from Central America to the United States.

The United Nations Crime and Development Report (2007) for Central America evaluates the impact that crime has on development on three levels: society, the economy, and governance. Local community leaders globally are in agreement that crime destroys social and human capital, while it is bad for business and undermines governance. Although crime takes various forms, the victimization of humans and the physical insecurity that people experience around the world is increasingly caused by

youth gangs. Crime thus, serves as a mechanism of disempowerment that interferes with the social, economic and political development of the communities affected. Although governments and international organizations have proposed and implemented many strategies in hopes to reduce the crime and violence in regions mainly affected by them, the situation aggravates further every day.

This research will analyze why Honduras and Nicaragua are different in their hosting of the Mara gang activity. I have identified four factors of comparison that this research will look into: a.) migration and deportation patterns of each country; b.) the state of drugs and arms trafficking; c.) government approaches to youth gangs; and c.) the conditions of obligatory military service in each country. The research question therefore becomes one of investigating *if* and to what degree do these factors dictate the scope as to which Nicaragua and Honduras host Maras.

### **Thesis Statement**

The stark difference between Nicaragua's and Honduras' gang situation has already been discussed by a number Latin American authors. Rocha (2006), Rodgers (2005), and Cruz (2007) have questioned the difference between both countries and briefly speculated on the motives that might give reasonable explanations to the query. Reasons range from migration patterns to different social and political histories that include the *Sandinista* heritage in Nicaragua. However, there is need for a more in-depth analysis of the variables already mentioned in the literature, as well as the consideration of additional probable causes that have remained unexplored. I was also able to identify that despite the growing concern about the Mara phenomenon as a transnational problem, few English-language academic studies addressed the issue. This research is an attempt

to overcome the scarcity of academic information regarding Central America's Maras in North America by contributing information directly from the region.

As the section of criminology and development studies make evident in this research, it is important to highlight the large number of variables that interact in the dynamics of crime, especially when it comes to the Mara phenomenon. After identifying and deconstructing the main variables offered in the literature that respond to this conundrum, I argue that Nicaraguan society lacks the mara presence that Honduras experiences, due to two fundamental factors: migration and deportation patterns, and governmental approaches to youth gangs. At the same time, I argue that two other significant factors further aggravate the Mara problem in Honduras: the international drug trade juxtaposed with the availability of firearms, and the elimination of obligatory military service.

### **A Note on Methodology**

This research focuses specifically on Honduras and Nicaragua to analytically compare four key variables and determine to what extent they influence the presence of the Mara phenomenon in each country. Both countries were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, both share similar socioeconomic conditions, representing the two poorest nations in Central America. Secondly, they are geographically next to each other. Of the countries in the northern Central American triangle that have a Mara problem, Honduras is the only country sharing borders with Nicaragua. Thirdly, Honduras statistically appears to be the country with the largest presence of *Mara Salvatrucha* (M-13) and M-18 groups in the region, while Nicaragua has the least. Although technically Costa Rica is the Central American country with the fewest number of Maras, I decided

not to include it in the research because its socioeconomic conditions differ significantly from those of Nicaragua and Honduras; considering that Costa Rica is the most affluent country in the region that has benefited from one of the most developed welfare systems in the region (BBC News, 2008; World Bank, 2008<sup>2</sup>). Additionally, Honduras and Nicaragua share a similar culture and the same democratic political systems of government. One marked difference between these two Central American countries is their political past.

The objective of this thesis is not to study how they [Maras] came about in the region. Rather, I am to analyze why Nicaragua has remained immune to this problem while Honduras is so vulnerable to it. As mentioned above, I have identified four variables to provide empirical explanations for this manifest difference. The first of these is migration and deportation patterns. The patterns for each country have been analyzed to measure the extent in which they contributed to the differences of Mara presence. Secondly, I evaluated the state of drug trafficking as well as consumption for each country. Included in this section is also the analysis of the availability of firearms. The purpose is to gauge the relevance and extent to which the presence of drugs and guns contributed to Mara activity for each country. Thirdly, I compared individual government approaches to youth gangs during the last 20 years; I analyzed the programs and policies implemented, as well as the results achieved to measure how they increase or deter mara activity. The last factor that remains unexplored in the literature which I deem significant is the assessment of obligatory military service in both countries. By

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<sup>2</sup> Web accessed on June 18, 2008 from:  
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/COSTARICAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20232979~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:295413,00.html>

analyzing the past and present conditions of military service in each country, I aim to demonstrate the extent to which this factor may have contributed to the presence, or lack, of Maras.

For purposes of this thesis, the research has been carried out by using evidence from a variety of secondary sources. For the literature and theoretical constructs, most of the data was accessed using library resources, as well as online databases and journals. The location of the data for the factors was facilitated by the search of online sources. Fortunately, many of the Honduran and Nicaraguan government offices offer online support and many of the documents could be accessed via internet. In addition, books and articles were directly received from Central America to further support this research. Over 350 online documents and articles were reviewed for this work; more than 70 primary sources from libraries were employed as well. The data was analyzed through method of comparison, therefore parameters and categories were set for each factor and gathered according to each country in order to avoid data mining. For example, for the section on migration and deportation patterns, the categories included numbers of migrants, main destinations, deportation statistics all within a specific time frame of the last 20 years, in order to clearly observe the trends. For the analysis of drugs and firearms trafficking, the categories included consumption as well as seized products.

Archival data from government documents, as well as studies from non-governmental sources (that assess the results of government approaches to maras and youth deviance) were used to evaluate the manner in which they have an effect on the problem. Using official reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the Small Arms Survey, and national governmental reports as well as local newspapers,

statistics on the state of the drug and weapons economy were researched for each country. This included information of drugs seized, estimates on drug consumption, and estimations of legal and illegal weapons circulating in each country. Finally, to measure the conditions of military service for each country, once again data from government documents were employed to discover whether this factor has any significant role on the levels of Mara activity in Nicaragua and Honduras respectively.

My research recognizes the limitations of relying on secondary data and statistics for this case study. However, the data acquired proved to be sufficient to build a strong case and provide an accurate conclusion to the research question in a holistic manner, rather than in an atomistic fashion. Although statistics are at times inconsistent and hard to rely on, my intentions are to observe patterns and trends as well as compare tendencies. Specific numbers are therefore not essential for my argument.

In order to provide the link between Mara gang activity and the factors mentioned above, it is important to offer a theoretical framework in which to situate the research. This thesis shall begin with the discussion of the intersection of criminological and development theories of youth crime.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS*

#### **Conceptualizing Youth Gangs**

Before examining the various approaches that try to explain youth gang activity, this research needs to define and conceptualize the object of study. To begin with, a large amount of literature has been produced that explains youth gangs by a wide variety of parameters that range from the criminally instrumental to the purely recreational (White, 2007). I present the premises that seem most appropriate to this specific research. Early contributions, like those of Thrasher (1927), are still applicable in the attempt of defining the concept of youth gangs today:

A gang is an interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory (Thrasher 1927, p. 57).

Gangs are also extremely heterogeneous social institutions. They can have diverse motivations, activities, structures and rituals; they all vary across regions and countries. Gangs in Africa vary significantly from those in South America or the Caribbean. It is important to define to the reader what we mean by the category of youth. Rodgers (1999) considers this to be a problematic area because of cultural boundaries, meaning what is considered youth in North America might be considered adulthood in another region. In North America adulthood begins at the age of 18 whereas in Latin America it officially starts at 21. In this case, the socio-cultural category of youth is more ambiguous than just

limiting it to age. It is often more appropriate to relate it to behavioural patterns and activities, as well as the social role, rather than physical maturity.

Hagedorn (2005) suggests that gangs today are organizations of the socially excluded. He also differentiates between groups of armed young men and institutionalized gangs, but believes that one central mechanism for the persistence of such gangs is their participation in the underground economy. According to a United Nations (UN) report (2007), an institutionalized gang is a framework through which membership flows, that continues from generation to generation, and holds its own set of conventions and rules. These frameworks generally include clandestine gang histories, initiation rituals, ranking systems, rites of passage, rules of conduct, and rivalries. Gang members often pledge unconditional loyalty to their group, which becomes their primary source of identity and constitutes the family nucleus of their lives. The assumption has been that most gang members are male, fall between the ages of seven and twenty-five, and come from impoverished or socially excluded urban backgrounds (Rodgers, 1999). The nature of youth gangs and the study of their emergence can be streamlined into two perspectives. The following section presents an assessment of the literature on youth gangs taking into account these two discourses.

### **Juvenile Delinquency: A Criminological Perspective**

In the spirit of sifting through the very broad topic of crime, I have decided to ground the analysis to the specific phenomenon of youth gangs. In this regard, I have identified three main approaches to which address the landscape of the debates; first from a criminological perspective; followed by a brief review of the intersection between crime and development theories, and finally from a developmental perspective.



### ***From Biological to Strain Theories of Crime***

The evaluation of criminological theories is essential as it provides a scientific explanation for the phenomenon of crime, aiming to establish causal effect relationships between variables and understand its complex nature. In this case, the purpose is to search for a theoretical framework that can lend itself to the explanation of the existence of youth deviance and more specifically, gang formations. The earliest contribution to criminology was the classical theory of crime, based on the original works of Cesare Beccaria (1775) (See Gottfredson and Hirchi, 1990; Cullen and Agnew, 2006; Schmallegger, 2002; Shoemaker, 1996; Roshier, 1989). The theory states that the government system is responsible for the crime or deterrence of crime in a society and makes three assumptions regarding human nature: a.) people have free will, b.) people are hedonists<sup>3</sup>, and c.) people have rationality. According to Beccaria, the existence of crime in a society is caused by irrational and ineffective law, not by individuals. He also responds to demonology, a belief still strong at the time, namely that crime is caused by supernatural forces, i.e. the devil (See Miller, et al., 2006; Vold and Bernard, 1979; Gottfredson and Hirchi, 1987; Taylor, Walton, and Young, 1973; Bell, 2007). Lombroso's (1911) work laid the foundations of what is considered the "Positivist school" of criminology. He argues that crime is caused by biological factors beyond the control of a single individual (Cullen & Agnew, 2006). Other theories of the late 1700s and early 1800s such as physiognomy and phrenology, focused on the physical aspects of humans; certain features like facial features by themselves were not the cause of crime, only that those with certain features were deemed criminals. Psychological theories of

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<sup>3</sup> Philosophical concept in which people by nature, seek pleasure and avoid pain. See Hedonist International (2007).

crime focus on the way people are different, especially in the way they think, “psychological theories, on the other hand, presume that the offender is in some way mentally flawed” (DeKeserdy and Schwartz, 1996, p.192. Also see Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985).

Theories emphasizing the setting include theories of social disorganization and routine activities (See Kubrin, 2003; Sampson and Groves, 1989; Cullen and Agnew, 2006; Markowitz, Bellair, Liska and Liu, 2001; Cohen and Felson, 1979). According to Shaw and Mckay (1942), delinquency originates from the interactions of societal life, namely the daily experiences that people are exposed to. Furthermore, they argued that geography mattered. Accordingly crime tended to be higher in slum areas, which were located in the centre of the city. This theory of social disorganization was strongly criticized. Opponents argued that the approach romanticized the upper class locations and inherently assumed that any person could be prone to crime so long as they were located in areas of high criminality. Criticisms are also based on the value judgment of the term “disorganization”. Simply put, what may appear disorganized to some, to others it could simply be a different way of doing things (Cullen and Agnew, 2006).

In the literature, one also comes across the learning and cultural transmission theories of crime (See Thornberry, 1990; Bell, 2007; Miller et al., 2006). Learning theories state that criminal behaviour is acquired from others through the internalization of values, rules, actions and conducts of groups. Sutherland’s and Cressey’s (1960) differential association theory argues that criminal behaviour is learned through the interaction with important peers in one’s neighbourhood. Aker’s (1994) social learning theory is similar, but is much broader stating that crime can also be learned through

imitation and differential reinforcement.

Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) also draw on Sutherland's differential association and discuss the notion of a subculture of violence. Subcultures arise when value systems conflict with conventional standards. Thus, the values, beliefs, rules of deviant subcultures provide rationalization for being criminal. Still, what might be considered normal, appropriate, and popular or wrong, varies considerably across different social groups in a given society. In an attempt to further comprehend the dynamic of youth street gangs, some researchers came up with theories that would give reason to the existence of youth formations that expressed themselves in deviant ways.

Merton's (1938) strain theory served as support to Cohen's (1955) gang culture theory. Strain theory was originally put forth by Robert Merton's work and later revived by Agnew, and Messner and Rosenfeld (2002) (Also see Agnew, 1992; Broidy, 2001; Akers, 2000; Hoffmann and Miller, 1998). Merton aimed to discover "how some social structures *exert a definite pressure* upon certain persons in society to engage in nonconformist rather than conformist conduct" (Merton, 1938, p. 672). According to Merton's strain theory, some individuals in society who are placed under pressure to achieve certain goals, while being prevented to do so in a legitimate manner, will react to this exclusion in a number of ways, including crime. North American society has idealized the 'American Dream' represented by the need of having expensive material things and life styles, where the emphasis is on success, but not on how it is achieved (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2002). Cohen attempted to explain the origin and content of delinquent subcultures through an analysis of middle class values and aspirations. According to Cohen, felony is caused by goal blockage, or stress factors as suggested by

Merton, the difference being that lower class working boys are measured by middle class standards which they often cannot live up to, therefore crime becomes a way of gaining respect. Cohen's theory received significant criticism. Matza (1957) concluded that Cohen "attributed to working-class youngsters the problems that torment the middle-class adult" (Matza, 1957, p.52). Others like Kitsuse & Dietrick (1959) had more methodological issues, arguing that Cohen's theory was basically untestable. Defleur (1970) attempted to apply the theory to evaluate youth crime in Córdoba, Argentina, and found that key social factors identified by Cohen did not play a significant role in producing youth deviance in that society.

Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) work follows the same strain premise in viewing society as exclusive leading low-class youth to respond by forming gangs. Additionally, they identify three types of gang formations: a.) the criminal subgroup, which engages in theft, extortion, and other means of securing income; b.) the conflict subgroup, which uses violence to gain status; and c.) the retreatist subgroup, which dedicates itself more to the consumption of drugs. Critics of this theory argue that in reality, gang formations do not really obey to one prototype of subculture; rather, they seem to have a combination of characteristics of all three (See for example, Akers and Sellers, 2004).

The theories previously discussed, for the most part, are based on individual behaviour. Before discussing structural theories, it is important to mention the Labelling approach which can be originally traced to Tannenbaum's (1938) work. This author states that crime is not a manifestation of individual differences but learned as part of an educational process in the community. Others, like Becker (1963) and Lemert (1951/1972), acknowledge that people first participate in norm violation by chance or

simply as part of growing up, and that it is society which defines what is a criminal, and stigmatizes youth as criminals. Labelling theory contends that through stigmatization, the criminal justice system creates crime and deviance as offenders come to identify themselves according to the expectations suggested by labels. The power to label behaviour as 'deviant' arises partly from the unequal distribution of power within the state, and because the judgment carries the authority of the state, it attributes greater stigma to the prohibited behaviour. Following the same line of argument, an interesting concept was set forth by Braithwaite (1989), who suggested that crime is higher when shaming is stigmatizing and lower when it is reintegrative. His theory attempts to explain why some societies experience higher crime rates than others. Braithwaite claims that shaming is necessary for social control; however, the key issue is what follows shaming: reintegration or stigmatization. Braithwaite states that societies with high levels of urbanization and residential mobility are less communitarian and are less likely to have interdependency between its citizens. Therefore, when there is a lack of communitarianism and trust, society will engage in shaming that is stigmatizing, categorizing and attributing stigma to large numbers of people. In turn, these people come together to develop ongoing criminal subcultural groups that provide learning experience and environments for crime. Unlike labelling theories, Braithwaite does not suggest non-intervention; rather, that reintegration must occur because shamed individuals are at a turning point in their lives. With reintegration, offenders are offered forgiveness and support in order to become once again a member of the community. In this case, what is shamed is the criminal act, not the criminal.

In addition to individual theories, there are structural theories that include Marxist and non-Marxist approaches, which view social conflict as the source of most of society's problems, including crime. According to the conflict perspective, crime is a result of social inequality, caused either by power struggles between different groups in society, or the general deprivation, alienation or marginalization experienced by those in the lower classes. Although Marx's (1883/1967) contributions did not strongly address crime, he concluded that the economic system of capitalism was the source of most social problems, including crime, because it generates conflict through competition for profit. Marxism tends to focus on societal forces rather than the motives of individuals and their dualistic capacity for both, right and wrong, as well as moral and immoral traits. This conceptual line of reasoning has led to the formulation of other structural theories of crime.

Among the first Marxist criminologists, Bonger (1916/1969) argued that the capitalist mode of production breeds crime. He believed that the key cause of criminality is the mental state of egoism, which is rooted in economic relations. Capitalism is based on individual profit and therefore is inherently self-centered. Those in the proletariat who are impoverished, exposed to harsh living conditions, incited by the material desires produced by the bourgeoisie, combined with poor moral training, are more vulnerable to the intensification of egoistic impulses, which consequently can lead to crime. For Quinney (1980), in the effort of securing its own benefit and profit, the capitalist class engages in economic crimes, denies people basic human rights and needs, and uses the state to protect its interests. Therefore the crime committed by the poorer classes is seen as retaliation to their marginalization and unequal treatment. Other authors like

Greenberg (1993), Currie (1997), and Colvin (2000) detail the way in which unequal social structures produce criminal behaviour. For instance, Currie (1997) also sees capitalism as the root cause of crime. Furthermore, he argues that it is the extreme subordination of society to the imperatives of the market that dictates the upsurges of violence in certain societies.

As emphasized by Schulte-Bockholt and Kenney (2008), the study of crime in North America, with strong individual linkages to deviance, has segregated studies and conditions from the global South, generalizing the applicability of crime theories to the rest of the world. However, general criminological perspectives have also been produced by non-western academics that attempt to explain criminality in Latin America focusing beyond individual approaches and expanding into social structures, with special concentration on the role and function of the state. (For more on Latin American Criminology, see Del Olmo, 1999; Aniyar de Castro, 1990, Bergalli, Ferracuti, and UNSDRI, 1969; Bergalli, 1972; Delgado, 1999; Elbert, 1999, Simonetti and Virgolini, 2002).

### **Intersecting Criminology and Development: A Brief Interval**

In the general discussion of crime, the fields of development and criminology have offered many more theories that attempt to explain the origin of deviance. For instance, criminological discourse includes postmodernist and feminist approaches to crime (see Henry and Milanovic, 1993; Gelsthorpe and Morris, 1990). In terms of the development discourse, theorists have built on modernization theory and dependency theory to provide explanations for crime. In the literature, the intersection of these two fields has led to what Huggins (1983) calls the “Traditional Criminology-Modernization”

approach and “Radical Criminology-Dependency” perspective (Schulte-Bockholt and Kenney, 2008).

The traditional criminology-modernization perspective claims that delinquency in developing societies will increase in the initial stages of the modernization process. Marginalization and social disorder are by-products of economic development and growth, therefore fostering conditions for increased crime. However, as prosperity increases, it is expected that crime rates fall and the nature of delinquency will become less violent. According to this perspective, crime is largely committed by lower class young males residing in marginal peripheral areas, assumptions shared by theories of social disorganization, which argue that crime tends to concentrate in slum areas (See for example, Shaw and MacKay, 1942). According to Clinard and Abbott (1973) and Shelley (1981), ideally, the benefits of the modernization process eventually trickle down to the marginalized classes through political and social struggles, facilitated by the systems of participatory democracy. However, in the cases of developing societies, especially Latin America, organic participatory democracy was almost non-existent due to heavy foreign intervention in national politics. In addition, the authoritarian traits of Latin American societies and governments potentially hindered any possibility for mass participation.

The Radical Criminology-Dependency perspective expands beyond individual behaviour and takes into consideration societal power structures. They place significant emphasis on Latin America’s dependency path and history of colonialism and exploitation, which inevitably led to structural deficiencies, poor conditions for the masses and the unequal distribution of wealth. It is this inequality that constitutes a



causal factor for crime (Zaffaroni, 1982). According to Schulte-Bockholt and Kenney (2008), criminologist associated with “radical criminology-dependency”, view criminal law as an instrument of the colonial and neo-colonial states to gain access to resources and to maintain control over the dependant states, “studies show how colonial regimes created new laws and categories of crime to reinforce foreign domination” (Schulte-Bockholt & Kenny, 2008, p. 7).

Traditional criminological theories appear to mainly have individual approaches to gang formations, which prove to be inadequate within a Latin American context as they fail to grasp the socioeconomic realities of the region, caused by distinct historical events. Traditional theories based on the individual tend to ignore the setting as well as structural factors that evidently contribute to a young person’s criminal behaviour. Conversely, the radical criminology-dependency perspective focuses on structural causes that take into consideration multiple factors inherent to the global South. Although the approach lacks the scientific focus on crime, my work finds itself better supported by this theoretical framework.

### **Youth Gangs and Development**

Criminological theories attempt to give reasoning behind crime, but these perspectives do not consider important dimensions of delinquency in the global South in general, and Latin America in particular. This general literature on street gangs fails to highlight important structural factors that are essential for examining the causes of crime in developing societies. In this sense, it is important to review the reasons offered for crime phenomenon in the South under a developmental lens, specifically addressing the existence of youth gangs and their impact on the development of their communities.

### *A Latin American Context*

The study of gangs<sup>4</sup> by North American scholars has been strongly challenged by Latin American criminologists; which is one reason this literature has been relegated to the fringes of western criminology as a discipline. Nevertheless, youth gangs have become a global and even transnational phenomenon; therefore their study cannot be limited to a specific condition and must be evaluated in a global context (Boraz and Bruneau, 2006). With this in mind, and for the purposes of this research, the dimensions of the debates to be presented are situated in a Latin American context. There are a number of related causal factors and issues that are broadly and extensively discussed in the literature on youth gangs in this region.

It is evident that the citizens of the underdeveloped parts of the world are suffering the highest levels of crime and violence. Africa, Latin America and to a lesser extent Asia, are notorious for the insecurity their populations are subjected to, with differences in the expressions and patterns of crime, including youth gangs. These differences can be attributed to a number of factors. The first is the impact of *neoliberal policies and the retreat of the state*.

Hagedorn (2005) attributes the appearance of youth gangs to the effects of neoliberalism. In the 1980s, a large number of Latin American countries were forced to endorse drastic market-oriented reforms, in efforts to end hyperinflation and stabilize their economies. These measures included budget austerity, reduction of public spending and employment, privatization of state-owned enterprises, access to foreign trade, cut back in social welfare and services (For more on the impact neoliberalism in Latin America,

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<sup>4</sup> (For more on American gangs, see Thornberry et al., 2003; Egle, Maxson, Miller, and Klein, 2006; Huff, 1990; Huff 2002; Delaney, 2006; Dudley and Gerdes, 2005; Esbensen, Tibbetts, and Gaines, 2004; Shelden, Tracy, and Brown, 2004; Elliot, 1994; Howell, 1998).

see Weyland, 2002; Baer, 2002; Jiménez, 1992; Walton, 2004; Stokes, 2001; Palacios, 1998). The role of the state has changed, leaving people to their own fate. According to Rapley (2006), gangs are born due to the necessity of marginalized areas to “protect” themselves, to maintain order in the multiplying and expanding ghettos that are products of the skewed inequality. This inequality, consequently, arises from neoliberal policies disrupting the income inequality, “leading to the emergence of pockets of vast wealth and areas of abject poverty” (2006: 6). The retreating state, however, proved ineffective in offering citizens appropriate security. In turn, the wealthy rely on private security forces, while the urban poor create their own security measures through gang formations or vigilante groups. Hagedorn (2005) argues that this retreat of the state in developing countries has created conditions of “social disorganization” (2005:157). This social disorganization has weakened and delegitimized social institutions unable to control the rapid urbanization. Therefore, young men arm themselves and join gangs, para-military and rebel groups, death squads, and drug cartels that replace or complement the space vacated by public authority. Elkus (2007: 1) refers to gangs as “anti-state formations” that have created a power network of their own, taking advantage of the weakness of the state. He argues that these actors thrive in conditions where neoliberal policies have worsened already existing inequalities.

The social exclusion created by the public institutions that are ideally designed to protect young people, is considered to be a fundamental element in the emergence of youth gangs and violence. Exclusion produces social and economic vulnerability. According to Cruz (2007), young people who join gangs are those whose families struggle to survive and who have few opportunities to attend school or find employment.

This was also emphasized by Jaramillo and Bedoya (1991), who pointed out that *sicarios* from Medellín, Colombia, had families who shared similar traits: poor economic conditions and broken families with mostly women heading the household.

According to Berkman (2007), social exclusion is not only furthered by the state, but is also carried out by the communities and even one's own family. The state and society fail to provide the adequate structural opportunities and incentives for young people to develop into productive adults. Communities blame youth for their problems and family feuds, and broken families damage communication, all of which contributes to the formation of youth gangs (Ibid). Rojas Aravena (2005) writes that the violence produced by juvenile gangs is not the result of irrational behaviours, but rather a response to the failure to provide for their necessities, and to the dynamics that they encounter living in a situation of social exclusion.

Other consequences of neoliberalizing policies are *poverty and inequality*. In 2002, the number of Latin Americans living in poverty reached 220 million, representing 43.3 percent of the total population (UN-HABITAT, 2004). Indeed, the difference between the rich and the poor are the most extreme in Latin America compared to the rest of the world. The GINI coefficient, which is the standard inequality indicator, registered a global average of 0.4 by 1999. Latin America, registered the highest, with Brazil's 0.64, Bolivia's 0.60, Nicaragua's 0.59 and Guatemala's 0.58 (Ibid). By 2007, Panama registered a coefficient of 0.56; Guatemala had 0.55, and Nicaragua 0.43, still much higher than the world average (World Bank, 2007).

According to Moser and van Bronkhorst (2002), the economic difficulties that the region suffered during the 1980s and 1990s unleashed a series of problems that have been

further aggravated by globalization, increasing the levels of poverty and inequality in the majority of the population. An important factor has been the rise in the number of female-led households, and the increased amount of young people living in marginalized neighbourhoods characterized by violent crime. According to Birdsall and Hakim (2007), unemployment levels were higher in 2007 than in 1990, while deep-seated inequality remains a prominent feature in the region. In most countries, less than 10 percent of the population controls 50 percent of the wealth. In addition, adolescents aged 10-19, represent 21.9 percent of the population in Latin America, ranging from 17 percent in Uruguay to approximately 26 percent in El Salvador (Moser and van Bronkhorst, 2002). While Bourguignon (2001) does not specifically address youth crime, he views delinquency in the region as the social costs of poverty and inequality. For him, the economic motivation behind crime is essentially the seizure of somebody else's property. Another motivation is the pursuit of illegal activity even at the risk of being caught and punished. Therefore if the person does not consider he or she could lose much out of an illegal situation, this individual will do it anyway because of the chance to gain economically. Strocka (2006) strongly suggests that the growth in violence and the parallel rise of youth gangs in Latin America are largely consequences of the convergence and interaction of global transformations and local trends. At the global level, she refers to the increased culture of material consumption, as well as liberalized market economies which weaken the role of the state. Domestically, nations seem unable to fight economic recession.

In many Latin American countries, the interplay of these global and local transformation processes has led to increasing inequality and social exclusion. Neoliberal economic restructuring has been associated with the exclusion of large parts of the population from the labor market and a resulting persistence and intensification of poverty, particularly in urban areas, which are now home to three-quarters of Latin America's population.<sup>20</sup> (...) Inequality—that is, the unequal distribution of economic, political, and social resources—is a major determinant of crime and violence in Latin America. The region has the highest levels of inequality worldwide, and cross-national studies have shown that countries with a higher degree of inequality also have higher levels of violence (Strocka, 2006, p.g.138).

She establishes the correlation between poverty, inequality, and youth gangs by stating that social exclusion has been greatest among the urban poor, especially male youths from slum neighbourhoods, who are exposed to disproportionate levels of violence. Neoliberalizing reforms have led to the decrease of male participation in the local workforce. This, in turn, has created a pool of young unemployed men, and increasingly girls, who turn to gangs in order to demonstrate their masculinity, and/or gain an acknowledged identity, receive protection, as well as economic sponsorship. She further argues that the U.S. derived culture of consumption further frustrates young people's desire, serving as a push factor to join gangs. Here we can clearly observe traces of Merton's (1938), as well as Messner and Rosenfeld's (2002) works. Other authors like Buvinic, Morrison & Shifter (1999), suggest that "poverty and inequality contribute to feelings of deprivation, frustration and stress, all powerful antecedents of violence. Violent behaviour, on the other hand, impoverishes people and likely consolidates inequality" (Buvinic, Morrison & Shifter, 1999, p.g. 38).

The relationship between poverty, inequality and crime is not as simple as it appears. It is certain that poverty and inequality as single variables interact with other factors as determinants of crime, making it hard to establish a solid correlation. The

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime argues that although poverty seems to have a direct effect on crime, it is more subtle (2005). After all, large parts of the world suffer from poverty, but their societies are not ridden with crime. Cruz (2007) argues that although many authors attribute poverty as a fundamental player in the emergence of gangs:

Pointing to poverty as a fundamental factor often obscures the interactive or procedural character of the gang phenomenon. A deeper analysis of the phenomenon reveals that social exclusion, which is often, though not always, associated with poverty, is a more significant factor (Cruz, 2007, p. 26; also see Rocha, 2001; Castro and Dominguez, 2004; Arana, 2005).

A third issue addressed in the literature is the *rapid rate of urbanization* the region has been experiencing in recent decades. Latin America is considered the most urbanized region in the developing world (Skinner and Steinberg, 2003; Brennan and Galvin, 2002). As of 2001, an estimated 390 million people resided in cities, constituting almost 75 percent of the Latin American population (UNCHS, 2001). Thus, by 2000, urbanization was highest in South America representing 77.2 percent, followed by Central America with 62.8 percent and the Caribbean with 63.1 percent of the total regions population (UN-HABITAT, 2004). Nearly 42 percent of the urban population lived in the region's fifty cities exceeding one million inhabitants. Parallel to this, the region hosts a large slum population. By 2001, approximately 128 million people were living in urban slums. This represents 32 percent of the urban population in Latin America, and 14 percent of the world's urban slum populations (Ibid). In Latin America, 64 percent of the poor live in urban, not rural areas (Human Security Cities, 2006).

Urbanization is often associated with youth violence and the formation of gangs. In the developing world, urbanization is characterized by the unorganized and unplanned

increase of populations in cities caused by the internal migration from rural to urban areas, due to the lack of opportunities in the former. According to Sanidad-Leones (2006), increased difficulties in rural areas exacerbated by natural and man-made calamities brought about the massive migration to the cities. Uncontrolled urbanization has led to the proliferation of slums and marginal neighbourhoods. In economic terms, urbanization worsens poverty because of increased unemployment, little or no access to basic needs, inflation and the deterioration of the family nucleus. The slums or *barrios* are often characterized by detrimental living conditions with high population densities (Moreno and Warah, 2007). These urban regions suffer from extreme levels of deprivation, and studies have shown that disease and mortality rates are significantly higher in slums (Ibid). Other aspects such as the inability to access services, housing, land, education, health care, and unemployment, are ripple effects caused by the neglect of the state. These have significant repercussions which include the rise in violence, especially in the vulnerable demographic category of children and adolescents (Skinner and Steinberg, 2003). In short, children who cannot attend school, and who subsequently have no access to legitimate employment, who do not have an actual home and come from broken families, are more likely to turn to illegal activities to support themselves: “Youth gangs are mushrooming, especially in Latin American and African countries, where rapid urbanization is straining families’ abilities to meet the social and economic needs of young people” (UN-HABITAT, 2004)<sup>5</sup>. Moncaleano (2006) argues that the relationship between urbanization and youth gangs is somewhat complex. Still, it is evident that the increase in youth crime and delinquency in general is linked to the

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<sup>5</sup> For this particular reference, I did not include the page number as the document was accessed online: <http://ww2.unhabitat.org/mediacentre/documents/sowc/Featurechild.pdf>



growth of cities which are characterized by overcrowding, invasion of personal space, precarious living conditions as well as the lack of a social security net.

According to the United Nations (2005), urbanization is an inevitable side effect of development and may be essential for the growth to occur. The problem is that these demographic shifts are fast, unmanaged and uncontrolled:

The rate at which urbanization occurs is also relevant, as population instability, or the rate at which people change their households, is strongly associated with crime, and urban populations are typically areas of high turnover. Since informal social controls are the most effective means of preventing crime, areas with little sense of community coherence are most vulnerable to criminality. The anonymity associated with transient populations is an enabling factor for a wide range of organized, and not so organized, crime activities. Illegal immigrants, runaways, drug dealers, and sex workers tend to congregate in urban areas (United Nations, 2005, p.g. 8).

On the other hand, Gilbert (1999) states that urbanization itself does not produce poverty, crime and political protest, which does not suggest that poorly managed urbanization cannot lead to undesirable forms of social development. For the most part though, contributions concur on the influence urbanization has on the increase of youth crime (For more see Carrión, ND; Martín-Barbero, 2002, Hagedorn, 2005; PAHO, 1997; Lungo and Martel, 2004; UNFPA, 2007).

### ***Other Prominent Issues on Youth Gangs***

The factors mentioned above are prevalent in the literature. However, other determinants also contribute to the youth gang crisis in Latin America. I have identified four relevant features that contribute significantly to youth crime in the region:

The first factor is the *culture of violence*. According to Cruz (2007), gangs are products of societies that cultivate violence. The term refers to a system of norms, values, attitudes, which enables and legitimizes the use of violence (Huezo, 2001;

Martín-Baro, 1992). It is certain that Latin America's history has been filled with political turbulence and bloodshed. Decades of authoritarianism, state terror, uprisings, political and social violence, have characterized the history of the region. According to Chávez, the cycles of state repression and popular resistance, typified by armed rebellions "consolidated a cultural pattern that mediated class and ethnic conflict with violence" (Chávez, 2004, p. 32). Violence became internalized and transferred to communities and families, therefore legitimizing the use of it to deal with conflict. The culture of violence not only destroys the social fabric and relies on the use of terror as a method to deal with social defiance, but disregards any value and respect for human life (Ibid). Waldmann (2007) nonetheless challenges the broader sense of the culture of violence, which Pécaut (1987) defined is inclusive of all socio-cultural structures and symbols that connect, produce and perpetuate violence. Thus, the broad nature of Pécaut's definition is not helpful, and he questions whether more specific factors in the collective consciousness or "whether cultural makeup in the narrower sense- understood as the general view of what is desirable, worthwhile, and normatively acceptable- is responsible for the difficulties in putting a stop to escalating violence" (Waldmann, 2007, p.g.64). Youth gangs appear to be the products of such culture of violence resulted from the conflicts in the region.

The second factor is the *lack of social capital*. Although various definitions of social capital are in use, it is the general consensus that the term refers to the components, such as trust, obligations and expectations, networks and social norms that contribute to a social organization, allowing members of a community to cooperate in benefit to the whole society (Narayan, and Woolcock, 2000; Putnam, 2002; Halpern, 2005; Mockbee, 1995; Sharma, 2005; Kay and Johnston, 1948; Franke, 2005). Cruz (2007) argues that

“gangs emerge in settings marked by community disorganization, that is, community contexts where there is a lack of trust among people, neighbours, and members of the community” (Cruz, 2007, p. 41). At the same time, gangs hinder and obstruct the development of productive social organizations. Likewise, Amaya Cóbar (2007) asserts that in order to understand gangs, it is important to study their origins as a multifactor phenomenon that includes conditions of exclusion and marginalization, as well as the lack of social capital.

An extensive study on Central American gangs demonstrated the relationship between social capital, or the lack thereof, and the rise of youth gangs (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2007). In this work, Cruz, Carranza, and Santacruz G. (2007) argue that gangs create their own perverse social capital, which is characterized by strong bonds between gang members, organized participation and solidarity, and their own norms and values that allow them to recognize what is or is not permitted (Rubio, 1997 in ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2007)<sup>6</sup>. This type of social capital is not beneficial to the community at large. On the other hand, positive social capital is generated by beneficial networks that work together for human development, and therefore stops or reduces criminal conduct within a community. When positive social capital is lacking, youth gangs tend to appear with their own version of it.

A third issue to address is the *proliferation of firearms*. The *State of World's Cities Report 2004/5* argues that Latin American cities and their urban areas have the highest concentration of gun ownership rates in the world with 19.7 percent on average (UN-HABITAT, 2004). The combination of social exclusion, lacking access to basic

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<sup>6</sup> By definition of Rubio (2007), perverse social capital involves the acquisition of positive benefits for members of a group, but also involves negatives results for the extended community.

needs, and the proliferation of fire arms is proving to be a deadly recipe for the region. According to Stohl and Tuttle (2008), at least 45 million to 80 million small arms (and light weapons) circulated in Latin America. Every year between 73,000 and 90,000 people are killed by firearms, making guns the leading cause of death among Latin Americans between the ages of 15 and 44 (Ibid). During the decades of the Cold War, large amounts of surplus weapons were transferred to allies by the U.S. as well as the Soviet Union (Lumpe, 1998; Phythian, 2000; World Council of Churches, 2001; NACLA, 2008; Lumpe, 1999). Specific developments on the armament of the Central American region will be discussed below.

According to statistics of the RCMP (2006), the number of firearms circulating in Guatemala is estimated to be around 0.9 to 2 million, while 70 percent of criminally violent deaths are caused by firearms. Honduras' National Congress estimated that around 400 to 500 thousand illegal firearms were in circulation and that approximately 68 percent of deaths were caused by violence involving firearms. Brazil is estimated to have almost 18 million firearms in circulation, which cause 80 percent of the violent deaths in the country. Meanwhile it is assumed that 200 million firearms are in circulation in the United States (RCMP, 2006).

The United Nations Crime and Development Report of 2007 stated that according to the International Action Network on Small Arms<sup>7</sup>:

There are an estimated 1.6 million guns in Central America, of which about 500,000 are legally registered. Many of these weapons are remainders from military conflicts in the region in the 1970s and 80s [sic], most notably in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. After these conflicts ceased thousands of military weapons ended up on the illicit market in those nations (...) Firearms are

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.iansa.org/regions/camerica/camerica.htm>

used to commit more than 70% of all homicides in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (in United Nations Crime and Development Report, 2007, p.g. 67).

According to the RCMP report, firearms are obtained illegally by gangs given that some gang members are involved in the theft and re-sale of guns. The availability of weapons by itself does not contribute to the creation of youth gangs as such. However, it does influence the violent nature of youth gangs and aggravate their interactions with society: either by employing guns in their attacks, or smuggling them as part of the underground economy. According to Chávez (2004: 36), the proliferation of firearms and explosives is a major factor in the vicious spiral of violence in Latin America. Accordingly, “dominant cultural attitudes favor the possession, the carrying and the frequent use of guns in what is increasingly being called a ‘culture of arms’” (Ibid). Still, the relationship between youth gangs and guns is limited to the economic activities of the gang, as well as their employment in crime (RCMP, 2006). The situation is only made worse when these gangs have access to military-type weapons (Ibid). Cohen and Rubio (2007) agree that gang membership is a complex social issue, and among one of the risk factors for this type of organization is the ready availability of guns, apart from other factors like dysfunctional families, marginalization, etc. According to Elbert (2004), gangs in Central America have been improving their arsenals to include automatic assault rifles, such as Ak-47s, facilitated by the illegal networks that run cross this region. According to the Small Arms Survey (2007), the availability of weapons, social dislocation, and anonymity of large urban centres contribute to armed violence. Therefore, when the state is unable to address the needs of young people living in precarious conditions, the option they are likely to pursue is to join drug and arms trafficking networks or gangs.

A fourth issue brought forth by the literature is the *presence of narcotics and drug trading*. The globalization of a drug economy (Briceño-León and Zubillaga, 2002) as an etiology of youth violence and gangs is a complex one to evaluate. The analysis has to take into consideration the production and distribution of narcotics and the relationship they hold with youth criminality, as well as the increasing consumption of drugs among youth or the population at large. The production and distribution of illegal narcotics have acquired sophisticated forms of organization and consolidated into extensive networks in the underground economy that thrives in many marginal slums and neighbourhoods in the region. Mockbee (1995) establishes this relationship by arguing that poor communities are most susceptible to the economic gain that drug trafficking offers. For a young person with few limited opportunities in terms of employment and education, the economic mobility that drug trafficking offers is highly attractive. In the case of Latin America, the drug industry is of significant relevance, especially because of the geographical locations of production and distribution areas. Moser and Winton (2002) conclude that the geographic location of Central America, between consumers and producers of drugs makes it a logical passageway for narcotics. In this same sense, the 2007 UN Crime Report on Central America, states that South America produces an estimated 900 tons of cocaine annually, most of which is shipped to 10 million users in the United States and Europe, a market worth some US\$ 60 billion in 2003. Thus, there has been a significant increase in drug smuggling, sales, and consumption in the region. A 2001 study by the Inter-American Observatory on Drugs showed that an estimated 43 percent of gang members were involved in the sales of narcotics (OID, 2001). It also demonstrated the relationship between the year in which the members joined the gang

and their involvement in the selling of drugs (Ibid). Del Olmo (1997) addressed links between drugs and youth gang activity by stating that narcotics use generates alternate states of consciousness that can lead to violent behaviour. Drug use leads to a physical and psychological dependence, and young people are driven to join gangs that can offer them the support to their addictions. Cruz (2007) argues that drugs play an important role in young people's affiliation to gangs. Consumption is viewed as a form of recreation, while it attributes to the social dynamics of violence within the group. He concludes that the presence of narcotics paves the way for young people to join gangs and strengthen "their link to the dynamics of violence, introducing them into complex processes of addiction, trafficking, and criminal networks" (Cruz, 2007, p.g. 46).

It is important to mention that the issue of migration was also considered in the literature. Latin American migration is discussed as a predominant factor in the emergence of gangs, especially in the Central American context (for more on Latin American migration see González and Sánchez, 2002; Pizarro and Villa, 2005; UNESCO, 1998; Pellegrino, 2000, Castillo, 1995). I will refrain here from expanding on migration because an upcoming section will exclusively deal with this issue as it relates to the Mara phenomenon. Other contributing factors discussed in the literature pointed to the role of media, culture of consumerism, and the globalization of needs (Surette, 1994). This relates to Merton's strain theory and the 'American Dream' concept.

### ***Implications for Development***

While it is important to review works that discuss the impact of youth gang activity on development, this aspect of my research proved to be somewhat challenging. Literature on the impact of youth crime on development in Latin America is not

abundant. However, most documents seemed to evaluate the general socioeconomic costs of crime for a society's development.

In this respect, most of the contributions evaluate the socioeconomic costs of violence and crime. For instance, Luz (2008) argues that the monetary cost of violence in Latin America is considerable. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, the economic losses as a result of criminal violence in the region was approximately US \$140-\$170 billion by the late 1990s, or almost 12 percent of the regional GDP (Ibid). These costs fall primarily on the shoulders of the public sector and the state, and they represent a great burden for poorer countries. Luz also highlights that elevated violence rates not only contribute to the destruction of human life, but have negative consequences for the social and economic spheres as well. For example, high crime rates keep away potential investors, foreign or domestic. Therefore, it is manifest that development projects are truncated by the significant impact of armed violence in the young population. Buvinic, Morrison and Shifter (1999) presented a detailed analysis of the socioeconomic costs of violence:

Social violence impedes economic development. At the microeconomic level, social violence reduces human capital formation by inducing some individuals to invest not in education but in the development of criminal skills; it also dissuades some individuals from studying at night for fear of violent crime. At the macroeconomic level, it reduces both foreign and domestic investment; it may also reduce domestic savings if people have less confidence in a country's future growth prospects (1999, p.12).

They created a typology of the socioeconomic costs of violence and divided them into four categories. The first is direct costs which refer to the efforts employed to preventing violence, treat its victims, and punish its perpetrators. The second category includes non-monetary costs, which refer to impacts such as increased homicide, and drug and alcohol use of a society. The third category refers to economic multiplier



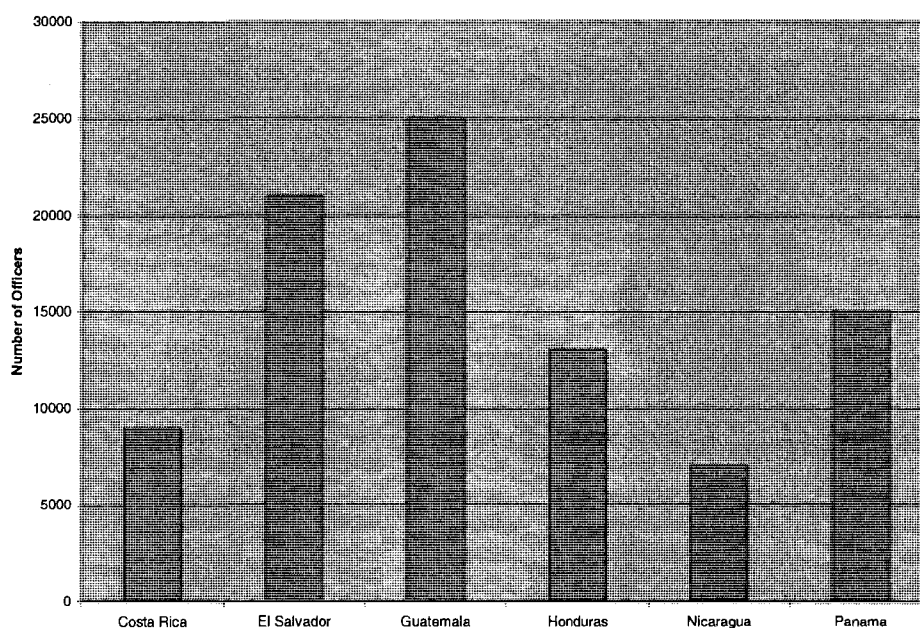
effects, such as decreased human capital, lower rates of labour market participation, poor employment productivity and lower savings and investment. The last category includes the multiple social effects, such as inter-generational transmission of violence, destruction of social capital, and a poor quality of life.

Another study by ECLAC (1998), argued that the evaluation of the impact of violence can be hard because of the lack of accurate statistical data. The authors too used the work of Buvinic et al. (1999) and Trujillo and Badel (1998) to demonstrate the impact of violence, classifying the costs into direct, non-monetary and economic, as well as social multiplier effects. Further studies produced by organizations like the International Centre for Research on Human Rights (CIIDH, 2006) or the UN together with the World Bank (2007) also referred to this categorization to analyze the costs of violence. The joint report by the UN and the World Bank on the Caribbean (2007) detailed specific costs of crime on aspects such as tourism and business, as crime threatened visitors and deterred investments. According to a 2006 World Health Organization (WHO) report, the consequences of youth violence affect the health and physical integrity of people as well as family and peer relationships; increase levels of fear in the community, and add pressure on the health and public services of a country (WHO, 2006).

The UN Crime and Development Report on Central America (2007) argues that crime impedes development on three levels: society, business and governance. Accordingly, crime erodes social and human capital. Fear of crime restricts mobility, which affects economic and social dynamics, especially in regards to education. Criminal groups seek the disempowerment of communities, and people want to reduce their chances of being victimized. Therefore a brain drain occurs when people leave who

feel unable to enjoy the basic security of life. In terms of the economy, crime creates instability, which in turn discourages investment, both foreign and domestic. The 2007 UN study also shows that crime and violence destroy the relationship between the people and the state by undermining democracy. The only ones likely to benefit from the situation are private security companies. The following table shows the number of officers employed in the private security industry in Central America in 2002:

**Figure.2 1 Private Officers in Central America, 2002**



Source: Adapted from Godnick, Muggah, and Waszink, 2002, p.3.

The importance of the study of youth gang violence and crime in development is clearly manifested. Moreover, its implications are evident and should provide much food for thought for policy-makers who setup development projects in communities or regions affected by crime. However, this brings up a fundamental issue. As previously discussed, much of Latin American literature in criminology has not been well accepted

by western scholars, and therefore has been rarely taken into consideration in the formulation of policy work. According to Schulte-Bockholt and Kenney (2008), Latin American literature has had a critical nature rooted on digestion problems originating from the imposition of U.S. perspectives on delinquency through various agencies that address crime and victimization research and strategies,

[i]t cannot be accepted that outside professionals bringing with them and promoting ideas, conceptions, and theories, perhaps valid for another society, can, in a few days' time, make an accurate scientific analysis of a foreign reality. There are others who have a much deeper understanding of the region, who know its problems and attempts at solutions, and who nonetheless,... are not called upon to contribute (Del Olmo, 1981, p.g. 64-65).

The U.S. models of crime and social control have had eclectic effects on Latin America's crime reality. Most U.S. programs are based on repressive approaches to problems, therefore one of the gravest impacts of applying imported models of crime has been on incarceration (Rico, 1998; Schulte-Bockholt & Kenny, 2008). Incarceration trends, especially in Central America, are usually characterized by overcrowded facilities, violence, and continuous homicides. Rather than serving as reformatory centres, jailhouses represent schools for increased criminal activities and cultures. However, the impacts of such models go beyond incarceration, transpiring into actual state policy effectiveness.

### **The Human Security Paradigm**

Finally, it is appropriate to briefly present to the reader an important issue that is relevant to this thesis. The concept of Human Security encompasses a multidisciplinary understanding of security. This emerging paradigm challenges the concept of national

security and argues that security is an issue that needs to be addressed at the level of individual, not that of state, to create policies that will have a more direct positive impact on human development. A 1994 UN Report introduced the concept which by now is extensively discussed in the academic literature, having become the cornerstone for numerous projects addressing security concerns. Human security has diverse definitions and contains many aspects that are not pertinent to this research. Still, aspects of the literature on human security pertain to this theoretical framework, making it applicable to policymaking.

The United Nations (1994) definition of human security identified two separate concepts that are interconnected: freedom from fear and freedom from want. It also stated that threats in seven different areas need to be considered: economic, food, environmental, health, personal, community, and political security. The Human Security Network defines human security as freedom from pervasive threats to people's rights, safety, and their lives (1999). The Commission on Human Security (2003) argues that the concept means protecting vital freedoms, namely, protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations, as well as building on their strengths. Sen (2000) calls upon Obuchi's idea of human security and describes it as "the keyword to comprehensively seizing all of the menaces that threaten the survival, daily life, and dignity of human beings and to strengthening the efforts to confront these threats" (Sen, 2000, p.1). It is evident that the above noted organizations and authors share common ground in their definitions of human security (For more on Human Security contributions, see Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, 2006; Richmond, 2001; Paris, 2001; Kleinschmidt, 2006; Stoett, 1999; McRae and Hubert, 2001; Weissberg, 2003; Nef, 1999;

Thomas, 2000; Myers, 1993; Ramcharan, 2002). However, these conceptualizations have not gone without criticism. According to Paris (2001), the concept of human security used by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is too broad and virtually covers every aspect of life. It lacks precision and is ambiguous because “existing definitions of human security tend to be extraordinarily expansive and vague, encompassing everything from physical to psychological well being, which provides policymakers little guidance in the prioritization of competing policy goals” (Paris, 2001, p. 88).

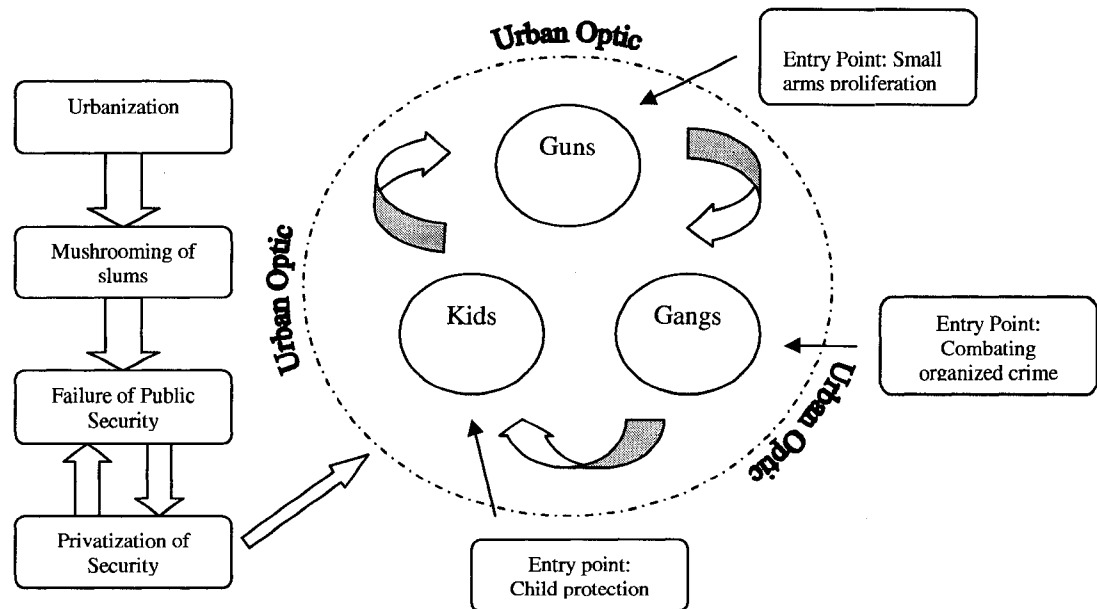
Others like Henk (2005) argue that the concept is not concretely defined and can be subject to an alternative range of definitions. The International Studies Association (2006) argues that the human security framework is highly problematic as it grants an excuse for stronger states to intervene in the affairs of weaker ones under the pretext that they threaten international stability. This negatively affects the sovereignty of citizens of weaker countries, limiting their ability to play an active political role, hence reinforcing imperialism. Many are the critiques and counter-critiques found in the literature on this issue (For more see Oberleitner, 2005; Hoogensen, 2006; Paris, 2005).

For the purposes of this research, the aspect of human security most appropriate to speak to is the freedom from fear. The Human Security Report (2005) applies a narrower definition of the concept. It states that the focus of human security is violent threats to an individual, as the issues of poverty, environment, and health are already addressed elsewhere. Therefore it is much more effective to address issues that deal with the interrelatedness of security, development and protection of civilians. According to Acharya (2005), before the terrorist events of 9/11, freedom of fear entailed the

protection of the dignity of an individual, and the prevention of cruelty to people caught in zones of conflict. With this in mind and constricting the analysis further, the Human Security Research and Outreach Program of the government of Canada (2006), delves into the discussion of the freedom of fear in urban spaces. According to Hawrylak, Houghton and Lawson (2006), the rapid growth of urban areas has turned the cities into powerful actors that can deeply influence human security. Therefore, it is vital to adopt an urban approach in which human security effectively contributes to policies and programs that will directly further peace building strategies. These authors insist that urban armed violence is largely neglected by international actors, while human security is increasingly being shaped by the unique dynamics of urban realities.

As previously discussed, the rapid forms of urbanization have led to the creation of marginal slums. The lack of public security or police has resulted in the emergence of a private security market for the elite, while gangs in the marginal slums use extortion to sell security to the poor. The aspect of urbanization has become part of the human security agenda because the trends of recent years have demonstrated the growing urban violence causing deaths among young people. “Examining human security through an urban optic reveals that poorly-policed slums are generating conditions for what are effectively ‘urban child soldiers’” (Ibid, p.g.12). Consequently, they argue that future human security policy must have at least three main entry points, represented in the following flowchart:

**Figure.2 2 Human Security Entry Points**



Adapted from: Hawrylak, Houghton, and Lawson, in Human Security Research and Outreach Program Discussion Paper, 2006, p.18

With this new approach, Human Security-Cities (2007) has also turned its attention to the implications of urbanization for policies and programs involving the protection of individuals. According to this report, since the end of the Cold War, human security has been shaped less by conflict between, but rather by strife *within* countries. The increased hostility and insecurity in the slums of major cities brought about the focus of these studies on violence reduction. A typology of urban crime classifies urban conflict into four categories: organized crime, anomic crime, open armed conflict, and endemic community violence (Human Security-Cities, 2007). The last category includes urban gang formations and vigilante groups or militias, who have the greatest impact on civilian casualties. As noted above, the failure to provide public security leads to its

‘privatization’. Hence, gangs take it upon themselves to offer protection, which in turn leads to violent clashes with other such groups as well as the police.

The purpose of including the concept of human security is to provide a stronger case for the importance of youth gang violence and the impact it causes. In this new ‘Urban Century’, the international community must acknowledge the increased effects these actors have on human livelihoods, and introduce policies and strategies that will address the role gangs play in threatening human safety and well being.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *UNDERSTANDING HISTORY TO SITUATE THE PRESENT*

Historical conditions are very important for analyzing the structural causes of crime in the countries used as my case studies. Central American history resonates with countless narrations of repression, violence, peasant rebellion, and political turmoil. Considered the backyard of North America, the region experienced extensive bloodshed in pursuit of a fake inorganic democracy by some, and social justice by others. During the decade of the seventies, at least 40,000 Nicaraguans were killed in the political insurrection against dictator Anastasio Somoza, while an estimated 12,000 more died in the subsequent Contra War. Similarly, almost 60,000 Salvadorians were killed during their civil conflict in the 1980s, and an estimated 50,000 to 75,000 Guatemalans have been killed during this period of civil strife. Millions have been displaced and thousands were forced to become refugees (Berryman, 1985). Central American politics has fitted itself within a conventional framework of liberals and conservatives, while U.S. influence has largely determined the rules of the game. Evidently, this history has shaped the current political, economic, and social dynamics of the region. Thus, it is of central importance to provide the reader with a succinct account of the main historical events for Honduras and Nicaragua to contribute to the understanding of today's reality.

#### **Honduras: A State for Sale**

The civil conflicts experienced by El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala did not cross over into Honduras. However, its past is as rough as its geography, which includes the making of a 'banana republic', nineteen years of nearly uninterrupted military rule,

and a shift to neoliberal democracy. Honduras played a fundamental role in the sequence of events that affected its neighbouring countries, especially El Salvador and Nicaragua. The country's strategic location at the center of the isthmus, and its borders with three countries that experienced violent political conflicts, made it inevitable for Honduras to be shoved in the middle of the region's turmoil. Honduras is a country that has undergone agrarian reforms, experiences high levels of peasant and union activity, but has also been heavily burdened with corruption and dependency.

### **The Banana Republic**

Politics in Honduras have generally been unstable. Following its separation from the United Provinces of Central America in 1839 until the 1900s, the country was governed by sixty-four presidents, few of whom were constitutionally elected (Anderson, 1988). Throughout most of the twentieth century, the country lived through long successions of presidents and military men, who played a strong role in the country's administration. Economically, throughout the nineteenth century, Honduras did not have significant contact with the world market, making it relatively self sufficient and quite isolated in comparison to its neighbours, which had managed to position themselves economically and politically through coffee exports. However, by the turn of the century, an increase in the demand for bananas attracted U.S. investment bringing dramatic growth to the agricultural industry in the northern part of the country. By 1930, the production of bananas, mainly by U.S. fruit companies, "had catapulted Honduras into the position of the world's leading banana exporter" (Morris, 1984, p.g.5). The largest and most powerful banana company was the United Fruit Company, originally created by a Boston-based businessman, Minor C. Keith. It was later directed by Samuel Zemurray,

an Alabama entrepreneur, who was one of the first to recognize the potential of the Honduran banana industry. He also founded the Cuyamel Fruit Company that would later merge with United Fruit. Owning most of the infrastructure and technology that gave way to the unparalleled economic growth, foreign banana companies soon controlled the politics of the country. For instance, in 1911, Zemurray financed the overthrow of President Miguel Dávila and installed General Manuel Bonilla in his place (Euraque, 1996; Anderson, 1988). This facilitated extraordinary concessions to the banana companies ranging from duty free imports to the right to build infrastructure. This banana enclave led to the failure of Honduras to develop a strong ruling class that would defend national interest. Local entrepreneurs were displaced, and the ruling groups that did emerge competed for the wealth and political resources offered by the foreign companies. Consequently, Honduras was coined with the generic term “banana republic”, which according to Meyer and Meyer (1994) is a disparaging label for Latin American states “whose economic dependence on the cultivation of bananas as its principal export crop led to foreign banana corporations exercising unprecedented influence on its internal affairs” (1994: 53).

Banana companies continued to operate and exert great influence in the country well into the 1980s. By 1988, U.S. transnational corporations not only had absolute control over the five largest firms in Honduras, they also controlled 88 percent of the 20 largest and 82 percent of the fifty largest companies in the country (Acker, 1988). Bananas still remain a leading export for Honduras (For more details on the banana history of Honduras see Euraque, 1996; Morris, 1984; Lapper & Painter, 1985; Anderson, 1988; Acker, 1988).

## **From Caudillo Politics to Militarism to U.S. Linchpin**

A number of leaders played significant roles in regional and national histories in Latin America. These popular leaders often termed *caudillos* were considered defenders of traditional customs, local livelihoods and national values, who radiated natural and charismatic leadership and whom the masses trusted (Burns, 1980). Honduran history also contains elements of *caudillismo*, disguised under the concept of democracy, which has been more characterized by political bossism and strong-man rule.

Honduras, for the most part, has had a traditional two-party system: the Liberal Party, which tends to have center-left policies, and the National Party which holds to more conservative positions. The National Party managed to consolidate its power, when, General Tiburcio Carías Andino, became president in 1932, a position he would hold for the next sixteen years (Lapper & Painter, 1985). Under his dictatorship, Honduras managed to sail without serious upheavals through the depression of the 1930s. He also kept the banana companies happy, as he recognized their importance for the stability of his government. However, his regime eventually became associated with fraud and corruption and by 1948 his term came to an end.

The military seized power in 1956 and the government established was led by a military council consisting of three officers: General Roque Rodríguez, Colonel Hector Caraccioli, and Major Roberto Gálvez Barnes. However, due to military interest in maintaining the façade of a democratic state, the liberal Ramon Villeda Morales was elected president in 1957. Under his term, the first agrarian reform was introduced. This unsettled powerful landowners, fruit companies, and a clique of conservatives, who supported a coup in October of 1963, headed by Colonel Oswaldo López Arellano

(UNAH, 2005; Anderson, 1988; Lapper & Painter, 1985). According to some, his influence on politics was extensive and dangerous, as he used violent repression against enemies or opponents of his government (See for example Anderson, 1988). To others, his government was dynamic, achieving projects of material progress, stabilizing the tensions of the country, and effectively dealing with conflicts with El Salvador (See for example UNAH, 2005). Lopez Arellano's first presidential term ended in 1971, nevertheless, in 1972 he carried out his second coup against the elected president Ramon E. Cruz. He governed Honduras until 1975, when he was forced to resign because of corruption scandals involving banana companies. Up until 1981, the country was run by a series of military men, which included General Juan Melgar Castro and General Policarpo Paz Garcia. Following the overthrow of Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, by the Sandinistas, the United States began strengthening its relations with Honduras (Ibid).

The U.S. role in Honduras during the 1980s is unprecedented in Latin American history. After the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua, civil war broke out in El Salvador. Honduras was strategically located between these two countries for the United States to anchor its regional defense strategy. By 1981, The U.S. National Security Council had approved US\$ 19 million for covert operations against Nicaragua in Honduras (Lapper & Painter, 1985). Although the constitutional president was Roberto Suazo Córdova, the country was heavily influenced by General Gustavo Alvarez, who became the Americans' number one ally in the region. In 1982, the Reagan administration pledged a 50 percent increase in military aid to Honduras, financing the infamous *Contra* operations against Nicaragua's left-wing government (Ibid). By 1984,

it was announced that the northern Honduran area of Puerto Castilla would serve as base for U.S. military facilities, where foreign as well as Honduran troops would be trained for combat. Honduras became a large U.S. military base, with headquarters and airfields spread all throughout the country. Furthermore, for most of the 1980s, American military supplied Honduras not only with money, but with arms, helicopters, and military munitions, converting the country into the region's anti-communist citadel.

The U.S. is doing all it can to keep the Contras intact in Honduras, for at least another year and they're using 'persuasive' methods to see it that Honduras remains willing to go on being an accomplice in the aggression against Nicaragua. (Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto in *Barricada Internacional*, 1989, p.g. 4.)

### **The Democratic State and Neoliberalism**

At the dawn of the 1990s, Honduras was considered one of Central America's "emerging democracies", after almost 20 years of military rule (Envío, 1990). The elections of 1990, where young nationalist Rafael Leonardo Callejas was elected president, were hardly influenced by democratic processes, but by three main factors inherited from the 1980s. The first was the draconian economic measures imposed by financial lending institutions, largely a result of the economic debt crisis that Latin America in general was experiencing. The second issue was the desire to lessen military influence in the political and economic matters of the country; and third, the lack of leadership and strategy from the popular movements who were unable to communicate the poorer classes' interests to those in the elites. The United States, the World Bank and the IMF supported Callejas. Given that the latter were the authors of the neoliberal economic package that the country was to inherit, it was to their best interest to have a

president who would consolidate the stabilization policies and structural adjustment programs. These policies, however, were dictated by the needs of the international market and U.S. geopolitics, and aimed at aligning Honduras with the rest of Central America.

Attempts to introduce the neoliberal model began in 1988 during Jose Azcona's presidency. While Honduras had been a regional military platform for the U.S., it also became one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid in the world (Envío, 1990). In addition, the country received nearly US\$ 1.4 billion in bilateral and multilateral loans during the same period, nearly doubling its foreign debt (Ibid). Rather than investing this money, the government wasted the funds in forms of subsidies to appease producers and consumers. During the 1980s, the exports of goods and services had contracted and dropped so much that by 1988 the country suffered from severe economic deficiencies, while depending on foreign transnational corporations as well as U.S. aid. International financial institutions required the Honduran government to tighten its monetary, fiscal, and its salary policies. The results, however, produced more problems that forced the country into taking even harsher measures. By 1990, international financial institutions had suspended aid to Honduras unless its government agreed to structural adjustment programs, which the then president, José Azcona, rejected.

Days after taking power in 1990, Callejas implemented neoliberal measures by immediately devaluating the currency and increasing the sales tax, while maintaining the previous measures imposed by the World Bank and IMF. Similar economic adjustments were implemented during the government of the next President, Carlos Reina, although his term came to be instrumental in changing the power dynamics of military. He was

the first to take power away from the military and to name his own Minister of Defense, rather than accept the nominee typically suggested by the Armed forces. While Honduras entered the twenty-first century in a democratic fashion, the country's politics and strategies are influenced by the global economic system. In this case, the model has transformed from a classic neoliberal model to what we now refer to as the *globalization* of markets. Today, Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, highly characterized by the unequal distribution of income as well as high rates of unemployment. The economy still relies on heavy exports of agricultural products, mainly bananas and coffee, and its growth continues to be extremely dependent on U.S. demand.

Honduran politics have evolved considerably throughout the years from a dictatorship to what appears to be a democratic state. A view of Honduras' history, would lead one to assume that by today, the country would be a modest regional success. With no history of internal armed conflict, flows of monetary aid, natural resources and an apparent democratic political system, Honduras should have cultivated economic and social development for its people. However, the country's present socioeconomic condition of extreme poverty and insecurity is a reflection of the political disparity, corruption, and social polarization, all consequences of poor and unpatriotic leadership, that have been trademarks of Honduran history. On the one hand, the country's cultural heritage and social dynamics include collective forms of engaging in politics and government, therefore fragmentation was bound to occur to a greater or lesser extent. On the other hand, the country is extremely vulnerable to external influences to the degree that one needs to question whether it is truly a sovereign nation in control of its affairs.



With this in mind, could the Maras, the object of this study, be simply another set of actors that have identified this lack of social and political cohesion in Honduras?

### **Nicaragua's History of Insurgency**

Within the Central American region, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were the three countries that experienced marked social upheaval during the twentieth century. With distinct social and political formations, it is no surprise that Nicaragua's history is significantly different from that of neighbouring Honduras. Nicaragua inherited a very unequal society from the days of the Spanish colonization, with an elite focused on concentrating its wealth while perpetuating the poverty of the population at large. This, in turn, contributed to the country's history of rebellions and political turmoil. The following section presents the main historical developments that occurred in 20<sup>th</sup> century Nicaragua.

#### **The Somoza Dynasty**

Like Honduras, Nicaragua broke away from the United Provinces of Central America in 1838 to become an independent republic. From then on, the political power was a constant struggle between the liberals and conservatives, but by the early 1900s, the United States intervened militarily to protect its own economic interests (Rudolph and Millet in McCuen, 1986). From 1912 until 1932, with exception of a brief interval in the mid-1920s, Nicaragua was occupied by the U.S. Marines, who created the National Guard in order to maintain internal order (Walker, 1997). During this same period, the nationalist guerrilla leader, Augusto César Sandino, opposed the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua and constantly frustrated the Marines' efforts to restore stability. Sandino

eventually forced the withdrawal of the U.S. military by 1932, and control of the National Guard was given to Nicaraguan, Anastasio Somoza García. By 1934, Somoza had Sandino assassinated, two years later he staged a coup and rigged the elections, officially becoming president of Nicaragua in 1937. With this began a “the longest lived dynastic dictatorship in Latin American history” (Walker, 2000, p.g. 68).

From 1936 up until 1979, three members of the Somoza family ruled Nicaragua. With the support from the United States, the first Anastasio Somoza García ran the country until he was assassinated in 1956. His son, Luis Somoza Debayle, took over the presidency and ruled until his death from a heart attack in 1967. Thereafter, his brother Anastasio Somoza Debayle took over until overthrown by the Sandinistas in 1979 (Culturegram, 1996). Although the three Somozas had distinct forms of dictatorship, with the last one being by far the greediest and the most violent, they all consolidated their power through the co-optation of key elites, direct control of the National Guard, and support from the United States. The Somozas carefully cultivated their relationship with the Washington during their rule. Nicaragua’s foreign policy was in line with that of the United States. Although there were occasional tensions between both countries, mostly due to the Somozas’ undemocratic styles of governing, the dictators were supportive of American policy, and the United States benefited from the relationship (Solaún, 2005). The Somoza regime was considered acceptable, especially because the alternative had communist or at the very least socialist orientations. In short, the Somozas used the United States to maintain power, and Washington used them to maintain influence in the region and perpetuate their pro-American stance (For more on the Somoza regime see Walter, 1993; Crawley, 1979; Morley, 1994).

## **The Rise of the Sandinistas and the Contra War**

The Somoza rule accentuated class differences and social problems. They accumulated a fortune worth hundreds of millions of dollars, and by the mid-1970s, the family owned approximately one quarter of Nicaragua's financial assets and major agro-exporting industries (McCuen, 1986). The rural peasants were displaced and marginalized; the elite were further constricted, and social conditions in the country were appalling. Therefore, it is no surprise that rebellion and opposition was on the rise. In 1961, a small guerrilla organization, the FSLN, was founded (McCuen, 1986). Commonly known as the *Sandinistas*, this revolutionary group named after the assassinated Sandino, viewed like a martyr by many Nicaraguans, was formed with the goal of overthrowing Somoza rule. For the following 15 years, the movement carried out small-scale attacks, but the struggle against Somoza became less and less of a class-based revolution. After the December 1972 earthquake, virtually all sectors of the Nicaraguan society united efforts to oust the dictatorship. The Somozas and their associates had engaged in the pilfering of international aid that was destined to those affected, losing their support among the middle and upper class (Berryman, 1985). As the Sandinista attacks and threats increased, the government responded with a violent 'counterinsurgency' campaign, carried out by the National Guard. The 1978 murder of Pedro Chamorro, a well known Nicaraguan figure and editor of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, ignited a sudden mass uprising to Somoza's rule. Riots broke out and the Sandinistas seized the National Palace in Managua and full civil war ensued. While the Sandinistas took government employees hostage, the government responded by bombing the opposition. The United States sought to intervene by persuading Somoza to step

down, in order to prevent the left wing rebel movement from assuming power. However, the Sandinistas, with the support of most of Nicaraguans, launched a final offensive forcing Somoza to flee the country, while the guerrilla movement took control in 1979. The civil war had cost the lives of almost 50,000 people (McCuen, 1986).

The ten and a half years of Sandinista rule can be divided into two periods. The government of National Reconstruction (1979-1985) where the new Marxist-oriented administration seized the Somozas' fortune, redistributed their lands to the peasants, suspended the constitution, and began tightening controls. They issued decrees to avoid the veneration of a strongman that could lead to another dictatorship. They were generally respectful of civil and political rights and created a mixed economy where the bulk of the production remained in the hands of a heavily regulated private sector. It also sought to maintain or establish trade and aid relations with other countries, regardless of regime type. The results of these policies were generally positive and Nicaragua was experiencing GDP growth and stabilization. According to Walker (1997), one of the most striking phenomena of these years was the explosion of grass roots organizations. This had been encouraged by government policies aiming to create true participatory democracy. The Sandinistas thus furthered the growth of organizations representing neighbourhoods, women, youth and others.

They allowed them significant autonomy, channelled resources through them to the people, and gave them formal representation in governmental decision-making bodies and on the Constitutional State- the corporative structure that served as the country's legislature until 1985. In turn, these organizations played a central role in the implementation of social programs and boosted production (Walker, 1997, p. 10).

However, the Sandinista government was seen by Washington as an extension of Soviet-backed communism. Concerned that the Sandinistas were aiding left-wing rebels

in El Salvador, the United States suspended economic aid to Nicaragua and funded the Contra War for most of the 1980s. Although the second period of the Sandinista rule, called the Constitutional Period (1985-1990) was a time of important achievements, it represented significant political setbacks for the movement. When Sandinista Daniel Ortega was elected president in 1985, the U.S. responded by imposing a trade embargo on the country that severely affected its economy. The war against the Contras also strained the economy, as there was a shift of budget from social programs to the military. This period resulted in the decline of the innovative programs implemented during the first stage of Sandinista rule. The Contras also deliberately targeted the country's infrastructure, committed massive human right abuses, and destroyed rural clinics, schools, and food-storage facilities, worsening the economic situation for the population. Eventually, the Sandinistas agreed to ensure free elections if the Contras disarmed. Consequently, in the 1990s election, and after much American anti-Sandinista propaganda and strategizing, the U.S.-backed Violeta Chamorro won the presidency (For more on the Sandinistas see Bugajski, 1990; Murphy and Caro, 2006; McCuen, 1986; Morley, 1994).

### **The Shift to Neoliberalism**

Violeta Chamorro promised to end the war and the American economic embargo, opening the floodgates of U.S. aid to Nicaraguans. This might have been her winning ticket in the 1990 elections against Daniel Ortega from the FSLN. The Sandinista government whose term in power was suffering from economic hardships due to the Contra war and worsened by the structural adjustments policies it had to introduce in

order to alleviate deficit and control inflation. Although the power shifted to the UNO coalition, this did not herald the disintegration of the revolutionary process of the FSLN. Rather, the party initiated a period of redefining its role in Nicaraguan society and its relationship with the new government (Linkogle, 1996). Meanwhile, the new president Chamorro was moving towards a market economy and opening investment inroads. Although structural reforms had actually begun under the Sandinistas, Chamorro, who was ideologically dedicated to neoliberalism, continued the process. After 1990, the country's reinsertion into the global economy and international political relations were highly reinforced by U.S. policies. During the first years of Chamorro's government, the United States injected millions of dollars of aid into Nicaragua, with the objective to *de-sandinitize* the country, as well as strengthen Nicaragua's neoliberal social order. The new government announced radical measures that included massive public-sector layoffs, privatizations, rate increases in public services, reduction on social spending, and the elimination of subsidies on basic consumption (Robinson, 1997). This led to chronic social conflict between the government and the popular classes, where strikes and negotiations were at the order of the day. Conversely, Chamorro's government consolidated democratic institutions, advanced national reconciliation and reduced human rights violations. However, the introduction of neoliberalism in Nicaragua increased social inequalities and consumption differentials, accentuated the concentration of wealth and created widespread impoverishment. It drove most Nicaraguans into desperate social and economic conditions of extreme poverty.

After the 1990 elections, Nicaragua has had four peaceful and free presidential elections. In 1996, Arnoldo Aleman was elected president who continued to liberalize

the economy, followed in 2001 by Enrique Bolaños. During the latter's government, Nicaragua was still very much in line with U.S. policy. However, in 2006, the presidential election was won by Sandinista Daniel Ortega, bringing the FSLN back to power after 16 years in opposition. Presently, Ortega and the FSLN still hold office, attempting to re-align their politics with those of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in defiance of the U.S. (Silva, 2008).

Nicaragua's history and transition to democracy has been unique and fragile. Its society has endured significant polarization that remains prominent in today's affairs, pushing its people to neopopular politics. Although there is a legacy of hatred and distrust left by the abuse of power, product of forty-seven years of dictatorship, followed by civil war and the vicious Contra War, history has proved that the fabric of Nicaraguan civil society is strong and resourceful. However, the magnitude of intervention this country suffered leaves room to question its authentic sovereignty as well, and to what extent this intervention affected its civic culture and state of democracy. Evidently, Honduras and Nicaragua currently share similar political and economic conditions, while their past is markedly different.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ***THEMATIC ANALYSIS: MARAS IN CENTRAL AMERICA***

Latin American youth gangs vary across the region according to their structures, motivations, interactions and origins (Strocka, 2006). Brazil's *Galeras Cariocas* are more egalitarian and less cohesive. Its *Quadrilhas* are mainly interested in economic gain. Peru has *Pandillas* who fulfill many social functions in terms of identity, control over territory and neighbourhood protection. But other youth gangs like the Chilean *Pandillas* or Costa Rican *Chapulines* are more concerned with pleasure-seeking activities, like drug consumption or sports. The Colombian *Sicarios* and the Central American *Maras* are extremely violent gangs who engage in drugs and arms trafficking.

#### **Presence in the Region**

As mentioned above, Central America has its own very specific kind of youth gang formations. Depending on the region, their labels vary, as well as their nature and structure, such as Nicaragua's *pandillas*, while Costa Rica is home to *chapulines* (Leibel, 2002; Strocka, 2006). The northern triangle of Central America, made up of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, is home to a gang formation known as *Las Maras*. Maras are characterized by extreme violence, highly structured and organized systems. They resemble organized crime cartels, engage in illegal activities such as drugs and arms trafficking, kidnappings, etc., (Cruz, 2007; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002; Boraz and Bruneau, 2006; Ribando, 2005). Recent years have seen a growing academic interest because these gangs have become a great threat to the security of countries in the region. The statistics on the number of Maras operating across Central America varies



extensively. The most consistent figures are offered by the 2007 UN Crime and Development Report. It estimated that by 2005, gang membership in Honduras oscillated around 36,000, compared to 10,500 in El Salvador, 14,000 in Guatemala, and some 4,500 Maras in Nicaragua. El Salvador's National Police also offers the same statistics for gang numbers in these countries, approximately 70,000 members for the whole of Central America (Boraz and Bruneau, 2006). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) used estimates of Mara membership in the United States and Central America in its 2006 gang assessment report which provided similar statistics. However, estimates by NGOs and academics say the numbers could be as high as 200,000 (Rodgers, 2007). A 1998 Honduran newspaper report claimed that there were more than 60,000 gang members in Honduras alone (*Diario El Heraldito*, 1998). *La Tribuna* (2003) estimated that Honduras had around 100,000 members of Maras, and El Salvador could potentially have somewhere between 70,000 to 150,000 active members (Elbert, 2004). According to Carranza (2003/2004), determining the number of gang members in the region is difficult due to the three stages of incorporation that these groups practice. The first refers to active gang members who have passed through all the rites and are formally part of the group engaging in all of its activities. The second stage consists of the collaborators. These are not formal members but they are closely related to the group and sometimes portray the same identity that active members do. Finally, there are the 'calmados' or the 'quiet' ones who represent the oldest members of a typical Mara gang. They receive special permission to be excluded from daily gang activities in order to dedicate themselves to family or employment. Whatever the numbers are, the tendency shows an alarming quantity of gang membership in the region, comparable to

an army of 'urban child soldiers' whose impact on their communities can only be extremely negative.

The two most numerous gangs in the region are *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and their rival, *Mara 18* (M-18) (Univision, 2008; Ribando, 2005; Ribando 2007). Although other Mara formations are in existence, such as *Los Cholos*, *Los Batos Locos*, *Los Puchos*, *Los Rockeros*, this research will focus specifically on MS-13 and M-18 activities and practices. Besides Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, members of *Mara Salvatrucha* can be found in at least thirty-one states of the United States, as well as Mexico, Canada and even Spain. The Maras are becoming a transnational phenomenon, similar to the Hell's Angels, who have franchises in the U.S., Canada, and various countries of the European Union. (Manwaring, 2007; Bruneau, 2005; Brevé, 2007; Arana, 2005; Saltsman and Welch III, 2008; Riesmann, 2006, Valdez, 2000).

## Origins

Most of the literature on Central American gangs and *Mara Salvatrucha* agrees on their origins and historical background. The origins of MS-13 gang activity in the United States and, later on, in Central America date back to the 1980s when El Salvador was engulfed in a bloody civil war between the leftist guerrilla FMLN (*Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front*) and the right wing military government supported by the United States (For more on the civil conflict see Montgomery, 1995; Bonner, 1984; Wood, 2003; White, 1996; Romero, 2005; Library of Congress<sup>8</sup>, 2005). From 1980 until 1992, the year the Chapultepec Peace Accord was signed, approximately 75,000 people were killed and nearly 1 million people were displaced, half of which are believed to

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<sup>8</sup> Web accessed on May 20, 2008 from: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/svtoc.html>

have entered the United States as refugees (Roush, 1997; Johnson and Muhlhausen, 2005). Among these refugees were guerrilla recruits with knowledge of weapons, explosives and combat tactics. Most of the people who fled from El Salvador during the 1980s were relocated in the 'Rampart' section of Los Angeles, where they faced problems of adjusting to life in North America. Also, many had a difficult time finding work due to their poor education. This area already had established gangs, like the M-18 or 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang, which was created in the 1960s by immigrants from Mexico (Saltsman and Welch III, 2008). Other gangs included the African-American *Crips and Blood*, the Mexican-American *EME*, the Mexican Mafia, which technically speaking does not constitute a gang due to its highly developed criminal organization (Bruneau, 2005). Most of the young displaced Salvadorans joined the M-18, where they were welcomed because of their combat knowledge and skills. Others, harassed by these gangs or rejected from them, decided to form their own organization calling it *Mara Salvatrucha* 13 or MS-13, based on the 13<sup>th</sup> street, and becoming a major rival for M-18. Although these gangs existed, and had developed structures and rituals, it was not until the 1990s that they began to cause attention by creating fright and fear. MS-13 was growing rapidly and began challenging M-18 for control of the streets. These two gangs have engaged in many violent confrontations that still continue to this day. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2002), in 1993, MS-13 became so strong that they took on the Mexican Cartels and their tax on drug sales. MS-13 eventually agreed to become suppliers of cocaine and marijuana in exchange of drug tax exemption, forging a close relationship between both organizations. Because most of the activities Maras were involved in were of a criminal nature, many were arrested and imprisoned, where they

“further defined and honed their gang identities and criminal skills” (Bruneau, 2005, p.g. 2). This situation was exacerbated by the events of the Rodney King riots of 1992, after police determined that most of the damages, looting, and violence had been carried out by members of local gangs, including *Mara Salvatrucha* (Libcom, 2006)<sup>9</sup>. According to Arana (2005), California responded by implementing strict anti-gang laws. Gang members were being charged as adults instead of minors, and many young Latino criminals ended up in jail.

*Mara Salvatrucha* as well as other forms of Maras started gaining presence in Central America after the mid-1990s. In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which expanded the categories of immigrants subject to deportation (Ribando, 2007). It included a clause that allowed for the repatriation to countries of origin of those non-citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison. As a result, in 1996, approximately 38,000 immigrants were deported (Papachristos, 2005). By 2003, the United States had forcibly removed a total of 186,151 persons, including 19,307 who returned to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Some 50,000 of these had criminal records (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999; Department of Homeland Security 2004). By 2006, Latin America and the Caribbean accounted for 95 percent of the almost 197,000 people deported; Honduras received approximately 26,000, while about 18,000 were returned to Guatemala, and some 10,000 to El Salvador (Ribando, 2007). These countries were ill-equipped to receive this influx of young people. With no housing available, these deportees sought out the urban slums (Johnson

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<sup>9</sup> Web accessed on May 20, 2008 from: <http://libcom.org/history/1992-the-la-riots>

and Muhlhausen, 2005), where they “ruthlessly destroyed local gangs and took control of huge swathes of Central American cities” (Elkus, 2007, p.g.1).

These countries not only suffer from a lack of resources, but neoliberal economic policies have also exacerbated traditional inequalities. The societies thus have provided the perfect environment for gangs such as *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Mara 18* to thrive in, converting them into a transnational phenomenon. *Mara Salvatrucha* is now present in states such as Oregon, Alaska, Texas, Utah, Michigan, New York, Florida, Georgia, and countries like Canada and Mexico (Valdez, 2000). This phenomenon, growing in the backyards of Canada and the United States, requires more attention considering the national and international development and security issues at stake. As a transnational phenomenon, the Maras not only affect local communities in North America, but internationally as well, especially in countries like Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador who lack the resources to address the problem.

### **Comprehending the Mara Phenomenon in Central America**

This section will present a brief description of maras; their organizational structure, hierarchy, culture and activities. Maras, especially *Salvatrucha*, are drawing the attention of authorities across North America as the problem has grown beyond Central America. According to CBC News (2008), Canadian authorities are increasingly concerned with the spreading of MS-13 activity and are taking action by arresting gang members in the cities of Toronto and Vancouver, in attempts to stunt its growth. MS-13 also has a presence in Montreal and Calgary where there is an established Latin American community (Globe and Mail, 2008).

### *Organizational Structure*

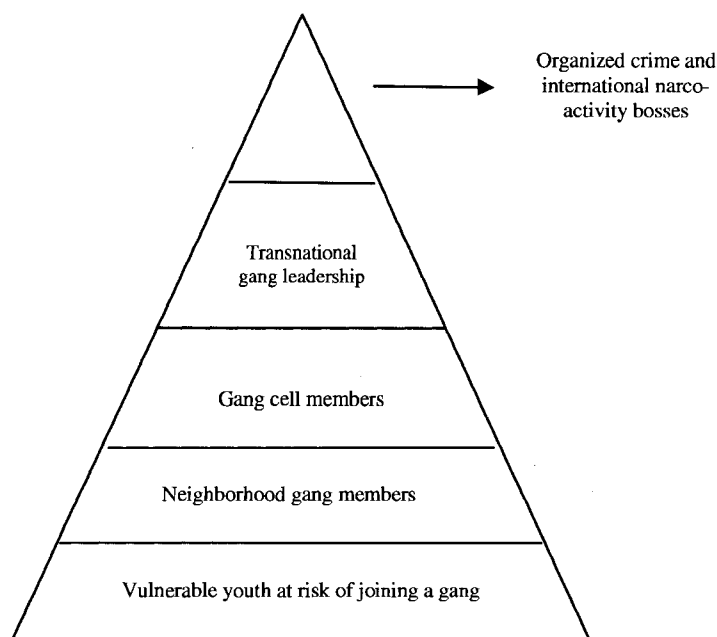
Details on the structure of *Mara Salvatrucha* are not completely accurate and vary according to region. Some authors like Harness (2006) argue that the structure of Maras is not very clear, due to its decentralized nature. Others like Logroño (2008) state that Maras have a clearly defined structure and hierarchy. Logan and Morse (2007) describe the vertical and horizontal chains of command of *Mara Salvatrucha*. Most investigators do agree that the phenomenon is extremely territorial. According to a 2007 Central American study carried out by *Demoscópia* and funded by CABI and SIDA, territorialism is a very important aspect in this particular gang culture, as it is in others. It consolidates their identity and therefore Maras express themselves by appropriating key locations or areas in which their lucrative and illegal activities take place. Mara structures function as networks with transnational linkages (Boraz and Bruneau, 2006). Smaller groups named “clickas” or “cliques” are formed within the name of Mara Salvatrucha in specific neighbourhoods and barrios, at local and international levels, and communicate on a regular basis. They are assigned names such as “*Marineros*”, “*Sureño-13*” or “*Big Gangsta Locos*” (Logan and Morse, 2008; *Demoscópia*, 2007; Walking with El Salvador<sup>10</sup>, ND; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002; Cauvin, 2006; Walking with El Salvador, n.d.). These subgroups are assigned individual functions such as recruiting, criminal activities, and information cells. When it comes to the issue of their hierarchical structure, one encounters a discrepancy between the fieldwork carried out by specialized research, namely the empirical data obtained from gang members themselves, and the views held by authorities and police intelligence. According to

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<sup>10</sup> No author identified and no date provided. Web accessed on June 11, 2008 from: <http://www.walkingwithelsalvador.org/Karen/Mara%20Salvatrucha%20Paper.pdf>

*Demoscopia* (2007), police and government authorities seem to have a vertical perception of Mara structures as extremely hierarchical, with a centralized direction, with fluent patterns of communication and cooperation patterns, and obeying a regional leader. The Salvadoran Anti-Drug Commission states that the structure of MS-13 and M-18 is particularly complex involving cliques and centralized hierarchies of local and regional leaders. This particular perspective is in line with what authorities generally perceive about structures of organized crime. Conversely, narrations and interviews of gang members emphasized the horizontal and decentralized nature of the organization and rejected the idea of a head or general leader (*Demoscopia*, 2007).

**Figure.4 1 Gang Structures**



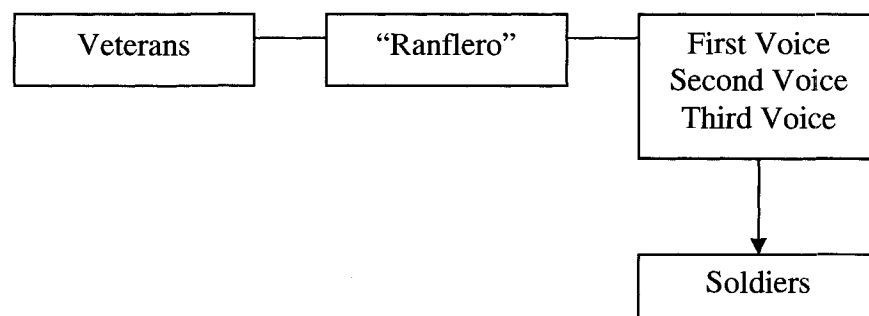
Source: Adapted from USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment, 2006.

The figure above represents the vertical assumption of Central American gang structures by USAID (2006). The top echelon consists of the highest level of leadership,

such as narco-leaders and organized crime networks, usually belonging to the Mexican Cartels. According to USAID, it is believed that some drug bosses work closely with the leaders of transnational gangs. The transnational gangs represent the leaders of MS-13 and M-18; they oversee the subgroups or “cliques”, which is the next lower level of gang member cells. They are involved in illegal activities such as extortion, collection of war taxes, drug distribution, and generally carry out orders from higher leaders. The next two levels are detached from the Mara organization. They represent the other barrio gangs that attempt to imitate MS-13 or M-18 and fight for territorial control as well. These are formed by youth from marginal areas and are viewed as ‘illegitimate’ by other stronger gangs. The last level comprises the vulnerable youth at risk of joining a gang, namely those between 8-18 years who live in poorer areas with limited access to education or job opportunities.

The next figure is a representation of the structures according to horizontal perceptions, adapted from the study carried out by *Demoscopia* (2007). Accordingly, this is the only form of organization of the Maras as described by actual gang members:

**Figure.4 2 “Clicka” Structure**





The veterans constitute those gang members who have been immigrants to the U.S. They enjoy special prestige within the organization but they do not occupy formal leadership roles. They serve as consultants and informants of activities in other countries and are referred as the founding groups or members of the organization. The “*ranflero*” is a type of administrator who takes on the role of treasurer and organizes the “*mirins*” or the formal meetings the members have. In these “*mirins*” all members of the gang participate, but there are special positions held by selected members labelled first voice, second voice and even third voice (if the gang is large in numbers). They conduct the *mirins* and are responsible of being the spokesmen in inter-clique meetings. The soldiers are the newcomers or ordinary members who obey orders from the leaders of the clique. These names vary according to region and country, but the essence of the Mara composition remains the same. In this horizontal construction, gang members refuse the idea of having bosses, rather they accept the notion of having group leaders. The horizontal analysis also includes the communication flows between cliques in a specific region, creating national networks of crime (Logan and Morse, 2008).

Although the perceptions of Mara organization vary from vertical to horizontal concepts, the fact remains that these groups appear to have sufficient organized structures that allow them to carry out their deviant activities in the most effective and beneficial way for the group.

### *Mara Culture*

Although differences exist according to the regions of origin or cliques they belong to, most of Mara behaviours and cultures share similar traits. It is also important

to highlight that rites, organization and operations, differ from gang to gang. For example MS-13 has more of a presence in Central America, while M-18 is more widespread in the United States (Iñiguez, ND). Maras are characterized by their notorious tattoos, which records their accomplishments and narrates their personal experiences. They “commemorate dead homies, girlfriends, gang calligraphy, religious symbols, and even names of streets in Los Angeles” (Del Barco, 2005). According to Iñiguez (ND), each gang has particular rules of what types of tattoos they can sport, for example no MS-13 member can bear a tattoo of the Guadalupe Virgin or a combination of green, white and red colors, as they make allusions to Mexico’s national symbols. Tattoos must be earned through acts that benefit the clique. These symbols are their methods of expression and identity and help attribute ranking within the cliques, depending on their number and significance (Salgado, 2008; *Demoscopia*, 2007). Graffiti marks their territories, and they also use a specific coded hand language called “stacking” which they employ to communicate with each other (*National Geographic*, 2006). According to Carranza (2003/2004), the symbols and modes of expression such as tattoos and clothing styles, may generally be the same in Central America as those in Los Angeles, yet the motivations, ways of expressing violence, and rules are not. Each Mara gang has its own elaborate internal rules as to what members are allowed to do or what is acceptable within their codes of values and judgments. Maras have distinct dress codes including shaved heads and baggy pants (Hadden, 2003). “The use of violence is probably the most defining characteristic of maras” (Boraz and Bruneau, 2006, p.37). Most of their operations, rites, language, and lifestyles are characterized by brutality and violence (Chase, 2005; Peralta, 2005). Their initiations rites include the violent beating

of candidates by all the gang members, a process called “*brincado*” (Reguillo, 2005; Demoscopía, 2007). If it is MS-13, the new recruits have to endure a beating for thirteen seconds, whereas M-18 initiation beatings go on for eighteen seconds. This initiation aims to test the physical and emotional resistance to pain. In the case of women, if they are strong enough, they will also endure the beatings. However, for the most part, they have to agree to have sexual relationships with all the gang members in order to enter the clique (Portillo, 2006; Salgado, 2008; *La Nación*, 2006; National Geographic, 2006, Argeñal, 2006; Walking with El Salvador, ND). As a rule of thumb, once people have entered the gang, they are in for life. They cannot leave because doing so is seen as treason punishable with death (National Geographic, 2006). As part of the ascension process, Mareros have to kill a member of a rival gang to prove loyalty, a process called *sangre afuera, sangre adentro*, “blood in, blood out” (National Geographic, 2006, Boraz and Bruneau, 2006). Maras compete for the control of a territory, and therefore engage in violent acts in rivalry with other Maras, as well as the authorities. According to Tamayo (2005), in their struggle for identity, Maras employ acts of violence to a.) dominate their rivals, b.) terrorize the community in their territories under control, and c.) to obtain economic resources.

Maras label themselves according to the ranking each holds within the gang. The most influential and with more seniority are often termed “cabecillas” or “jengas” (Reguillo, 2005). The general membership refer to each other as “homies” or “homeboys” (Logroño, 2008) and women are often called “hainas” or “haynas”, a term implying lover or companion (Reguillo, 2005; Logroño, 2008). Females usually play the role of conjugal partners, but also of prostitutes or drug mules.

According to Elbert (2004), Maras have been modernizing their arsenals throughout the years. Although they started out with home made guns, known as “hechizas” or “chimbas” (Brevé, 2007), they now have access Ak-47s, machetes, grenades and small handguns. In general, maras show no fear of law enforcement and consider them one more of their enemies (Valdez, 2000). Another key characteristic which differentiates Maras from many other youth gangs, is the extreme brutality used when they commit their acts. In an interview with a former gang member, Elbert (2004) noted that killings of rival Mara members or enemies had to be deliberately cruel, inflicting the most pain and suffering imaginable to the victim, including torture, mutilations, burning, and dismemberment. These acts are not only done to the unfortunate member of a rival gang, but also to their families, friends or romantic partners. Mara vengeance may at times lead to authentic massacres. “From a cultural point of view, the *pandillas* and Maras create their own world around them, which is differentiated and explicitly separated from “normal” society” (Leibel, 2002).

### *Activities*

According to Cabezas (2008), Maras are involved in a number of delinquent activities such as drug and arms trafficking, extortion, kidnapping and assaults, prostitution, and trafficking of people (Brevé, 2007; Cabezas, 2008; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002, Hadden, 2003; Carranza, 2004, *Demoscopia*, 2006). Drug dealing seems to be their principal activity and is the cause for their suspected connections to international drug cartels. It is assumed that Maras control drug trafficking at the local level within each country and region, supplying logistics and armed protection to the

large cartels (*Demoscopia*, 2007). However, the exact nature of the relationships between the Maras and druglords is not clear. U.S. studies point out that the majority of drug deals of Mareros happen at an individual level and not as part of organized crime. Others like Brevé (2007) argue that Mara growth has been facilitated by organized crime or rogue elements of the state security apparatuses. It is evident that such a relationship between narco-traffickers and maras is a dangerous development. Still, it remains to be determined to what extent the drug economy fomenters Mara activity within a specific region?

More recently, the smuggling of people into the United States has become a central activity for Maras, especially MS-13 (Chase, 2005; Cabezas, 2008; Brevé, 2007; *Walking with El Salvador*, ND). There are different motivations for this. People smuggling is a lucrative business, with fees ranging from US \$5,000-\$8,000 per person (Arana, 2005; Brevé, 2007). Secondly they gain new recruits, as the children of those illegal immigrants who are left behind, often join gangs. Thirdly, as a result of strict U.S. immigration policies, gang members are constantly deported. However, it is an objective to try to return immediately to the United States, and Maras provide the necessary smuggling networks (Papachristos, 2005).

Another frequent activity that Maras carry out is extortion, by 'taxing' the community. The 'impuesto de Guerra' or 'war tax' is employed to obtain daily resources by charging money to small businesses, neighbors, bus drivers and anyone who interacts with the community. This is for protection services either from themselves or rival gangs (Avila, 2006; Johnson and Mulhausen, 2006; *Demoscopia*, 2007). As far as other activities are concerned, the daily *El Heraldo* (2006) in Honduras reports that M-18

members do not serve as hit men, they do not get paid to commit homicides and only kill for vengeance or treason. Conversely, M-13 kills are motivated by vengeance, payment or rivalry.

As mentioned before, Mara victimization is usually intra or inter-group related, as gangs fight each other over territorial control. However, on December 2004, a group of MS-13 attacked an urban bus northern Honduras, killing twenty-eight innocent passengers, women and children included, to express protest and defiance to the government, which was engaging in anti-gang raids (*El Nuevo Diario*, 2004; *La Tribuna*, 2004).

It is evident that Maras are not merely groups of young misguided people who commit random acts of violence. Rather, these gangs have sufficiently complex structures and internal codes which define their daily activities, as well as behaviour in general. Although many laws were passed and strategies implemented by governments to contain the threat, the Mara phenomenon seems to be spreading uncontrollably. The next section will address the specific situation in Honduras and Nicaragua.

### **The Maras in Honduras: A State of Terror**

According to Univision (2005), the Maras have converted Honduras into the most dangerous country in Central America. The issue has become the biggest social problem facing the region (Bertodano, 2008). Street gangs have existed for many years, but it was not until the late 1990s that the phenomenon began metamorphosing into its present state. In 2005, police estimated that there were approximately 489 gangs in Honduras, with some 30,000 to 40,000 members (Durán, 2007). Even though El Salvador is the

country most frequently linked with Mara activity, the numbers are actually higher in Honduras.

### *Socioeconomic Context*

Honduras is a lower middle class income country in Central America bordering on Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. By 2006, the population was estimated at 7.4 million and its per capita income stands at US\$ 1,170 (World Bank, 2008)<sup>11</sup>. The major population centres in Honduras are Tegucigalpa, the capital, and San Pedro Sula, which is considered to be the most industrialized city.

Honduran society is rife with economic inequality, poverty, and malnutrition. The country is one of the poorest in the Western Hemisphere (U.S. Department of State, 2007). According to USAID's (2006) Honduran gang assessment,

Overall, 71.1 percent of Hondurans lives in poverty, and 77.7 percent of the rural population is poor. In urban areas, some 63.1 percent are poor. Income inequality is a critical issue. The richest 20 percent of households receive 54.3 percent of the total income of the country, while the poorest 20 percent receive only 3.2 percent. Of the country's 7 million inhabitants, 41 percent are under age 14. Because the population is fairly young and economic conditions are harsh, a large number of marginalized youths struggle daily to subsist. Youths head 10 percent of Honduran households, and 68 percent of these households are below the poverty line. USAID, 2006, p.g. 4.

A review of the human development indicators of the United Nations Human Development Report (2007/2008)<sup>12</sup>, stated that by 2004, the Honduran human poverty index, which is an indication of the standard of living in a country where lower the

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<sup>11</sup> Web accessed on June 17, 2008 from:  
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/HONDURASEXTN/0,,menuPK:295076~pagePK:141159~piPK:141110~theSitePK:295071,00.html>

<sup>12</sup> Web accessed on June 17, 2008 from:  
[http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_HND.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_HND.html)

percentage the better, was placed at 16.5. The Gini index measuring inequality was 53.8, whereby the value of 0 represents complete equality and a value 100 represents complete inequality. Military rule, a large gap between the rich and the poor, crime, and natural disasters have rendered Honduras one of the least developed and secure countries in Central America (BBC News, 2005). Therefore, poverty, unemployment, and according to Sullivan (2005), leftover weapons from the 1980s, and the U.S. deportation of criminals to the region, have turned the country into fertile ground for Mara activity.

Located in Central America, Honduras is on the transit route for drugs from the South to the North like Guatemala and Mexico (Durán, 2007). Thus, it is no surprise that groups such as Maras partake in the smuggling and distribution of narcotics, and contribute to extremely high levels of violence. According to the *Policia Nacional Preventiva* (National Preventive Police of Honduras) and ECLAC (2007), Honduras reached its peak of 55.89 deaths per 100,000 in 2002, compared to 40.41 deaths per 100,000 for 2007 (OCAVI, 2007).

MS-13 and M-18 are the two most dominant gangs in Honduras (Carranza, 2006). MS-13 became prominent in Honduras in 1989 and M-18 established itself in 1993 (USAID, 2006). These two gangs are now deeply entrenched, especially in the main cities where they are held responsible for many crimes. According to the study *Maras in Honduras* completed by Save the Children and ACJ (2002), it was estimated in 1999 that 34,202 members of gangs, were organized into 397 groups. Yet according to official Honduran government reports, due to the persecution of these groups during 2004 and 2005, an estimated 3,000 gang members have fled the country seeking refuge in the United States, Mexico, Guatemala and even El Salvador (*El Herald*o, 2005). Although it



is evident that MS-13 and M-18 are the dominant youth gangs in the country, Andino Mencía (2006) identifies six different types of gang formations in Honduras: 1.) the California gangs, which represent M-13 and M-18, currently dominating the gang scenario and surviving in conditions of repression and social cleansing; 2.) satellite gangs, which are sympathizing peripheral gangs who remain organically separated from the California gangs, but retain certain ties to it in order to secure their own survival; 3.) independent traditional gangs, which focus mainly on coming together to control their neighbourhood and to consume drugs and alcohol; 4.) Gangs of wealthy youths, which are integrated by young adults from the middle and upper class of the Honduran society who come together to consume drugs and carry out certain acts of crime and violence; 5.) the *professional mafias*, which are more like organized crime groups that carry out illegal activities such as drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, kidnappings, auto theft, etc.; and 6.) school gangs that originate within educational facilities in the high risk classes of society and generate violence in school. Generally these are independent but can quickly merge into the more dominant MS-13 and M-18 gangs (Andino Mencía, 2006, p. 9).

In spite of identifying many different types of gang formation in the country, it is widely recognized that MS-13 and M-18 pose the biggest threat and represent the most dominant groups. Firstly, they are the only gangs with a national dimension, present in the main cities of Honduras. Secondly, they appear to be sufficiently organized, territorial, and expansionist. The severe repression against them has made them band together and struggle to survive at any cost. Thirdly, it is believed they receive international support from MS-13 and M-18 groups in other countries, especially those active in the United States.

To date, the Mara phenomenon in Honduras is still a clamorous reality that remains unaddressed by the government and ignored by the international development community. In recent years, Honduras has seen the growth of juvenile violence beyond the two largest cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Smaller population centres such as La Ceiba, La Paz, Tela, Choluteca, Puerto Cortés, Comayagua and El Progreso (Meza, 2007) have also come to experience problems with Maras.

### **Mara Situation in Nicaragua: A case of Pandillas**

Nicaragua is said to be the safest country in Central America, however, Maras can also be found there. Most studies place the number at 4,500 members (USAID, 2006; United Nations, 2007; Ribando, 2007; Boraz and Bruneau, 2006; Bruneau, 2005). Nicaragua's youth gangs are most commonly known as *pandillas*, and have not yet acquired the characteristics of Maras. They are less violent and are more of a localized, rather than a transnational phenomenon (Rocha, 2006).

#### *Socioeconomic Context*

According to the assessment made by USAID (2006), Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and the second poorest in Latin America after Haiti. "Approximately 70 percent of Nicaraguans live in extreme poverty (less than a US\$1 per day), and unemployment hovers around 60-65 percent. 50 percent of the unemployed are people under the age of 24" (USAID, 2006, p.4). According to the World Bank (2008)<sup>13</sup>, during the 1950s and 1960s, Nicaragua had one of the fastest growing economies in the region, but lived under a dictatorship. Its history of civil wars and natural disasters has

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<sup>13</sup> Web accessed on June 18, 2008 from:  
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/NICARAGUAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20214837~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:258689,00.html>

created unfavourable economic conditions for the country. By the early 1990s, the country “had the slowest economic growth in the region and was one of the most indebted and economically unstable in the world” (World Bank, 2008). With Managua as its capital city, Nicaragua is a country with a population of 5.6 million (United Nations, 2006)<sup>14</sup>.

Its population is fairly young: 40 percent are under the age of 12, while 35 percent are between 13-29 years of age (USAID, 2006). Most Nicaraguan youth have little access to education. Only 8 percent have obtained a university level education, while over 13 percent never had any schooling (Ibid). A review of the human development indicators of the United Nations Human Development Report (2007/2008)<sup>15</sup> showed that Nicaragua’s GDP per capita (PPP) was of US \$3,674. Its human poverty index was 17.9 in 2004, and its GINI index for equality was 43.1. According to PAHO (2008), a quality of life survey carried out in 1993 by the National Statistics and Census Institute (INEC) indicated that 75 percent of Nicaraguan households had one or more unmet basic needs, and 44 percent lived in conditions of extreme poverty. In rural areas, the proportion of households in extreme poverty was 60 percent. However, even though Nicaragua experiences such poverty, it is still one of the safest countries with lower rates of violence than the rest of its neighbouring countries. For example, in the 1990s, the official homicide rates stood at an average of 16 deaths per every 100,000 (Serbin and Ferreyra, 2000). According to Rodgers (2004) the homicide rates changed little and remained at an average of 15 deaths per 100,000 between 1990 and 2003. This compares to almost three

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<sup>14</sup> Web accessed on June 18, 2008 from: <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Nicaragua>

<sup>15</sup> Web accessed on June 18, 2008 from:  
[http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_NIC.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_NIC.html)

times as many annual deaths in Honduras. Another study by PAHO-OPS (2005) stated that by 2002, the homicide rates for Nicaragua were 12.3 per 100,000 (in Cohen and Rubio, 2007). In comparison, a report by the Honduran National Police and ECLAC (2007) showed 55.89 deaths per 100,000 habitants in 2002. This represents a difference of 43.59 deaths per 100,000 habitants only for 2002.

According to Rocha (2006), Nicaragua is not yet home to MS-13 and M-18 gang franchises. This is not to say that Nicaragua lacks the presence of youth gangs, which more commonly known as *pandillas* (Rocha, 2006; also see Rodgers, 2002; USAID, 2006). However, these are in general fragmented local formations, less permeable to foreign influence and not tied to transnational groups. According to Rodgers (2002), these Nicaraguan *pandillas* generally

...consist of a variable sized group of overwhelmingly male youths aged between 7 and 25 years, who engage in illicit and violent behaviour- although not all gang activities are either illicit or violent- and have a particular dynamic. Most notably, *pandillas* are territorial and tend to be associated with a particular urban neighborhood (2002, p.g. 5).

According to USAID's gang assessment in Nicaragua (2006), the country's problem significantly differs from neighbouring Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. During the 1990s, *pandillas* in Nicaragua seemed to be more motivated by the protection of their neighbourhoods and engaged in petty crime such as theft, mugging, pick pocketing, shoplifting, etc.,. However, by the early 2000, these *pandillas* were increasingly involved in drug trafficking, more interested in the individual accumulation of wealth and status and less concerned with the protection of their neighbourhoods. The same study stated that gang activity in Nicaragua had decreased over the years. In 1999, an estimated 110 *pandillas* with approximately 8,500 members could be found in Managua, the capital. However, by 2005, the police registered only 108 gangs with

2,201 members. Nicaraguan *pandillas* are so different from their counterparts in Honduras and El Salvador, that Rodgers (2005) argues that under certain conditions they may be viewed not as destructive elements of society, but as socially constructive forms of “social sovereignty” that provide localized systems of order in areas that have been neglected by the state.

Nicaraguan government policies responded to gang problems in a more of a preventive nature, rather than by simple repression. According to Bellanger (2006), the integral and less repressive focus of the National Police against Nicaragua’s gangs avoided the violence its neighbours’ policies resulted in. For instance, Rocha (2006) argues that Nicaraguan police processes dub their operations against youth gangs with names linked to public holidays- i.e. The ‘Bethlehem Plan’ at Christmas, or the ‘Beach Plan’ in Easter week, in contrast to the repressive labels that Honduran, Guatemalan and Salvadorian police have: ‘Broom Plan’, ‘Zero Tolerance Plan’, ‘Hard Hand Plan’ or even ‘Super Hard Hand Plan’.

Nicaraguan legislation seems to favour the protection of youths. According to Rocha and Bellanger (2004), Nicaragua has been one of the countries that, in recent years, has vigorously moved towards the design and implementation of policies for its youth. For example, in May of 1998, Nicaragua implemented the *Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia*, or Code for Childhood and Youth, which promoted a legal framework for people younger than eighteen years. In June 2001, the National Assembly passed a law known as *Ley de Promoción del Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud*, or Law for the Integral Promotion of Youth, which seeks to encourage strategies for the development of youth while fully enforcing their fundamental rights.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***ELEMENTS OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: DATA PRESENTATION***

It is manifest that youth gang dynamics, as well as the policies made to address them, differ significantly in Nicaragua from those of neighbouring Honduras. The Mara phenomenon, especially Ms-13 or M-18, have not yet extended their operations into Nicaragua in spite of their expansionist tendencies. Seeing that both countries share similar socioeconomic conditions as well as geographic proximity, we must pose the question, *why is there such a stark difference in the hosting of mara activity between Honduras and Nicaragua?*

I have identified four factors that, in my judgement, contribute significantly to the differences in Mara presence between Honduras and Nicaragua. The objective of this chapter is to present the reader with empirical data for each factor and country. This will be followed by my interpretation of the data, to answer the problematic presented in this thesis.

#### **Factor One: Migration and Deportation Patterns**

Migration flows have been trademarks of this contemporary era of globalization. With a growing gap in social and human development within less developed societies, as well as the increasing incapacity to access basic needs, it is no surprise that individuals around the world migrate to more developed countries, searching for better opportunities that will provide a better quality of life. The case is no different for Central Americans. In recent decades, Central American migration, for the most part, has flowed to the United States. Large amounts of undocumented migrants have characterized these flows,

making it an important security issue for the international agenda, especially for the U.S. and its war on terror.

At the end of the 1970s, the economic, social and political crisis of Central America, paved a new path for international migration trends in the region. Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, saw increased the movement of people out of their territories because of their internal conflicts during the 1980s. According to Alvarado (2006), Belize and Costa Rica became the biggest receptors of these populations, offering refugee to those fleeing conflict. Other countries, like Honduras and Mexico, became transit territories:

In the decade of the 1980s, due to the armed conflict, more than one million of Central Americans migrated to other regional countries, including Belize and Mexico. At least one million people were internally displaced; and approximately fourteen percent of the population in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, abandoned their communities, mobilizing to other countries (...) El Salvador had the largest amount of internal displacements, representing at least 7 percent (400,000 people), expelling approximately 15 percent of their total population (Alvarado, 2006, p. 14).

**Table.5 1 Migration in the Central American Region between 1980-1989 (thousands)**

Receiver Country	For Economic Reasons	Refugees Acknowledged	Refugees not Acknowledged	Internally Displaced	Repatriated	Total
Belize	7	4	18			29
Costa Rica	170	40	80			290
El Salvador		*	4	400	13	417
Guatemala	40	3	180	188	4	415
Honduras		37	200	22		259
Mexico		42	200			242
Nicaragua		7	9	355	34	405
<b>Total</b>		<b>217</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>691</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>2,057</b>

\* Less than 500 people

Adapted from: Del Cid, in Casillas, 1992, p. 38.

Towards the end of the 1980s, when the armed conflict began to decrease in the region, a shift in migration trends occurred. By the 1990s, migration flows were no longer triggered by political displacement or wars, rather they began to increase due to the inequality and poverty caused in part by the new neoliberal agenda. Thus, the United States became idealized as the land of opportunities and of the good life. It is estimated that at least 20 million people from Latin America are expatriates, residing mostly in the United States, Canada and Spain (INE, 2006). In the last thirty years, the United States experienced an increase in Latin American immigrants from 1.7 million to 14.4 million, and in the last 10 years, it has increased by 6.1 million people (Ibid). According to the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) (2003), from January 1990 until January 2000, the amount of illegal migrants from different Central American regions increased from 3.5 million to 7 million people.

**Table.5 2 Estimated Population of Non-Authorized Residents in the U.S. – 1990 and 2000 (thousands)**

Country of Origin*	Estimated Population		Growth 1990-2000
	2000	1990	
Mexico	4,808	2,040	2,768
El Salvador	189	298	-109
Guatemala	144	118	26
Colombia	141	51	91
Honduras	138	42	96

\* Five selected countries with the most illegal immigrants living in the United States.  
Adapted from: USCIS, 2003, p. 9<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Web accessed on July 15, 2008, from:  
[http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/III\\_Report\\_1211.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/III_Report_1211.pdf)



Although, the United States continues to receive a major influx of migrants from Central America, the region also incurs in intraregional migration. This type of migration is less significant than international migrations just described. However, according to Alvarado (2006) and SIEMCA (2003), in the case of Central America, Costa Rica has been the historical recipient for Nicaraguan migrants, which is an important factor in this thesis. Hondurans, on the other hand, tend to migrate to the United States. My basic assumption is that Honduras has a greater Mara presence in part because its citizens tend to migrate to the United States, where Mara culture is strong. Through deportation, this gang culture was transmitted back to Honduras, creating a type of transnational link between gangs in the U.S. and those created in the Central American countries. Conversely, the majority of Nicaraguans migrate to Costa Rica, which lacks the Mara culture and therefore no transculturization occurs (Rocha, 2006). The next section shall provide the data to support this assumption, presenting migration and deportation patterns for Honduras and Nicaragua of the last 20 years.

### *Honduran Migration*

The main reasons driving Honduran migration have mostly been because of economic and political upheavals, and natural disasters. During the 1980s, the military repression in the country and the region, forced the exit of many Hondurans. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch not only devastated the most productive areas in the country, but it displaced thousands of people who joined the urban areas in the main cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. During the 1990s, the economic crisis which included a severe devaluation of the currency, unemployment, lack of an agrarian reform, increase in oil prices and hence the increase in the price of basic staples, also forced many

Hondurans to migrate in search for better opportunities (*Foro Nacional para las Migraciones en Honduras* (FONAMIH), 2003).

In an intra-regional context, the beginning of the 1990s saw 40.5 percent of Honduran migrants moving to Nicaragua, while 37 percent went to El Salvador. However, the majority tended to migrate extra-regionally, notably the U.S. The following table shows an approximation of Honduran citizens living in other countries for the decade of 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, demonstrating that the United States received most of these migrants.

**Table.5 1 Hondurans Residing in Other Countries: 1970, 1980, 1990**

Residing Country	Migrants			Male Population			Growth	
	1970	1980	1990	1970	1980	1990	1970-1980	1980-1990
Costa Rica	996	1,572		95	84		4.08	
Nicaragua	6,919		9,473			77		
El Salvador	14,290		8,666	69	61	63		
Guatemala	6,231	5,326	4,634	95		95	-1.96	-1.07
Panama		464	623		104	92		2.93
Belize		1,576	2,337		103	121		3.54
Bolivia		204	189		113	89		-0.69
Chile	122	179	220	122	139	96	3.16	2.06
Brazil	83	207	300		188	165	8.55	3.34
Venezuela	165	332	429	63	77	83	6.72	2.83
Mexico	941	1,500	1,994	117	104	92	4.58	2.83
<b>United States</b>	<b>27,978</b>	<b>39,154</b>	<b>108,923</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>3.33</b>	<b>9.42</b>

Adapted from: Statistical Information System on Migrations in Central America (SIEMCA), 2002, p. 178.

*Sistema de Información Estadística sobre las Migraciones en Centroamérica*

(Systems of Statistic Information on Migration in Central America) (SIEMCA) (2003)

estimated that for Honduras, 2.2 percent of the population immigrated to the United States in 1990, increasing to 4.4 percent by 2000. As previously discussed, Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the global South with high levels of inequality and

unemployment. This situation has resulted in the increased migration to the United States, where families have become exceedingly dependent on the remittances sent by members working abroad (Schmalzbauer, 2004). Honduran migration towards the U.S. is mostly illegal, and those Hondurans are part of the 1 million undocumented migrants who annually join the 10 million already working in the United States illegally (*The Economist*, 2005).

As seen in Table 4.2, during the decade of 1990s, Honduras was among the five countries with the largest amount of illegal migrants living in the United States. By the turn of the millennium, Honduras still remains in the top ten list of countries of origin of illegal migrants. A 2006 study on unauthorized immigrants residing in the U.S. estimated that approximately 7.6 million of the total 10.5 million of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States during 2005 were from North America, including Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America (Department of Homeland Security, 2006). These top ten countries accounted for 79 percent of the illegal immigrant population in 2005:

**Table.5 4 Country of Origin of Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the U.S., 2005 (thousands)**

Country of Origin	Estimated Population in January 2005		Percent of Total		Percent Change	Average Annual Change
	2005	2000	2005	2000	2000 to 2005	2000 to 2005
All Countries	10,500	8,460	100	100	24	408
Mexico	5,970	4,680	57	55	28	258
El Salvador	470	430	4	5	9	8
Guatemala	370	290	4	3	28	16
India	280	120	3	1	133	32
China	230	190	2	2	21	8
Korea	210	180	2	2	17	6
Phillipines	210	200	2	2	5	2
<b>Honduras</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>
Brazil	170	100	2	1	70	14
Vietnam	160	160	2	2	-	-
Other Countries	2,250	1,950	21	23	15	60

- Figure rounds to 0.0

Adapted from: Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006, p. 7.

By 2005, Honduras figured with approximately 180,000 illegal migrants residing in the United States. The same study illustrated the states in which illegal immigrants tended to concentrate in. By 2005, an estimated 6.1 million of the 10.5 million unauthorized residents lived in the five states of California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois (Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 2006). Furthermore according to the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau, Hondurans tend to concentrate in these states and/or cities as well:

**Table.5 5 Major U.S. Cities/States hosting Honduran Migrants (2004)**

<b>State of Residency</b>	<b>Country of Origin: Honduras</b>
United States	407,994
Florida	71,481
Miami	<b>44,065</b>
California	78,955
Los Angeles	<b>56,555</b>
Texas	40,136
New York	59,896

Adapted from: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, in Rocha, 2006.

The 2007 report on the unauthorized immigrant population by the U.S.

Department of Homeland Security shows a significant increase in the number of Hondurans residing illegally in the United States for 2006. The Honduran population increased approximately 55 percent in one year, representing almost 100,000 new illegal residents (DHS, 2007). Thus, Honduras managed to be, once again, one of the top five countries with the largest amount of illegal migrants to the United States. By this year, an estimated 8.4 million of the total 11.6 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in 2006 were from Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America (Ibid). It is worth noting that Guatemala and El Salvador are also included in the top five countries with large amounts of illegal migrants in the U.S. from the 1990s up to 2006, and they too, deal with a strong Mara presence in their countries.

**Table.5 6 Country of Origin of Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the U.S., 2006 (thousands)**

Country of Origin	Estimated Population in January 2006		Percent of Total		Percent Change	Average Annual Change
	2006	2000	2006	2000	2000 to 2006	2000 to 2006
All Countries	11,550	8,460	100	100	37	515
Mexico	6,570	4,680	57	55	40	315
El Salvador	510	430	4	5	19	13.333
Guatemala	430	290	4	3	48	23.333
Philippines	280	200	2	2	40	13.333
<b>Honduras</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>20</b>
India	270	120	2	1	125	25
Korea	250	180	2	2	39	11.667
Brazil	210	100	2	1	110	18.233
China	190	190	2	2	-	-
Vietnam	160	160	1	2	-	-
All Countries	2,410	1,950	21	23	24	76.667

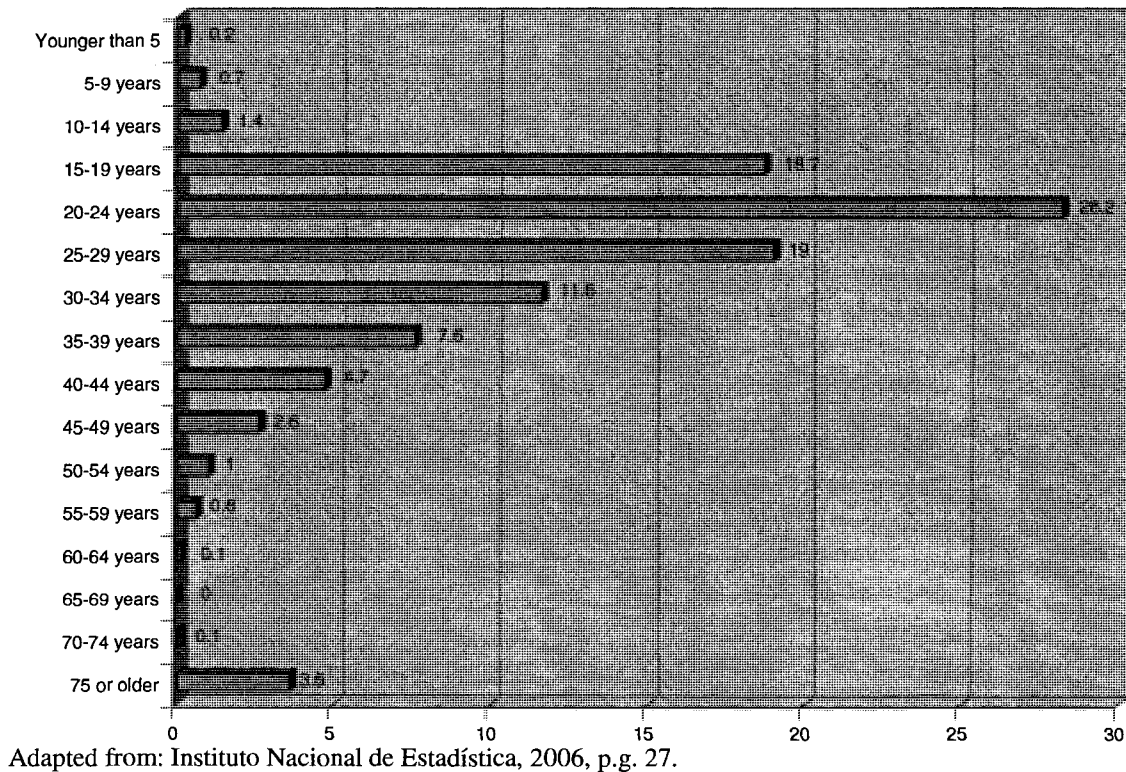
- Figure rounds to 0.0

Adapted from: Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics, 2007, p. 4.

The sources of the previous tables are U.S. government offices and international organizations. However, the Honduran government, through the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE)* (Institute of National Statistics) and FONAMIH (National Forum for the Migrations in Honduras), has also produced reports on the migration patterns of its citizens. The Honduran Migration State Report published by FONAMIH (2007), estimated that by 2006, some 185,000 Honduran nationals left for North America, constituting an average of 15, 416 per month, 3,557 per week, and 508 per day. They estimate that for every 100 Hondurans who leave the country to migrate into the United States, only 7 percent make it through legal channels, 17 percent do it in an illegal fashion, 75 percent are deported from Mexico and the United States, while 1 percent stays along the way (Ibid).

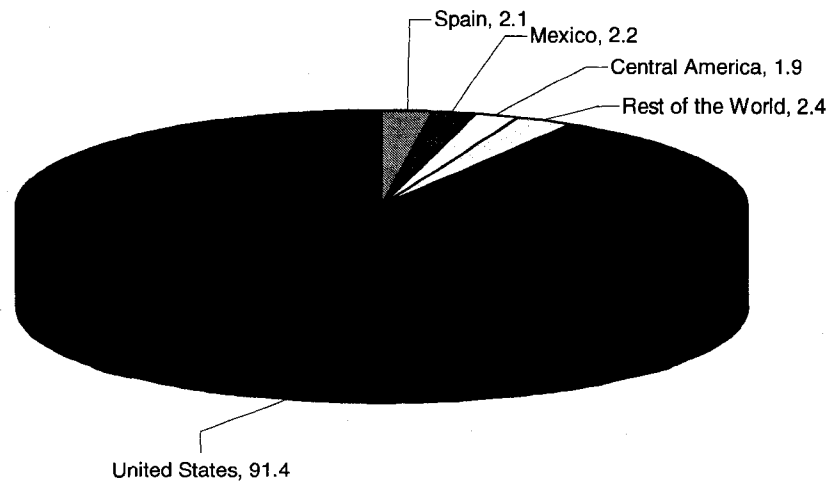
According to a study carried out by INE (2006), the majority of the Honduran migrating population is male with an average age range of 15 to 34 years old:

**Figure 5. 1 Average Age of Honduran Migrating Population**



From a Honduran perspective, the same study by INE shows that 91.4 percent of the total migrating population resided in the United States, while the other 8.6 percent was distributed among other countries such as Spain and Mexico. With over 80,000 Hondurans trying to reach the United States annually, it is undoubtedly clear that Hondurans, for the past 20 years, have mobilized mainly to the United States (Sladkova, 2007).

**Figure 5. 2 Countries of Residence of the International Honduran Migrant Population**



Adapted from: *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, 2006, p.g. 25.

In the case of Nicaragua, migration patterns differ significantly from those of Honduras. As mentioned before, it appears that the majority of Nicaraguan nationals prefer to migrate to Costa Rica, rather than to the U.S. Although there are Nicaraguans residing in the U.S., it is not to the same extent that Hondurans do.

#### *Nicaraguan Migration*

Nicaragua, like many other Latin American countries, has a long history of bipolar migration. Nicaragua is the only Central American country that has Costa Rica as its primary destination, with the United States coming in second. According to Vargas (2005), from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the end of the 1970s Costa Rica was the main destination for Nicaraguan migrants. This changed during the 1980s with the Contra war where there was an increase in migration to the United States. However, once the armed



conflicts ceased, Nicaraguans began flowing back to Costa Rica like never before, as the reasons behind migration were no longer political, but socioeconomic.

According to Mahler and Ugrina (2006), Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica has historical roots in agricultural labour. Many Nicaraguans have migrated seasonally to Costa Rica to work in the banana, coffee and other export-commodity industries. Generally, Nicaraguans have migrated to Costa Rica because of greater employment opportunities, higher wages, and better social benefits. However, current migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica is much more urban and diverse:

Although a third of male Nicaraguans continue to work in the agricultural sector, that percentage has declined while urban occupations in construction, manufacturing, and informal retail have risen to constitute 48 percent of their employment (...) Projections suggest that Nicaraguan migration will account for one-quarter to one-half of Costa Rica's population increase. (Mahler and Ugrina, 2006)<sup>17</sup>.

This has undoubtedly strained relations between both countries. Border disputes as well as growing anti-Nicaraguan sentiment has had consequences for Nicaraguan migration. The Costa Rican government, throughout the years, has increased its punitive immigration laws, raising penalties for smugglers, and facilitating deportations of undocumented immigrants.

The *Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería* (2008) (General Office for External Migration), which is the Nicaraguan Office of Migration, published for 2008 the national migrant traffic from 1984 to 2005, registered the largest movements to Costa Rica and the United States:

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<sup>17</sup> Web access on July 17, 2008 from: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?id=386>

**Table.5 7 Migratory Traffic for Nicaraguan Nationals: Costa Rica and United States, 1984-February 2006**

Year	Total per Year (including movement in other countries)	Costa Rica		United States	
		Incoming	Outgoing	Incoming	Outgoing
<b>Total for Country</b>	<b>13,643,300</b>	<b>4,739,189</b>		<b>2,822,041</b>	
1984	233,008	39,037	39,998	20,080	20,381
1985	227,888	25,302	26,423	12,383	13,268
1986	190,310	21,781	23,520	12,887	16,016
1987	189,352	19,969	23,055	14,651	18,190
1988	238,447	23,466	25,340	16,008	19,863
1989	274,504	29,507	28,786	14,161	14,616
1990	355,345	40,807	39,891	38,113	34,523
1991	384,568	53,677	45,754	64,830	60,852
1992	363,019	55,448	51,606	64,107	65,588
1993	444,094	79,791	71,728	68,091	75,981
1994	511,159	108,901	101,636	68,341	69,898
1995	520,766	122,668	98,681	67,819	66,468
1996	574,184	138,374	114,636	64,321	64,766
1997	668,755	156,241	133,655	68,706	69,273
1998	847,495	211,598	178,134	71,512	75,779
1999	911,682	200,182	160,332	83,223	86,347
2000	941,976	174,737	156,430	93,148	103,002
2001	924,825	151,528	161,259	99,284	101,109
2002	949,212	135,001	164,685	103,135	103,102
2003	1,003,818	149,319	175,079	113,135	111,350
2004	1,280,736	204,523	222,608	106,171	111,896
2005	1,347,565	216,574	239,169	108,856	107,918
Feb-06	260,592	36,674	61,679	17,858	21,035

Adapted from: *Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería*, 2008<sup>18</sup>.

Evidently, for the past 20 years, Nicaraguan migratory movements have been greater to Costa Rica than to the United States. Still, according to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services (2003), by 1990 approximately 50,000 unauthorized Nicaraguans resided in the United States. By the year 2000, the number went down to

<sup>18</sup> Web accessed on July 17, 2008 from: <http://www.migracion.gob.ni/eventos.php?OP=3&ID=8>

21,000. In contrast, Honduras, by 1990 had 42,000 unauthorized residents, but by the year 2000 the number increased to 138,000.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2004) showed that by 2004, the main states where Nicaraguans lived were Florida and California:

**Table.5 8 Major U.S. Cities/States hosting Nicaraguan Migrants (2004)**

<b>State of Residency</b>	<b>Country of Origin: Nicaragua</b>
United States	248,725
Florida	93,646
<b>Miami</b>	<b>79,896</b>
California	93,600
<b>Los Angeles</b>	<b>29,910</b>
Texas	7,591
New York	5,760

Adapted from: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, in Rocha, 2006.

With exception of the decade of the 1980s and 1990s, it is apparent that Honduran presence in the United States has been far greater than the Nicaraguan one:

**Table.5 9 Foreign Born Population from Central America in the U.S., 1970-2004**

<b>Country</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004*</b>
Belize	8,860	14,436	29,957	40,150	46,517
Costa Rica	16,691	29,639	43,530	71,870	120,316
El Salvador	15,717	94,447	465,433	817,335	1,201,002
Guatemala	17,356	63,073	225,739	480,665	698,745
<b>Honduras</b>	<b>19,118</b>	<b>39,154</b>	<b>108,923</b>	<b>282,850</b>	<b>407,994</b>
<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>16,125</b>	<b>44,166</b>	<b>168,659</b>	<b>220,335</b>	<b>248,735</b>
Panama	20,046	60,740	85,737	105,175	113,053
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>113,913</b>	<b>345,655</b>	<b>1,127,978</b>	<b>2,018,380</b>	<b>2,836,362</b>

Adapted from: U.S. Census Bureau 2000, \* American Community Survey, in Mahler and Ugrina, 2006.

## *Deportation Trends*

Due to the fact that the bulk of Central American migration of recent years is mostly illegal, deportation becomes a very important issue for the discussion of my thesis.

Deportation refers to the procedures by which a foreign person is removed or expelled from a country. Generally, these procedures include the decision of a competent authority with respect to the nationality of an individual and his right to obtain a legal status or a refugee status in the country where he finds himself. (*Red Regional de Organizaciones Civiles para las Migraciones*, RROCM, in FONAMIH, 2007, p.g. 41).

In recent years, U.S. immigration laws have become restrictive, if not draconian. In the case of Honduras, deportations from the United States can be traced back to the early 1990s. Nicaragua has also experienced deportation, but to a much lesser extent than its neighbouring country. The differences between Nicaragua and Honduras are manifest. The Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service showed that by 1992, approximately 9,497 Hondurans were deported, versus the 1,585 Nicaraguans:

**Table.5 10 Hondurans and Nicaraguans Deported and Naturalized from 1992-2002**

<b>Legal Action</b>	<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>Honduras</b>
Deported from 1992-1996	1,585	9,497
Naturalized from 1992-1996	19,586	15,606
Deported from 1998-2002	5,026	63,639
Naturalized from 1998-2002	22,794	19,996

Adapted from: Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Rocha, 2006.

Moreover, the amount of Honduran deportees increased almost five-fold in less than ten years, whereas the level of naturalizations did not significantly increase during

the decade. Comparing the two countries, for the period of 1998-2002, the difference between Honduran and Nicaraguan deportees is 58, 613.

If we take a closer look at each country, we can observe individual patterns. According to data from the *Secretaría de Gobernación y Justicia*, the Honduran Department of Governance and Justice, from 1992 to 2003 the number of deportees from the United States registered was 41,019 (Flores, 2003). FONAMIH (2003/2007) presents a more detailed account of Honduran deportations for the last twenty years:

**Table.5 11 Hondurans Expelled from the U.S. 1992 -1999**

Year	#
1992	957
1993	1,118
1994	1,235
1995	1,860
1996	2,736
1997	3,922
1998	4,631
1999	4,105

Adapted from: FONAMIH, 2003.

**Table.5 12 Deported Hondurans from the U.S. via air: 2000-2008**

Year	Returned Adults		Returned Minors		Total Accumulated	Grand Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female		
2000	2,427	183			2,610	2,610
2001	3,629	274			3,903	6,513
2002	5,862	442			6,304	12,817
2003	6,520	448	112	25	7,105	19,922
2004	8,294	817	211	28	9,350	29,272
2005	16,276	2,179	424	62	18,941	48,213
2006	20,549	3,481	432	181	24,643	72,856
2007	25,639	3,287	368	54	29,348	102,204
Jan-08	1,300	228	14		1,542	103,746
Total	90,496	11,339	1,561	350	103,746	

Adapted from: FONAMIH, 2008<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Web accessed on July 16, 2008 from:  
<http://www.fonamih.org/Base%20de%20Datos/ESTADISTICA%202008.pdf>

For Nicaragua, the *Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería* published the official register of nationals deported, rejected and re-embarked for the period of 1996-2005, which clearly demonstrated that Costa Rica was the main country sending back Nicaraguan nationals:

**Table.5 1 Nicaraguans Re-embarked, Deported, and Rejected: 1996-2005**

Departing Country	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	TOTAL per Country
Germany	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Belize	0	0	0	0	2	2	8	3	9	20	44
Canada	6	18	4	6	1	3	5	1	8	5	57
Colombia	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Costa Rica	50,368	59,494	95,094	72,230	54,957	18,829	15,661	14,170	10,256	10,195	401,254
Cuba	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
El Salvador	0	3	1	0	3	0	0	1	1	1	10
Spain	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	4	5
United States	424	459	298	263	326	402	386	600	857	1,406	5,421
Finland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
France	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Great Britain	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3
Guatemala	0	21	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	27
Haiti	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Honduras	41	28	4	195	141	11	45	0	0	0	465
Italy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Mexico	3	6	0	0	0	0	0	2	24	25	60
Other Countries	20	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25
Panama	3	4	1	3	13	10	11	30	38	16	129
Puerto Rico	2	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	6
Switzerland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3
Total	50,868	60,040	95,408	72,697	55,444	19,258	16,117	14,810	11,196	11,682	407,520

Adapted from: *Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería*, 2008<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Web accessed on July 17, 2008 from: <http://www.migracion.gob.ni/eventos.php?OP=3&ID=8>

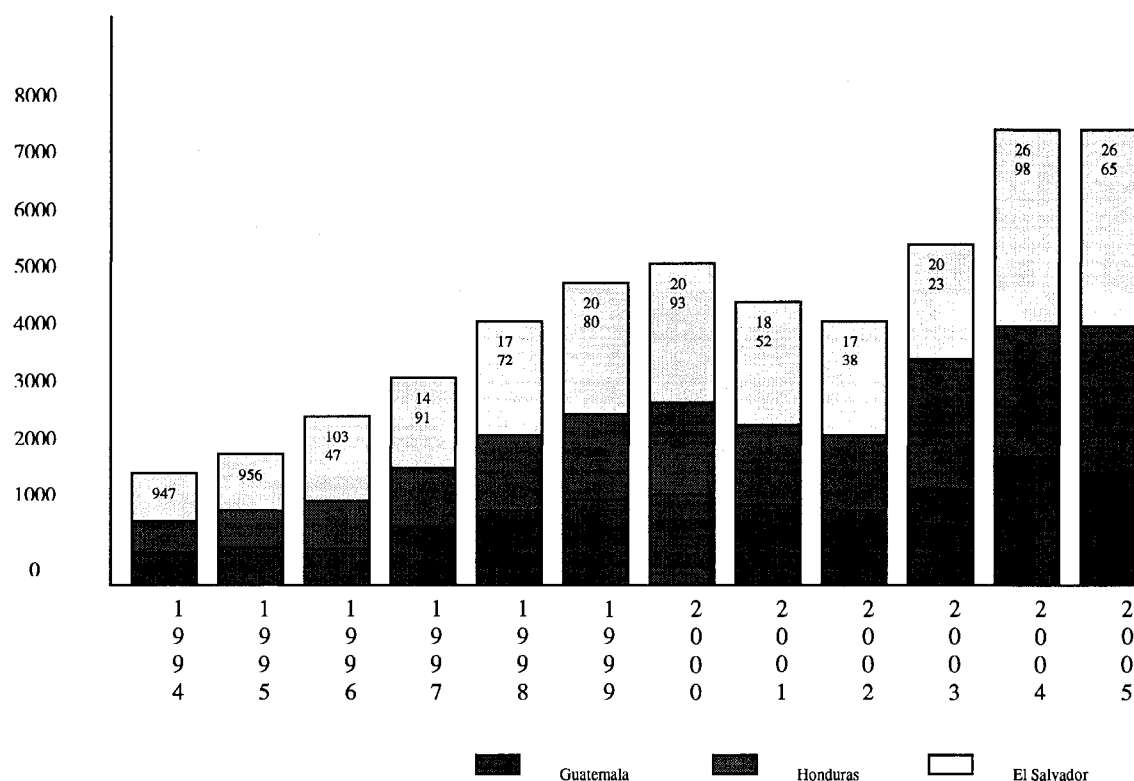
It is important to mention that in 1997, President Clinton signed the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA). This act provided various forms of immigration benefits and relief from deportation to certain Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans, as well as some Cubans and nationals of the former Soviet Union countries, mostly due to the political conflicts their countries suffered (Davy, 2006)<sup>21</sup>. The fact that Honduras was not part of the agreement could have contributed to the stark difference in the number of deportees for each country. However, it seems logical that if Honduras experienced more migration to the U.S. then its levels of deportation are bound to be greater to those of Nicaragua.

Deportation of criminals is also a relevant factor when addressing deportation. According to the UN (2007), between 1998 and 2005, the United States deported almost 46,000 convicts to Central America. These deportations took place in addition to those caught undocumented, therefore criminal deportation involve people who have been convicted of separate offences such as drug offences and violent crimes:

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<sup>21</sup> Web accessed on July 17, 2008 from: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=385#top>

**Figure 5. 1 Top Three Central American Destinations for U.S. Criminal Deportations 1994-2005**



Adapted from: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2006, in United Nations, 2007, p.41.

With this evidence in mind, the question still remains: what do migration and deportation patterns of Central American countries have to do with increased criminality in the region? Specifically, *is* there a link between the migrating trends of Honduras and Nicaragua and their respective abundance or lack of gang activity? According to Rocha (2006), migration leads to transculturization, which refers to the different phases of the transition from one culture to the next. This process implies a partial de-culturization and a neo-culturization; the former meaning a detachment from the original culture, and the



latter involving the creation of new cultural phenomena. However, with the new globalised dynamics and technological advances, plenty of cultural diffusions between North and Central America occur without physical mobilization. Cultural remittances, as termed by Rocha, include music, dress codes, and lifestyles that have a high impact on younger generations, leading to complex cultural mixtures of all types. This has been further accentuated with migration and its by product, deportation. In the cases of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, the local gangs were quickly absorbed by their two dominant U.S. born counter parts from MS-13 and M-18. This took place during the 1990s, which coincides with the deportation flows from the United States back to Central America.

According to Falla (2001), the open migration to the United States causes ideas and organizational elements of Maras to flow back into the Central American countries. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in its 2007 report on Central American crime, states that Maras “are fuelled by criminal deportee flows from the United States” (United Nations, 2007, p.49).

Other more sensationalist sources, such as the Salvadoran daily *El Diario de Hoy*, do not hesitate in establishing a direct link between deportation and violence:

The local authorities are convinced that many of the criminal deportees have contributed, to a great extent, to the increase in violence and the change in operations of local gangs, to the point of considering them as structures of organized crime. The extortions, assaults, and murders have incremented as many gang members formed in the streets and jailhouses of California, Arizona, Texas, and Washington, have arrived to the country to recreate that style of life (...) The biggest concern with national deportees with criminal backgrounds is that they come back with more sophisticated methods, organizational structures and contact with criminals in the United States. (*El Diario de Hoy*<sup>22</sup>, 2006).

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<sup>22</sup> Web accessed on July 16, 2008 from: <http://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/2006/10/16/nacional/nac6.asp>

The history of the U.S. origin of Maras and the data presented in this section suggest a relationship between migration tendencies and the existence of Maras for the Central American case. When comparing the data for both countries, the last twenty years Honduras reported higher migrant and deportation rates to and from the United States than Nicaragua. Furthermore, its citizens tend to be concentrated in Los Angeles, the U.S. city the Maras were established. In addition, Table 4.8 shows that those Nicaraguans who did reside in the United States tended to concentrate in Miami, not Los Angeles, therefore being less exposed to cultural elements such as Maras. It also appears that Nicaraguans have benefited more from naturalization processes in the U.S. than Hondurans, influencing the quantities of deportees.

It is important to note that Nicaraguans who migrate mostly to Costa Rica are less likely to experience transculturization, as the cultures are fairly similar. Thus, even if deportation does occur, there are no neo-cultural elements brought back to Nicaragua. However, this is not the case for Honduran migrants. Because North American culture distinctly differs from the Central American one, Hondurans face more transcultural issues, such as adaptive capacity, language, even religious changes, making them more vulnerable to adopting Mara traits. Consequently, when deportation occurs, the new acquired cultural elements, which can include criminal characteristics, are inherently transferred.

With this analysis, one can extrapolate that the different migration and deportation patterns of Honduras and Nicaragua in fact contribute to the striking difference of Mara presence in each country. However, other significant factors also contribute to this situation which are discussed below.

## **Factor Two: The Presence of Drugs and Availability of Firearms**

Illegal drugs and weapons, especially firearms, are two key areas of crime that are linked with gang activity around the world. When addressing the issue of drugs, the case is no different for Central American Maras. Furthermore, not only does Central America suffer from being the conduit for the most highly valued flow of drugs in the world, the region also experiences one of the world's highest murder rates. According to the most recent U.S. estimates, some 88 percent of the cocaine destined for the United States transits through the Central American corridor. Approximately 50 percent is smuggled along the Eastern Pacific in fishing boats, and the other 38 percent along the Western Caribbean coast of Central America (United Nations, 2007, p. 4). It is important to mention that Nicaragua and Honduras comprise the longest stretch of coastline along the Caribbean route.

It is no surprise that Maras get directly associated with such clandestine activities. Nevertheless, although there is literature that suggests that Maras engage in the trafficking of drugs and weapons, the issue here is to discover to what extent the presence of drugs and illegal firearms contribute to the existence or lack of Maras in Honduras and Nicaragua (Fernández and Ronquillo, 2006).

### *Drugs in Honduras*

Drug trafficking, which has a transnational nature and constitutes one of the most sophisticated expressions of organized crime, began gaining notoriety in Honduras during the 1970s. According to Orteza Abadie (2007), from the beginning, drug traffic in Honduras was closely linked to the military and high ranking government officials. However, during the 1980s, drug activity and arms trafficking increased with the

sponsorship of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States. Within the context of the Contra war, Colombian and Mexican drug cartels represented timely allies for the U.S.:

This alliance allowed the cartels to traffic, with minimum risk, drugs to Mexico, the United States, and Europe. In exchange, the drug lords would transport weapons and other services to the anticommunist troops located in Honduras, who would operate against the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua (Ortez Abadie, 2007, p.1).

The Kerry Report (1989), published after press accounts concerning links between the U.S. backed Contras and drug traffickers, stated that there was clear evidence that individuals who provided support to the Contras were involved in drug trafficking, and accordingly, the supply network of the Contras was used by drug cartels, and members of the Contras received financial and material assistance from drug lords.

However, towards the end of the 1980s with the end of the Contra war, U.S. repression against the drug cartels intensified. Despite increased efforts to fight narcotraffic, both from the local government and the United States, Honduras continues to be a transit country for illicit drugs coming from South America destined to the United States. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) (2001), maritime trafficking has traditionally been the primary method used by cocaine smugglers operating out of Honduras. Sea transit among the many coastal, island, and cay areas is relatively risk-free, with few police patrolling and scarce population.

The statistics provided for drug trafficking in Central America are based on seizures, which do not necessarily reflect the actual flow of drugs through the region. In addition, the countries that are believed to be home to drug trafficking are not necessarily the ones that make the largest seizures. However, a general picture of the condition of

drugs emerges from the information provided by government sources, as well as international agencies:

**Table.5 14 Drug Seizures in Honduras 1996-2000**

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Cocaine (kilograms)	3,324	2,213	1,843	714	1,139
Marijuana (kilograms)	541	788	1,500	1,600	1,138
Marijuana plants destroyed	2,309	337,813	286,364	103,649	589,027
Drug arrests	707	746	922	1,210	943

Adapted from: Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Department of Justice, 2001.

The Inter American Commission for the Control of Drug Abuse (CICAD) (2008) published the seizures for drugs in Honduras from 1998 up until 2006:

**Table.5 15 Drugs Seized in Honduras 1998 -2003**

	Measure	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Cannabis Leaf	kg	1,293	1,583	1,112	1,231	416	1,473
Cannabis Plants	unit	286,414	133,680	83,859	248,951	41,402	385,881
Cannabis Cigarettes	unit	-	1,027	-	1,556	1,127	5,105
Cannabis Seeds	kg	-	-	2	12	1	7
Cocaine (Total)	kg	1,804	709	1,215	396	149	5,628
Cocaine Salts	kg	1,804	709	79	396	70	5,628
Cocaine Base	kg	-	-	1,136	-	79	-
Crack (stones)	unit	603	662	1,031	821	708	862
Crack (dosis)	unit	-	-	-	-	-	752

Adapted from: *Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas (CICAD/OAS)*, 2004<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Web accessed on July 18, 2008, from:  
<http://www.cicad.oas.org/oid/Estadisticas/resumen2004/RED2004/honduras%202003.pdf>

**Table.5 16 Drugs Seizures in Honduras 2003 – 2006**

	Measure	2003	2004	2005	2006
Marijuana	Kg.	1,473	2.77	3.63	1,391.96
Total Cocaine and its by-products:	Kg.	5,628	2,633	55,359	2,995.47
Cocaine Salts	Kg.	5,628	N/A	N/A	N/A
Pasta based Cocaine	Kg.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cocaine Base	Kg.	N/A	2,633	55,359	2,995.47
Unpurified Cocaine (basuco)	Kg.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Heroin	Kg.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Crack (Rocks)	Kg.	862	312	486	1,165
Ecstasy	Kg.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Adapted from: *Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas (CICAD/OAS)*, 2008<sup>24</sup>.

As it can be observed, the confiscation of cocaine in Honduras increased following the new millennium. According to the Honduran daily *El Herald* (2008), it is estimated that around 60 to 100 tons of cocaine transit through Honduras annually. In 2007, approximately 6 tons of cocaine were confiscated by the Honduran police, some 3.5 kilograms of crack stones, 1.7 tons of marijuana, 1 kilogram of heroine, and 789 people have been detained suspected of illicit association with narcotraffic (*El Herald*, 2008, p.6).

Drug trafficking through countries results in the development of domestic consumer markets. Still, the UN (2007) estimated that for Guatemala, of the 150 tons of cocaine that pass through the country, only 10 percent remains in that country for local consumption, stating that cocaine use in the region appears to be remarkably low. This opinion is also shared by the World Drug Report (2007), stating that less than 200,000 people use cocaine in the seven countries of Central America every year, compared to a user population of 5.5 million in the U.S. According to the DEA (2001), no reliable

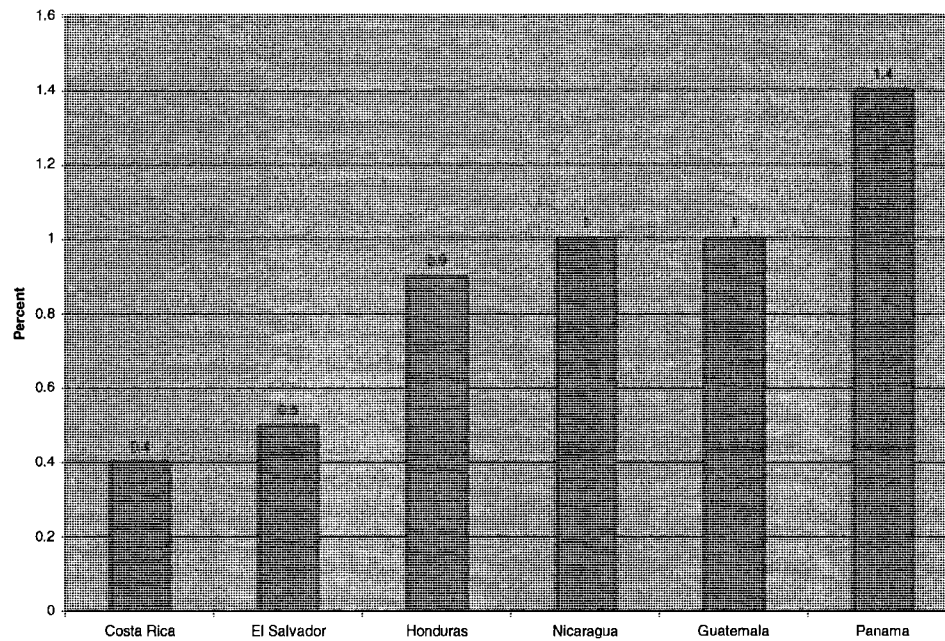
<sup>24</sup> Web accessed on July 18, 2008, from: <http://www.cicad.oas.org/apps/oidstat.aspx?lang=ESP>

estimates for domestic consumption are available for Honduras. However, among the Honduran population, alcohol and inhalants are the most common substance abused, while fewer persons abuse marijuana and cocaine:

Cocaine hydrochloride (HCl) and crack cocaine are found in the urban areas of the country and on the north coast. Crack cocaine use was limited prior to 1999, but increased rapidly during 1999 and 2000, especially in the capital Tegucigalpa and in northern areas such as San Pedro Sula, Puerto Cortes, La Ceiba, and the Islas de la Bahía. Cocaine HCl is abused by a relatively small group of middle- and upper- class youth, and is most readily available in Honduras' largest cities. Trafficking in cocaine for local consumption is controlled mostly by Honduran traffickers (Drug Enforcement Administration, 2001, p. 4-5).

According to the United Nations (2007), a sizeable cannabis production takes place in Central America, mostly for domestic use. However, they too agree that the levels of cannabis use in the region are remarkably low. In Central America, Guatemala leads the share of the population using cannabis each year. This same study shows that in Honduras, less than 1 percent of the population 15-64 years old use cocaine annually. Of this group, no more than half are chronic users (United Nations, 2007, p.62).

**Figure 5. 4 Estimated Share (%) of the Population who use Cocaine Annually**



Adapted from: United Nations, Crime and Development Report, 2007, p.g. 62.

### *Drugs in Nicaragua*

Drug trafficking has gradually increased in Nicaragua since 1987. Due to its geographic position in the middle of Central America, the country also constitutes a principal transit area between drug production zones in South America, and consumers in North America. According to Nicaragua's National Anti-drug Plan (2005), the increase in the crime of drug trafficking and subsequent crimes have had the following causes and conditions:

- Border zones and maritime seaboard with little police surveillance
  - High rates of unemployment and poverty
  - Interest of cartels to take over the territory as a transit zone.
  - Weak legal framework
  - Decrease in the technical measures, military control and detection, monitoring capacity, and the reduction of the Nicaraguan Army after the armed conflict
  - Little specialization in the police institutions of Central America
  - Economic profit that is generated through the smuggling
- (Consejo Nacional de Lucha Control las Drogas, 2005, p.15)



According to the DEA (2005), drug traffickers use Nicaragua's long Pacific and Caribbean coasts for refuelling and way stations en route from Colombia to the North. Traffickers in the area use speed boats, fishing boats and coastal freighters to move drugs towards Mexico and the U.S.

The Inter-American Commission for the Control of Drug Abuse (2004/2008), published statistics on the number of drugs seized from 1997 until 2006:

**Table.5 17 Drugs Seized in Nicaragua 1997-2002**

	Measure	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Cannabis Leaf	kg	285	613	754	737	560	631
Cannabis Plants	unit	24,239	833,943	13,569	83,070	116,003	144,697
Cannabis Seeds	kg	-	-	-	1	23	-
Cocaine Total	kg	2,790	4,749	833	961	2,718	2,207
Cocaine Salts	kg	2,790	4,749	833	961	2,718	2,207
Crack Rocks	unit	7,109	21,235	-	-	-	12,739
Crack Rocks	kg	-	-	-	2	1	1
Heroin	kg	2	-	2	2	8	53
Ectasy	unit	-	-	-	-	-	19,886

Adapted from: *Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas (CICAD/OAS)*, 2004<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Accessed on July 18, 2008 from:  
<http://www.cicad.oas.org/oid/Estadisticas/resumen2004/RED2004/nicaragua%202003.pdf>

**Table.5 18 Drugs Seized in Nicaragua 2003-2006**

	Measure	2003	2004	2005	2006
Marijuana	Kg.	382	N/A	529.57	543.27
Total Cocaine and its byproducts:	Kg.	1,184.00	0	7,311.61	9,902.61
Cocaine Packs	Kg.	N/A	N/A	7,311.61	9,902.61
Pasta based Cocaine	Kg.	1,184.00	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cocaine Base	Kg.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unpurified Cocaine (basuco)	Kg.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Heroin	Kg.	82	N/A	65.48	14.88
Crack (stones)	Kg.	12	N/A	4.25	2.55
Ectasy	Kg.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Adapted from: *Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas (CICAD/OAS)*, 2008<sup>26</sup>.

However, Nicaragua's National Police has also published, through the National Antidrug Plan (2005), the following chart of seizures:

**Table.5 19 Drugs Confiscated in Nicaragua 1991-2001**

Year	Marijuana (lbs)	Crack (Rocks)	Cocaine (Kilos)	Heroin (Kilos)
1991	1,502	-	762	-
1992	1,124	-	155	-
1993	519	-	96	-
1994	882	455	1,337	-
1995	765	1,069	1,512	-
1996	1,984	3,531	398	1
1997	628	7,109	2,790	2
1998	1,349	21,235	4,749	-
1999	2,085	10,568	687	2
2000	1,622	5,203	960	2
2001	1,236	8,040	2,717	8

Adapted from: National Police in *Consejo Nacional de Lucha Control las Drogas*, 2005, p.18

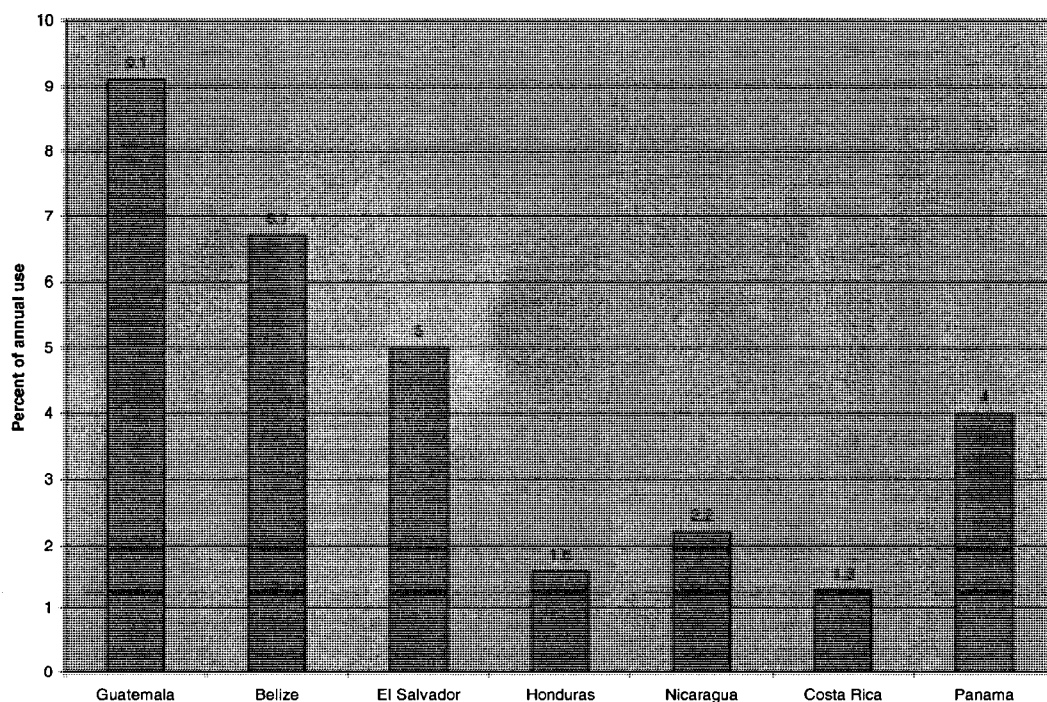
In terms of use, the Nicaraguan government states that drug use occurs mainly from the Caribbean coast to the Pacific, especially in Managua. The fact that Managua,

<sup>26</sup> Web accessed on July 18, 2008, from: <http://www.cicad.oas.org/apps/oidstat.aspx?lang=ESP>

the capital city of the country, remains to be the epicentre of drug transit in Nicaragua, is due to the fact that the seven internal routes that begin in the border areas of the country, all end in the city of Managua. Subsequently, the drugs are distributed to the centre and north of the country.

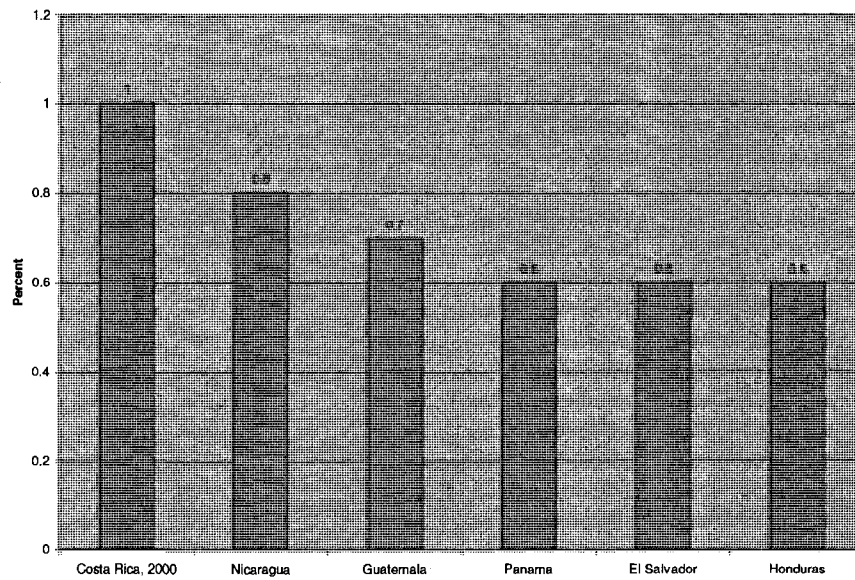
According to the National Anti-Drug Plan (2005), marijuana is the illegal drug of choice for high school students. Crack and cocaine are not used to the same extent, and the use of these narcotics normally starts at the age of 16 and 20 years of age. As seen in Figure 5.4, Nicaragua has a higher consumer rate of cocaine than Honduras. For Cannabis, the United Nations (2007) reported the share of Central American using the drug during 2006:

**Figure 5. 1 Share of Central American (%) using Cannabis in 2006**



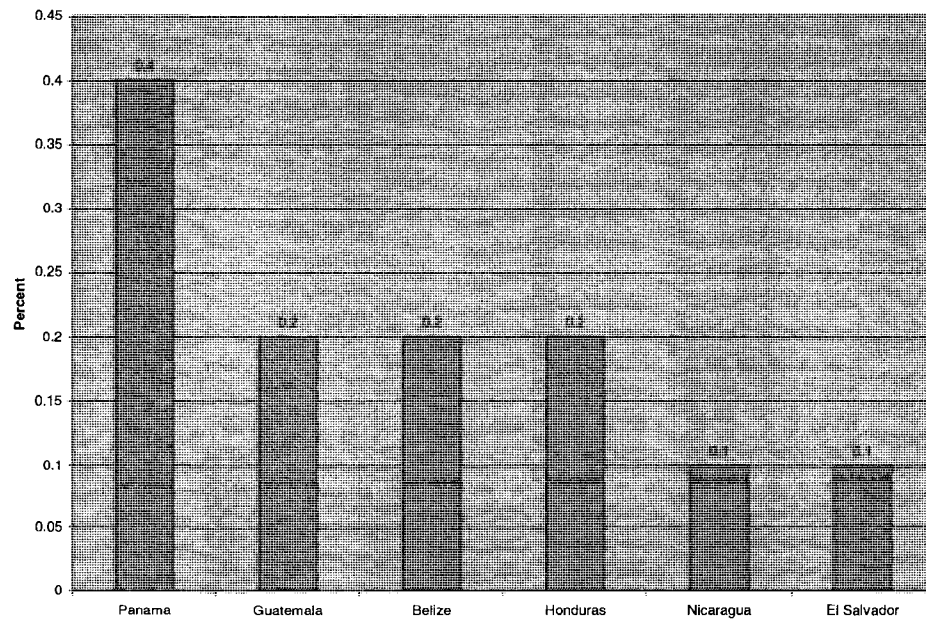
Adapted from: United Nations, 2007, p.51

**Figure 5. 6 Annual Prevalence of the use of Amphetamines as a Percentage of the Central American Population 15-64 years of age, 2003**



Adapted from: United Nations, Informe *Mundial sobre las Drogas*, 2006, p. 396.

**Figure 5. 7 Annual Prevalence of the use of Ecstasy as a Percentage of the Central American Population 15-64 years of age, 2003**



Adapted from: United Nations, Informe *Mundial sobre las Drogas*, 2006, p. 396.

Although little information is known on the approximate amounts of drugs flowing through the country annually, it is evident that Nicaragua's drugs situation regarding is not too different from that of Honduras.

### *Correlating Maras and Drugs*

Street gangs, especially Central American Maras, are universally associated with drug dealing as part of their clandestine economic activities, and drug consumption as part of their socializing ones. This may be the case for the Mara franchise in the U.S. According to the FBI, the National Drug Intelligence Centre (NDIC), and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE), these gangs are the first distributors of drugs in the streets of the major cities of the United States (Fernández and Ronquillo, 2006). Some of these gangs, including M-13 and M-18, have created links with Mexican cartels dedicated to the traffic of narcotics.

Much has been made of the possible connection between Central America's street gangs, or maras, and related groups resident in the USA. (...) Here, youth became involved in street gangs (such as the 18th Street gang) and formed some of their own (such as Mara Salvatrucha). These groups spread to Central America after large numbers of gang members were deported following criminal convictions under the broadened provisions of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Street gang members are key in drug distribution in the USA, and the presence of these youth in a drug transshipment zone raised the spectre of transnational drug networks arranged along gang lines (World Drug Report, 2007, p. 180).

Although Maras are involved in drug trafficking in the United States, this largely takes place at a street level. Most of the U.S. drug market is run by Mexican cartels. Yet, because the presence of *Mara Salvatrucha* and M-18 has increased in Central America, it is assumed that their involvement in the drug economy is similar to the one carried out by their U.S. peers. However, this might not be the case for Central American Maras.

Although USAID's (2006) assessment of Honduras states that as gangs have become more sophisticated because of increased involvement in the trafficking of drugs and access to weapons, while they also consume the products they sell, the lack of concrete data makes it hard to know what the exact relationship of Maras with narcotics is. The United Nations (2007) is sceptical about the connection made between Central American Maras and drug trafficking for two main reasons. First, Central America represents more of a transit zone than a potential consumer market. As previously discussed, the consumption rates in Central America, compared to North America, are remarkably low. The region does not represent a major lucrative business for sophisticated organized crime networks. Second, most of the narcoactivity occurs in isolated coastal areas of the country, and Maras tend to concentrate inland in the main cities. "The bulk of cocaine trafficking through the region occurs in large shipments controlled by well resourced drug trafficking organizations, generally dominated by Colombian and Mexican nationals" (United Nations, 2007, p. 63). Even if Maras were to be located on the coast, it is unclear what role they would play, given that it is unlikely for them to have advanced nautical skills.

The objective here is to evaluate the drug situation of Honduras and Nicaragua, analyzing whether it is different to the extent that it could explain the substantial differences of their mara hosting. The data appears to suggest that levels of drug smuggling are not drastically different in Honduras as in Nicaragua. Although seizures in Honduras appear to be higher, this could be attributed to different factors other than increased drug trafficking, such as more effective drug raids, increased police patrolling on the key areas of drug transit, even more efficient government strategies. However,

when taking a closer look at the drug consumption rates, it can be observed that Nicaragua has slightly higher rates than Honduras. Therefore, if the initial premise is to suggest that drug traffic and consumption in the population of a country are positively correlated to Mara presence in that country, then it can be inferred that for the case of Honduras and Nicaragua, this premise does not apply. Nicaragua, despite having similar levels of drug seizures and even higher rates of consumption, has still less of a Mara presence in its country than Honduras.

### *Availability of Firearms*

Drug trafficking through the region has been accompanied by illegal trafficking of arms left over from the region's civil wars. Central America is known for the easy availability of firearms and poor legislation for gun control. If the presence of drugs is not a major factor in determining the difference of Mara existence in Honduras and Nicaragua, could the availability of firearms be a more contributing factor?

According to the International Network on Small Arms (2008), there are an estimated 1.6 million guns in Central America, of which about 500,000 are legally registered. For the purposes of this research, I shall use the term 'small arms' and 'light weapons', whose definition according to the United Nations (2006)<sup>27</sup>, covers a wide range of weaponry, including commercial firearms and military weapons that can be used by an individual soldier or a member of a gang. The main focuses are military and

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<sup>27</sup> According to the United Nations (2006), small arms include revolvers and pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns. Light weapons include heavy machine guns, hand-held and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of less than 100mm caliber.

civilian firearms, however, home-made weapons and hand grenades are included in the discussion.

In Central America, the influx of firearms began in the decade of the 1980s, when the various armed forces and insurgent groups in the region began receiving military arsenals, mainly from the United States and the former Soviet Union. El Salvador and Honduras were the largest recipients of arms from the U.S. government in the 1980s and early 1990s in order to offer support to the forces fighting left-wing rebel movements in the region. In El Salvador, the government received most of the armament to fight the Farabundo Martí National Liberal Front (FMLN), and Honduras was the primary base of operations for the Nicaraguan resistance known as Contras (Godnick, Muggah, and Wasznick, 2002). The Sandinistas received military support mostly from the Soviet Union and Cuba.

**Table.5 1 Reported deliveries of selected arms to Central America under the US Foreign Military Sales Program in the fiscal years 1980–1993**

Country	M-1911 Pistol	9 mm Pistol	M-16A Rifle	M-203 Grenade Launcher	M-79 Grenade Launcher	M-67 Grenade	M-14 Grenade
Costa Rica	1,000	130	4,750	140	n/a	n/a	n/a
El Salvador	225	1,675	32,474	1,413	1,704	266,410	96
Honduras	1,116	n/a	8,607	651	18	22,668	1,139
Panama	100	n/a	n/a	57	n/a	6,000	n/a
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,441</b>	<b>1,805</b>	<b>45,831</b>	<b>2,261</b>	<b>1,722</b>	<b>295,078</b>	<b>1,235</b>

Adapted from: US Defense Security Assistance Agency in Godnick, Muggah, and Wasznick, 2002, p. 5.

After the conflicts ended, many of the surpluses of military firearms entered the illicit market, spreading throughout Central America. Today, the availability of weapons is due to more than just the remnants of the civil conflicts of the region. According to de



León (2006), the availability of firearms increases because of the arsenals built by organized crime, small transactions made at the street levels, and weak commercial control over the sales of firearms in the Central American region.

**Table.5 21 Legal firearms in Central America, 2000**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Legally registered Firearms</b>	<b>Licenses to Carry a Concealed weapon</b>
Costa Rica	43,241	53,857
El Salvador	170,000	143,126
Guatemala	147,851	125,982
<b>Honduras</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>27,500</b>
<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>52,390</b>	<b>44,089</b>
Panama	96,614	n/a
<b>Total</b>	<b>509,826</b>	<b>394,554</b>

Adapted from: Cruz and Beltran (2000) in Godnick, Muggah, and Wasznick, 2002, p. 4

**Table.5 22 Estimates of Registered Firearms in Central America, 2006**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Legally registered Firearms</b>	<b>Licenses to Carry a Concealed weapon</b>
Guatemala	253,514	34,200
<b>Honduras</b>	<b>151,003</b>	<b>151,003</b>
El Salvador	149,719	n/a
<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>90,133</b>	<b>83,035</b>
Costa Rica	148,000	43,241

Adapted from: IPEDADES in de León, 2006, p. 49

It is evident that the amount of registered weapons has increased considerably in less than ten years for most Central American countries. Estimates are also available of the number of illegal weapons flowing in the region for 2006:

**Table.5 1 Estimates of Illegal Firearms circulating in Central America, 2006**

Country	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Nicaragua	Costa Rica
Illegal Weapons	1,800,000	650,000	280,000	n/a	97,000

Adapted from: IPEDADES in de León, 2006, p. 50

The circulation of small arms in Central America is strongly correlated to drug trafficking. According to Wasznick (2000), the drug networks in the region are being used for the transit of weapons as well, sometimes being employed as payment for drugs.

According to Small Arms Survey (2007), in Honduras, the military is heavily involved in the legal transfer and distribution of small arms. The Ministry of Defense authorizes all small arms imports and grants licenses to importers. The Military Pension Institute, which is controlled by the military, has a monopoly on firearms retail commercialization in the country. On the illegal side, military have been involved in several high profile arms trafficking scandals. The National Congress estimates that approximately 400,000 to 500,000 illegal firearms are in circulation in Honduras (RCMP, 2006).

During the decade of the 1990s, social violence came to substitute the political violence that the region was experiencing. In Honduras, from 1988 to 2000 there has been a 500 percent increase in the number of crimes reported to the police (Castellanos, ND). In Honduras, by 2000, 78.2 percent of all homicides were committed with a firearm. By 2001 the figure had increased to 82 percent (Ibid). Honduras allows its citizens to legally bear arms, under the *Ley de Tenencia y Portación de Armas* (Law of Ownership and Bearing of Arms). The law requires that individuals fill out an application, submit two photos, and a criminal background report in order to get a license

for their weapon. Another law, the *Ley de Control de Armas y Municiones*, (Law of Arms and Munitions Control) approved by the Honduran Congress in 2000, stipulates that people within the national territory are allowed to carry weapons so long as they are authorized to do so by the law. This facilitates the availability and spread of weapons without major control and at an accessible price. However, Honduran law prohibits the use of certain weapons, such as automatic and semiautomatic revolvers and guns, rifles and shotguns, including the infamous AK-47. Yet, these firearms still find their way out to the illegal markets.

During the 1990s, Nicaragua was the first country in conflict to undergo a peace process that included serious disarmament efforts. Nearly 100,000 military firearms were destroyed, however, given the enormous distribution of weapons that occurred in the country, the impact it had on the overall circulation of weapons was minor. According to the Small Arms Survey (2007), Nicaragua's relatively lower statistics on the existence of firearms and violence cannot be trusted, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the Nicaraguan government's institutional capacity is the weakest of the Central American countries; therefore the incidence of violence and arms trafficking may be widely understated. Secondly, Nicaragua has experienced the re-emergence of armed groups in the northern and eastern part of the country, where there is a substantial lack of government and police presence.

Nicaragua has a great number of weapons and people who know how to use them. By 2000, Nicaragua had an estimate of 52,390 legal weapons, Costa Rica had fewer with 43,241, but Panama reported higher amounts with 96,614 (Rocha, 2006). In 2002, the

Nicaraguan Ministry of Government estimated that 140,000 firearms were in civilian hands, of which only 69,167 had been legalized.

If we count the “homemade” weapons – hammers added to metal tubes with the capacity to fire AK-47 rounds – the availability of firearms in Nicaragua increases. According to my own calculations during the field work for this study, there are at least three “homemade” pistols for every twenty houses in some Managua neighbourhoods. Nicaragua could also have both a low registry and a high distribution of weapons as the Sandinista government created a number of armed defense mechanisms that achieved mass recruitment during the Eighties in its desires to knock out the counterrevolution. (Rocha, 2006, p. 14).

According to the Nicaraguan daily *La Prensa* (2000), the type of weapon mostly owned by civilians is the revolver, with an estimated circulation of 16, 938. This is followed by 13,992 guns (short magazine), 12,449 rifles, and 8,441 shotguns. The *Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas* (IEEPP) (Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies) of Nicaragua published that the number of firearms in the hand of civilians was approximately 98,000 by May of 2005. The National Police has not established an ideal method to calculate the number of illegal weapons circulating in the country. However, by August of the same year, it was estimated that about 133,083 firearms were registered by civilians (IEEPP, ND)<sup>28</sup>. Nicaraguan law is relatively weak in regard to small arms control. This country also allows its citizens to bear arms; there is no specified limit on the number of weapons an individual may own and each license is valid for a three-year period. In addition, there are no quantitative limits on ammunition purchases.

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<sup>28</sup> Web accessed on July 24, 2008, from:  
[http://www.ieepp.org/download/armas/docs/Presentacion.Transferencia\\_Armas\\_Nicaragua.pdf](http://www.ieepp.org/download/armas/docs/Presentacion.Transferencia_Armas_Nicaragua.pdf)

### *Correlating Maras and Firearms*

It is no surprise that youth gangs in Central America have taken advantage of the easy access to firearms. Maras employ a variety of weapons in their criminal activities, and the most common ones used are grenades, shotguns, and revolvers. These they acquire in exchange for drugs, or by theft from private security guards or policemen (Wasznick, 2000). The abundance of arms combined with a weak economy, the lack of opportunities, and a slow, and sometimes inefficient, reintegration of deportees, has resulted in a society with a high level of citizen insecurity. Armed violence has increased in recent years, and in countries like Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, the blame is placed mostly on the Maras and their activities.

Some authors such as Saltsman and Welch (2008:9), state that the proliferation of firearms in the region has contributed to the growth of the Mara problem due to the fact that weapons are easily obtainable. According to *Walking with El Salvador* (ND), the ready availability of guns is an enabling factor for youth to join gangs. The argument is that with weapons, it is easier for them to obtain economic benefits, as well as reputation and status. Statements like these are common in the study of Maras. However, within the context of this analysis, the assumption that the existence of firearms, legal or illegal, is the cause for a greater Mara presence in countries like Honduras has to be questioned. The data suggests that overall the five Central American countries experience a high presence of firearms; some more than others. Although Honduras reports higher quantities of weapons than Nicaragua, the difference is not sufficient to hypothesize that this is a crucial factor in shaping the difference in Mara presence in Honduras and Nicaragua respectively. In addition, the legal availability of weapons appears to be

almost the same in Honduras as in Nicaragua. Nicaragua would have to have notably lower rates of weapons in order to establish a positive correlation between the existence of firearms and the presence of Maras. Panama and Costa Rica also report high levels of firearms, but they lack the presence of Maras. Thus, like drugs, firearms aggravate the Mara problem already existing in countries like Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, but they do not cause it. If that were the case, then countries like Panama, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, would experience higher Mara activity.

This is not to say that drugs and firearms are irrelevant to the problem of Maras in Central America. If anything, they intensify the already existing criminal issues of countries and should be taken into consideration when addressing these issues. Nevertheless, in the case of this specific research, the levels of activity for drugs and weapons reported for Nicaragua against Honduras are not remarkably different. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to suggest that they constitute a significant factor when it comes to identifying the reasons behind the stark difference of Mara presence in Honduras and Nicaragua.

### **Factor Three: Government Approaches to Youth Gangs**

Youth gangs are not a recent phenomenon in Central America. The existence of youth groups of rebellious youth goes back to the 1960s and 70s, although in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, their character has changed significantly in the 1990s turning into what we now refer to as Maras. The governmental responses to youth crime have varied over time and across the region. Some have focused on tougher law enforcement and repression, while assigning minimal resources to rehabilitation and

prevention, whereas others have focused on preventive strategies and reinsertion.

Notably in El Salvador, Honduras and to some extent the United States, draconian legislation has been enforced against Maras. According to Cruz (2005), despite sharing similar socioeconomic conditions to the rest of Central American countries, Nicaragua and Costa Rica offer different scenarios of violence and youth gang formations, while governments have historically reacted differently when dealing with these issues.

Therefore, it is possible that the manner in which the Honduran and Nicaraguan governments have addressed youth problems in the past has contributed to the differences in the gangs they host today?

#### *The Honduran Approach: Fighting Fire with Fire*

When it comes to youth gangs, the Honduran government has generally not focused on prevention, but has opted for methods and strategies that come close to repression and institutional violence. It has chronically lacked the preventive and educational programs that provide opportunities for its young population to obtain training and employment. In addition, its inefficient judicial system is not appropriate to deal with the thousands of youths that are mired in cycles of violence and drugs. In the case of Maras, the Honduran model has attempted to offer an immediate sensation of security, based on the repression of 'anti-socials', segregating, persecuting and stigmatizing the young deviated population that has resulted from the government's own neglect. However, even before Maras existed, the Honduran government has employed poor, evasive strategies that may have contributed potentially to the presence of Maras today. According to Andino Mencía (2006), the Honduran government has historically gone through three stages when dealing with youth gang problems: a.) indifferent stage

(1992-1995); b.) containment stage (1996-2001); and c.) repressive offensive stage (2002- present).

#### The Stage of Indifference (1992-1995)

Initially, Honduran gangs existed in a much contained, traditional fashion. In spite of creating some discomfort for the police and society, they did not cause social concern since their activities were very localized and controlled by small doses of repression. At this point, these gangs were not referred to as Maras. According to Equipo de Reflexión Investigación y Comunicación (ERIC) (2005), by 1984, youth gangs in Honduras would combine daily activities with the consumption of drugs and violent acts against society. However, the violence was random and rarely reported. During this period, the State was committed to the adaptation of its internal legislation to the recently ratified *Convención de los Derechos del Niño* (Convention of Children's Rights) (Andino Mencía, 2006:62). The public debate pivoted around the involvement of youth under age in crime, especially economic offences and a few homicides. However, the discussion seemed to focus more on questioning the efforts to approve the *Código de la Niñez y Adolescencia* (Code for Children and Adolescents), rather than focusing on prevention strategies. At the shadow of the state's indifference, youths at risk were already forming groups in the marginal slums. By 1994, the local news began reporting on violence associated with youth gangs and by 1995 gangs began to gain notoriety as a regional problem. At this point it is important to mention that the Honduran obligatory military service was eliminated in this same year, an issue that will be addressed below.



### The Containment Stage (1996-2001)

The second stage of the gang phenomenon in Honduras began manifesting itself in 1996 when the rates of violence in the country began creating social panic. According to local newspaper magazines (*Diario Tiempo*, 1996), delinquent activity carried out by youth gangs was increasing, especially in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The government strategy at this moment was to implement the newly approved Code of Children and Adolescents, which boarded the issues of offences carried out by youth under age and their respective rights. However it did not address the reasons behind the uprising of gangs.

The Honduran Institute for Children and Family, designed for another type of problematic (individual violators or small groups), was not prepared- nor did it seek to prepare itself- to deal with groups as aggressive as the new gangs, which by 1997 began to be addressed as 'Maras' (Andino Mencía, 2006, p.63)

By 1997, reports of violence had doubled. Local newspapers began reporting on the phenomenon and efforts were made to quantify the magnitude of the Mara problem (ERIC, 2005). During the first half of 1998 the country experienced a new wave of gang activity, which increasingly involved MS-13 and M-18. However, with Hurricane Mitch, the topic of gangs took a back seat. The strategy of the President at the time, Carlos Flores Facussé, between 1999 and 2001 was to administer the economic crisis and contain the phenomenon of Maras through limited police repression. He was careful not to antagonize Human Rights groups who demanded less repressive methods when dealing with troubled youth.

### The Repressive Offensive Stage (2002-Present)

This stage is characterized by the implementation of one of the most repressive campaigns against crime in the history of Honduras. The first attempt to implement a preventive law against Maras was introduced to Congress by aspiring Presidential candidate Rafael Pineda Ponce, naming it *Ley de Prevención y Rehabilitación de Pandillas* (Law of Prevention and Rehabilitation of Gangs). The project was approved in November 2001, during President Carlos Flores' term of office, but it never managed to be implemented. With the triumph of Ricardo Maduro as President of Honduras for the 2002-2006 period, the law was quickly shelved and the repressive policies set forth by Carlos Flores' term were further strengthened and employed.

Although Maras have had presence in Honduras for the past fifteen years, according to Carranza (2006), the present situation of gangs in this country is influenced by the policies of President Ricardo Maduro. While campaigning, he had promised to fiercely fight crime and insecurity, making it his winning ticket to power. Once in office, Maduro categorized all youth gangs into 'Maras' and called in the military and the police to initiate raids in many areas in Honduras, a campaign called "Zero Tolerance". This unleashed a violent war between the government and the gangs. In 2003, shortly after the raids began, the Honduran Congress modified article 332 of the Penal Code, passing the new 'Anti-gang Law', which made it illegal for any person to be a member of a gang (Elbert, 2004; USAID, 2006). Any charge of illicit association of a person with a gang meant up to six years in prison and up to twelve years for identified Mara leaders. This operation became known as *Mano Dura* or Firm Hand (WOLA, 2006; Arana, 2005; Mejía, 2007; Latin Trade, 2002; Walking with El Salvador, ND; Univision, 2005).

Similar approaches were subsequently implemented in El Salvador and Guatemala. According to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) (2006), under this operation, thousands of youths have been indiscriminately arrested for merely sporting tattoos or wearing baggy pants, which represented a violation of basic rights of these young Hondurans. The large number of detentions of young people led to the collapse of the already overcrowded penitentiary system. This was apparent on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April of 2003 in the penitentiary of El Porvenir, in northern Honduras, when one of the biggest jail massacres in the country's penal history took place. Sixty-six members of M-18 were killed and mutilated (*La Tribuna*, 2003; Moreno, 2006; Tejeda, 2003). In 2004, another incident occurred in a prison located in the city of San Pedro Sula, where a fire burned and killed one hundred and four members of *Mara Salvatrucha* (*La Tribuna*, 2004; *El Herald*, 2004; *Diario La Prensa*, 2004).

This caused Maras to retaliate against the government by launching a wave of violence: "Shortly after the introduction of the new anti-gang laws, they began killing and beheading young victims; at least a dozen decapitated bodies were found in Honduras and Guatemala, grisly symbols of the Maras' undiminished power" (Arana, 2005). Gangs went underground and lowered their public profile to avoid persecution, and as a result, they became more organized, making them harder to identify (WOLA, 2006). Many critics have come to argue that such repressive policies seem to have worsened the Mara problem in Honduras. Although it evidently did not resolve the problem, it was an attempt to make citizens feel more secure (For more on critiques see Mejia, 2007; Elbert, 2004; *Proceso Magazine*, 2003; Noticen, 2007; Hayden, 2004; Benitez, 2008).

According to Floresi, Mejía, Mejía, Moreno, and Serrano (2004) the legislation of the Honduran government has been almost non-existent regarding youth. The particular legislation addressing Maras and gangs has been a topic of discussion of only recent years. However, it conceals an inheritance of ignorance and denial of the real condition of youth in the country, particularly of the marginalized sectors. The study, *Maras y Pandillas de Centroamérica* (Maras and Gangs of Central America) (2005), is an extensive study of the country's underage population and their needs. It concluded:

The governing policies have been characterized for implementing superficial measures without touching the roots of the biggest problems in the country. For the case being, the State pretends to reduce crime without having a strategy against organized crime, which is becoming more complex in Honduras, and without addressing the problems of substance that make the levels of crime to rise in the country. The Honduran State, in this and other governments, has not implemented the measures that have a prevention nature oriented to attack the causes of the delinquency in the country. Repressive measures have been favored without addressing crucial aspects such as education, employment, and the alarming rates of Honduran poverty (Flores, et.al., in ERIC, IDIES, IUDOP, NITLAPAN, and DIRINPRO, 2004, p.g. 201)

The repressive measures that the Honduran government has implemented in order to address certain sectors of the juvenile population have had two major consequences in the country. Firstly, the law has stigmatized the organized youth of Maras and gangs as the cause of all crime in the country. Secondly, the policy of the state validates the practice of social cleansing that clandestine death squads have been carrying out over the years against children and youth in the marginal slums. From 1998 until 2003, *Casa Alianza de Honduras*, a humanitarian organization that helps children in the country, documented a total of 2,054 cases of homicides of children and young adults under the age of 23, most of them gone without any legal investigation (*Casa Alianza*, 2003).

Interestingly enough, this “Zero Tolerance” repressive approach to combat Maras was not originated in Honduras. According to Democracy Now! (2004), the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, and the Giuliani Group, formed to export the ideas of New York’s hard line “zero tolerance” campaign against street people to Latin America; were the two agencies responsible for advising the Honduran president to implement such strategies. The Manhattan Institute is an organization based in New York that is associated with “broken windows” policing and “zero tolerance” measures; Giuliani’s program to combat crime in New York, gained popularity among the middle class New Yorkers in the 1990’s, reducing approximately 65 percent of criminality in the city (Terra, 2003). It antagonized inner city residents where thousands of young people were arrested. These two agencies became consulting firms exporting ideas to countries like Honduras, without taking major consideration of the individual realities and situations of the Latin American context. According to Lovegrove, the implementation of this foreign strategy led to the “invisible genocide” and a type of social cleansing where thousands of youths were murdered, especially unemployed men who were marked as criminals by society who had no room for them,

So, although I am referring here to the particular case of Honduran human rights abuse, the various structures that facilitate them are international in scope. While Giuliani’s policy did not result in large-scale killings in New York, many accused it of criminalizing poverty and cleaning the streets to aid economic investment that never trickled down to the poor. Zero tolerance was implemented in New York and then Honduras to stop a violent yet vague threat, “delinquency,” just as the Patriot Act, which reconfigured the U.S. constitution toward creating a security state, was implemented in the name of stopping the vague enemy, “terrorism.” (Lovegrove in Honduras this Week, 2008<sup>29</sup>).

Honduras is not the only Latin American country that has received recommendations from Giuliani’s private consulting firm. Mexico also was recipient of

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<sup>29</sup> Web accessed on August 23, 2008 from: <http://quotha.net/node/51>

these recommendations. According to Terra (2003), Giuliani was hired in 2002 as an advisor to reduce the violence and crime the country was experiencing and paying a total of US \$4.3 million to his consulting firm for services rendered. It is evident that such strategies have soundly failed within the context of Latin America, further proving that imported strategies lack a comprehensive understanding of local realities and historical events, which in turn result in the waste of resources and the aggravation of the situation.

The children and youth of Honduras are groups in society who have not received much institutional attention. It is evident that the favoured policies for youth throughout the years have been repressive in this country. The next section shall look into the government approaches of Nicaragua to analyze whether this is a significant contributing factor to the central theme of research.

#### *The Nicaraguan Approach: Policies directed towards Youth*

Nicaragua's approach to youth gang has been very different from that of other countries in the region. The presence of gangs in many cities of the country has been detected since the 1990s. However, as mentioned previously, the nature of Nicaraguan *pandillas* is very different from that of the Maras found in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. They demonstrate much lower levels of aggression, organization and are more concerned with individual wealth than protecting territory. According to USAID's (2006) gang assessment in Nicaragua, the Sandinista movement has been attributed as being one of the main reasons for the low levels of criminality in the country. In addition, Nicaragua's National Police strategies seem to have chosen a strategy of prevention, rather than repression, when addressing youth violence.

### *The Sandinista Legacy*

Much of Nicaragua's safety and nature of gangs has been attributed to the influence the Sandinista government had on the social fabric of the country. After their triumph in July 1979, the Sandinistas encouraged a mixed economy and carried out national crusades against illiteracy and disease. According to Oettler (2007), the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), aimed at fostering a system of mass organizations with the Sandinista Youth, the Women's Organizations, *Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses 'Luisa Armanda Espinoza'* (AMNLAE), and the Worker's Association, *Central Sandinista de Trabajadores* (CST).

Aside from the efforts of the government to include youth in social programs, it is important to mention the militarization aspect of this period. Militarization became a key FSLN tool for mass mobilization, regimentation, and social control in the country. The size of the armed forces increased more than twelve-fold between 1979 and 1985, when it peaked around 75,000 active duty personnel (Bugajski, 1990).

Since the early days of *Sandinismo*, militarism has constituted a central organization ingredient. Commitment to the armed struggle has been perceived as an almost purifying experience for the FSLN because the discipline of the armed forces evidently facilitates class consciousness, political indoctrination, cadre training, and 'democratic centralism' (Bugajski, 1990, p.39-40)

The military draft law of 1983 lowered the age of recruitment to 17 and involved 2 years of military duty for any young man between 17 and 25. Evidently, during this period, tens of thousands of young male Nicaraguans passed through the armed forces and thereby experienced intensive political indoctrination. The army became the primary school of socialist politics.

The FSLN encouraged and fostered grassroots movements, the strongest one being the *Comités de Defensa Sandinista* (CDS), which become key when analyzing the legacy of the movement. These Sandinista Defence Committees were formed in all urban neighbourhoods and many rural areas as part of the regime's security and surveillance apparatus. In addition to civil defence functions, the CDS conducted intelligence gathering and counterintelligence work, administering food distribution, price controls, and job placements. About 15,000 CDS operated around the country, acting as the eyes and ears of the FSLN with a total membership of approximately 600,000 people by the mid-1980s (Bugajski, 1990:31). The mass organizations of women, youth, workers, children, and professionals served as the implementing elements of the Sandinista policy.

According to Rocha (2005), a significant factor was the transformation of the Sandinista police into the National Police. The existence of Sandinista and traditional networks within the National Police generated different strategies and actions towards youth violence, where the focus became the rehabilitation and prevention of youth violence, rather than the repression of them. The Nicaraguan government actually made efforts to reintegrate 'youth at risk' as a marker of difference indicating the democratic nature of Nicaraguan politics.

Most of these developments occurred during the first half decade of Sandinista rule, however by the second half, due mostly to the efforts directed in fighting the Contra war, most of the social and economic programs of the country began declining. With the electoral defeat in 1990, Sandinista civil society imploded and struggled against structural adjustment and privatization policies implemented in the new neoliberal agenda. After the electoral defeat, NGOs dealing with child protection mushroomed throughout the



country (Oettler, 2007). The *Instituto de Promoción Humana-Estelí* (The Institute of Human Promotion – Estelí), the *Centro de Prevención de la Violencia* (Centre of Violence Prevention), and the *Fundación de Protección de los Derechos de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Infractores de la Ley* (Foundation for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents Offenders of the Law), were some of the most important ones working with youths at risk (Ibid.) Most of these NGOs were dependant on foreign funding and in conjunction with Nicaraguan decision-makers, the notion of youth violence emerged as a substantial public issue that was rapidly addressed.

#### *Contemporary Government Responses*

Although Nicaragua briefly adopted a repressive approach to the problem of youth gangs in 1999, it did not last very long. By 2000, the government had changed course towards a more preventative nature (USAID, 2006). As previously discussed, currently the Nicaraguan legislation favours the protection of youths. Several constitutional articles and laws protect youth and provide resources for various programs directed at improving the situation of youths in the country. Among them is Law 392, which encourages the establishment of youth programs. Law 228 directs the National Police to establish plans and policies to prevent youth violence. Finally, Law 212 names a Special Inspector for Youth and Adolescents to ensure respect of their human rights, among others. In 2005, there was an initiative on an anti-gang law, similar to the ones approved in Honduras and El Salvador, introduced to the Nicaraguan National Assembly. However, the Justice Commission and local consultants agreed that the law would violate the Constitution and it would not solve the problem of youth violence in the country.

In response, Nicaragua has developed programs on both the government and civil society sectors to deal with the prevention of youth violence:

- a.) Program for the Attention and Prevention of Violence: implemented by the *Secretaría de Juventud* (Secretary of Youth), which provides marginalized and at-risk youth alternatives to gang membership. The government also has implemented an intervention program for the rehabilitation of former gang members into productive members of society.
- b.) The *Ministerio de Gobernación* (Ministry of Interior) has initiated a significant program called *Convivencia y Seguridad Ciudadana* (Co-Existence and Citizen Security), funded by the Inter-American Development Bank and the government. Its basic purpose is crime prevention initiatives in eleven departments of the country. The program targets youth at-risk, youth in gangs, and youth in the penal system.
- c.) The National Police has coordinated efforts with different sectors of society, including the media, different state institutions, the private sector, and former gang members, to implement the Prevention of Juvenile Violence program. The program provides psychological counselling, educational opportunities, vocational training, and job placement. Nicaraguan police are noted for not using repressive force on the younger population, and are visibly outgoing towards incarcerated gang members. Such a relationship does not exist in the neighbouring countries.

The Nicaraguan government has also made efforts to improve conditions in the country's penitentiaries. Those who are rehabilitated in prisons are encouraged to participate in vocational and artistic activities, including music and arts (Ibid). Conversely, the state of prisons in Honduras is derelict. In some penitentiaries, gang members are housed together in a one-story concrete block building in overcrowded living conditions and with no activities. The approach of both governments is clearly distinct.

A closer look at the National Police Prevention Model (2008)<sup>30</sup> can clearly show that the Police have opted to pass from a reactive model to a prevention model when dealing with youth gangs:

The complex dynamic and the dangerous nature of other gangs in various countries of Central America have obliged us to focus on this phenomenon with great alert, knowing how it originated and how it developed, we have an enormous responsibility today, because we cannot leave to our future generations uncertainty, unrest, and the terror that other gangs are cultivating in the region. It is important in historic terms, and for the development of our institution, to recognize that it was a mistake that before gangs and delinquency were confronted without any difference, under the same procedure: persecution, detention, and jail (Nicaraguan National Police, *Modelo Preventivo Policial*, 2008).

The model implemented by the Nicaraguan National Police seeks to address the dynamics of youth violence, as well as its sociological, economic, psychological, and cultural causes. Gaining knowledge on the risk factors and strengthening the protection factors will allow them a more effective and appropriate police intervention. The following figure represents the risk factors for youth gangs and the strategies to be implemented to address them:

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<sup>30</sup> Web accessed on July 29, 2008 from: <http://www.policia.gob.ni/cedoc/sector/prevenc/fich.htm>

**Figure 5. 8 Situational Analysis and Prevention Focus**

<b>Risk Factors</b>	<b>Protection Factors</b>
<b>INDIVIDUAL</b>	
Psychological and behavioural disorders	Psychological Treatment
Drug Consumption	Rehabilitation of addictions
Frustration, lack of values, rejection to social norms and low self esteem	Strengthening of personal values, self esteem and leadership
History of abuse and parental mistreatment	Family psychological treatment
<b>RELATIONAL</b>	
Dysfunctional family, violence, and addiction	Family therapy of livelihoods and rehabilitation
<b>COMMUNITY</b>	
Easy access to weapons and drugs	Disarticulation of drugs and weapons shops
Lack of recreation and education access	Facilitate spaces for recreation, culture, education, and sports
Violent Environments	Conflict resolution training
<b>SOCIAL</b>	
Unemployment	Skills training and employment opportunities
Culture of Violence	Stimulation of a culture of peace

Adapted from: Nicaraguan National Police, *Modelo Preventivo Policial*, 2008, p. 13-15

As the model seeks to reinsert youth into society, the report claims that at least 4,000 youths have been reinserted as productive members of the community through the prevention strategies.

A comparative analysis of the different institutions and policies for youth for Nicaragua and Honduras could be misleading due to the similarity of the names and responsibility of the laws and agencies, which is often deceptive. Bellanger and Cruz (2007) demonstrate it through the following figure:

**Figure 5. 9 Institutions and Policies for Youth: Honduras and Nicaragua**

Country	Child and Adolescent Code	Code Implementation Agency	Youth Services Agency	Objective	Juvenile Law	Anti-Gang Law
Honduras	1996	<i>Fiscalía de la Niñez</i> (Attorney General's Office Special Unit on Children)	Honduran Institute on Children and the Family	Policies for prevention and for the integral protection of children and adolescents	Draft Bill 2001	Passed 2002
Nicaragua	1998	<i>Procuraduría Especial de la Niñez y Adolescencia</i> (Special Ombudsman's Office on Children and Adolescents)	Secretaría for youth	Promote, coordinate, and implement actions that improve the quality of life of youth	Law to promote the Integral Development of Youth 2001	Rejected 2002

Adapted from: Bellanger and Cruz, *The Politics of Policies about Gangs in Central America*, 2007, p. 118

### *Contextualizing State Policies with Maras*

The cases of Honduras and Nicaragua clearly demonstrate divergent policy approaches to youth crime. Using largely repression, the Honduran government has attempted to address the frequent deadly violence that has riddled the country for the past ten years. However, today it is evident that violence in Honduras has worsened. With overcrowded prisons, no effective rehabilitation programs for gang members and convicts, and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, the hope for social peace and freedom from fear for its citizens is slim. In Honduras, youth gangs have become the 'public enemy number one', and social cleansing policies and extrajudicial executions are implemented with atrocious results. Although on paper there exists the "Law for the

Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Re-entrance into Society of Persons Belonging to Gangs or Maras” approved in 2001, it has been tabled and most people have not heard of it. With pro-repression factions, the Honduran government clearly has failed to address youth issues in the country. In marked contrast, Nicaragua’s entire citizen security policy is smoothly set forth by the government with clear prevention and rehabilitation strategies, and it is considered the Central American country to have the best relations between gang members and the National Police (Bellanger and Rocha, 2007).

In the context of this research, the task lies in discovering whether the historical government responses of Honduras and Nicaragua have dictated the difference of Mara presence in each country. The police repression that occurred in Honduras, especially during 1996 to 2001, disbanded many smaller traditional gangs without offering any options of social reintegration or rehabilitation. During this period it is important to remember that M-13 and M-18 influence was beginning to assert itself in the country through deportation processes. According to some experts, the domestic gang members, without anywhere else to go, soon joined the foreign, more aggressive, franchise of M-13 and M-18. As noted by Andino Mencía (2006), “in other words, the repressive policies applied during these years made an indirect contribution to the fortification of these youth groups instead of preventing their development” (2006: 10). Also it is important to observe here that these repressive policies have led to the ‘invisibility’ of the Mara phenomenon in the country because they have adopted an extremely hermetic *modus operandi*, making it harder to observe and study them. Avoiding persecution and social cleansing, Maras have not only been forced to improve their organization, they have reacted in more vengeful violent ways. In short, the repressive strategies that Honduras

has implemented to fight the Mara phenomenon have not only failed, but have been counterproductive.

In the case of Nicaragua, it is noticeable that the influence of the old Sandinista social network managed to transcend throughout time into contemporary government strategies. It not only helped implemented government prevention approaches, but facilitated more community participation in crime prevention policies and ideologies. As a result, Nicaragua has had to invest fewer resources in repressive law enforcement efforts to deal with gang violence. Paradoxically, Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the Central American region, yet it has prioritized the channelling of resources towards prevention and intervention efforts. The positive outcome, therefore, can be tangible with a perceived reduction in costs normally associated with violence, such as increases in health-related costs, loss of productivity, deterrence of foreign investment, and others. In addition, the almost non-existence of Maras in Nicaragua could be attributed to the manner in which the government has chosen to address the issue. Therefore, by understanding the nature of youth deviance and implementing prevention programs, one can construe that such policies are a contributing factor when accounting for the difference in Mara presence in the Central American region, especially Honduras and Nicaragua.

One important aspect was the militarization that the Nicaraguan youth experienced during the decade of the 1980s. As previously discussed, the army served as an indoctrination institute who exerted discipline and patriotism. However, although Honduras had a strong military presence in the 1980s, military obligatory service for citizens was eliminated from the country in 1995 by initiative of President Carlos

Roberto Reina, eliminating the strongest disciplinary institute for thousands of youths in the country. While perusing the literature, the issue of obligatory military service and the possible impact it might have on gang formation (or lack thereof) in the Central American region, is scarcely addressed, if not at all. Brevé (2007) is one of the few authors who link the elimination of obligatory military service with the uprising of the Mara phenomenon. I have identified this unexplored factor as a potential contributing element that might have significant relevance when trying to identify of the reasons behind Honduras' and Nicaragua's Mara hosting disparity.

#### **Factor Four: Obligatory Military Service**

Throughout time, the armed forces have had a central role in many of the Latin American countries. However, in the case of Central America, it appears to be that the decline in importance of the military occurred simultaneously with the emergence of structural adjustment programmes. Conscription has been predominant in the history of Latin America. According to Cameron, Dorling, and Thorpe (2000), in the case of Latin America, coercion is engaged in contracts for military service to replace voluntary participation. In these cases, recruitment relies on physical force- as opposed to voluntary drafting or even draft lottery- when the geopolitical condition of a country renders it important and viable for the manning of ranks:

One would expect voluntary enlistment to be slight, and coercive methods more common, in countries where the military functions to serve the interests of an elite, where social and political cohesion is partial, and where the military is rigidly stratified with little or no mobility between tiers. Force is particularly likely where culture and ethnic differentiation is acute and the economic base allows some degree of independence, on two accounts. First, when potential recruits are not party to the ideology of the dominant culture, then the concept of patriotism will not be such a persuasive motivational factor in encouraging the voluntary recruitment. Second, social and economic commitments and rituals within the potential recruits' own communities are likely to be incompatible with



periods of absence, serving the interests of an alien and often hostile political and economic body. (Cameron, Dorling, and Thorpe, 2000, p. 48).

Military service before the 1990s was for the most part obligatory in Central America. This could be easily assimilated due to the civil conflicts that countries of the region were undergoing. However, with the arrival of peace accords and a new economic model, things changed and the military lost significant participation in governmental issues. This was the case for Honduras and Nicaragua; however the issue lies in the extent in which this decreased military power encouraged or hindered the proliferation of youth gangs for each country.

#### *Conscription in Honduras*

Conscription was not a new phenomenon in Honduras, dating from the time of the government of Marco Aurelio Soto, which introduced obligatory military service under Article 16 of the 1880 Constitution. The decade of the 1980s represented an especially important period for the military. As Honduras was employed to serve as U.S. military base against the Contra War in Nicaragua, the military benefited financially as the United States transferred increased aid flows. Although military bases were home to some 1,200 U.S. soldiers, local manpower was required. At this point, the military retained the right to veto appointments to the Cabinet, control the police and security forces and have immunity from human rights or corruption investigations, making obligatory service more draconian and arbitrary. As tensions mounted, drafting in Honduras increased to 15,400 soldiers in 1989 (Ibid). The Honduran military rounded up large numbers of 18 year olds for their obligatory military service practice which lasted until 1995. The drafting process was similar to a hunt, as military men would scout grounds of certain

vicinities, including secondary schools, soccer matches, or other events where young males gathered, who would fit the profile for recruitment. Exemptions did take place based on the notion of age (under 18 or over 30 were exempted), marriage or physical and mental disabilities. An interesting aspect of these exemptions was the social class discrimination that frequently occurred. Most of the individuals who were targets of forced recruitment were from the poorer classes of the Honduran society. The young males from the elite, normally could get exemptions, based on influence or bribe, and usually did not participate in the military barracks. Needless to say, this process was feared by society in general, as it literally represented hunting for potential soldiers.

Obligatory military service gave way to a culture of violence that subordinated civil power to the military, creating a wall of impunity against all the abuses carried out by those in uniform. Although this coercive draft represented one of the oldest forms of institutional violence in the country, it also served as a disciplinary institution for the thousands of youths who had little or no access to a secure social net provided by the state. The barracks offered employment, occupation, and discipline.

However, according to the Honduran Network of Sustainable Development (2002), the Honduran population became increasingly intolerant with military abuse, which included the disappearance and torture of many people, as well as murders of innocent civilians. By the beginning of the 1990s, alongside with international pressure, the Honduran society opened spaces for the discussion of the possible demilitarization of the country. With the election of President Carlos Roberto Reina, the era of the military came to an end:

The arrival to power in 1994 of the ex President of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights, the liberal Carlos Roberto Reina, propelled the reforms that finally left the military out of combat, and that fortified the position of

organizations defenders of human rights. Under popular pressure, the Reina government eliminated the obligatory military service and substituted it for a democratic and volunteer one; in addition, he replaced military with civilians in the administration of public institutions. (Oliva, 2003)<sup>31</sup>.

Conscription was temporarily suspended in 1993, then replaced with a lottery-based system in 1994 before finally being abolished in 1995 (Cameron, Dorling, and Thorpe, 2000). In May of 1994, the Honduran Congress modified article 276 of the 1982 Constitution, in which all healthy men between the ages of 18 and 30 years old were subject to two years of military service. The constitutional amendment established the voluntary military service in times of peace (CONCODOC, 1988). The reduction of military was significant, from an estimated 26,000 soldiers in 1986, to approximately 18,000 in 1997 (Ibid). To date, the most relevant military statistics for Honduras are represented in table 4.24:

**Table.5 24 Honduran Military Statistics, 2005 est.**

	Statistic
Armed Forces Growth	-50
Armed Forces Personnel	8,000
Manpower Fit for Military Service: Female Age 18-49	1,121,649
Manpower Fit for Military Service: Male Age 18-49	1,100,991

Adapted from: Nation Master, 2008<sup>32</sup>.

As the data suggests, the number of personnel for the armed forces has decreased significantly over the years. From 1998 to 2005, it was reduced almost by 10,000 soldiers.

<sup>31</sup> Web accessed on July 31, 2008 from: <http://www.nuestraamerica.info/leer.hlvs/1285>

<sup>32</sup> Web accessed on July 31, 2008 from: <http://www.nationmaster.com/red/country/ho-honduras/mil-military&all=1>

### *Conscription in Nicaragua*

During the ruling of Anastasio Somoza, conscription in Nicaragua was established in the Constitution, however it was not implemented. By nature of the dynasty, power lay with the National Guard, the elite force that was passed on by family ties. In the last years of the 1970s, the Somoza government began to use forced recruitment and ordered the drafting of young people. According to the 1998 report of the Conscription and Conscientious Objection Document Project (CONCODOC), approximately 40 percent of the recruits for the National Guard were drafted when they were 15 years old or younger. During this period, the young population in Nicaragua suffered a severe repression due to Somoza's fear that they would join the uprising Sandinista movement. Youths between 14 and 18 years of age were considered the most prone to join the Sandinista opposition.

From the Sandinista perspective, the movement did not have major difficulties recruiting volunteers during its opposition to the Somoza regime. Once the FSLN was in power, initially it relied on the voluntary enrolment of civilians to join the army. However, as the Contra war intensified, the Sandinistas began considering the obligatory military service to fill the barracks of the *Ejército Popular Sandinista* (EPS) (Sandinista Popular Army), a military force of popular origins. Therefore, conscription was introduced in 1983 by the FSLN through the approval of the *Ley de Servicio Militar Patriótico* (Law of Patriotic Military Service), which established that all men between the ages of 18 and 40 years were subject to military service for the term of two years (CONCODOC, 1998).

According to Conscience and Peace Tax International (2008), the early draft of the Law had included provisions to enable religious objectors to perform an alternative service, but this clause was soon withdrawn as a result of the increasing tensions between the Sandinista movement and the Catholic Church. Although for the most part, in practice these conscientious objectors, most notably Mennonites, were not recruited, some were still imprisoned for refusing military service. Initially, the government announced that out of the 250,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 15 that had to register, only 15,000 would be drafted. In addition, it is important to mention that the Contra movement itself practiced obligatory recruitment, called “Contra kidnap”, which occurred not only in Nicaraguan, but in Honduran territory as well (Lindsey-Poland, 1988).

During the 1980s, the EPS played a dominant role in Nicaraguan society as the military arm of the FSLN:

With arms and training supplied principally by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Eastern Bloc countries, the EPS developed sufficient resources, internal cohesiveness, and organizational structure to contain, but not eliminate, the forces of the National Resistance. By 1987-1989 the human and economic costs of the prolonged war had led to a series of negotiations that considered, among other issues, the demobilization of the Contra forces and the reduction of the EPS. Thus, over the course of a decade, the EPS evolved from guerrilla units born out of revolution into a partisan, semi-professional institution closely identified with the popular sectors (Premo, 1997, p. 65).

With the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, the EPS now faced possible eliminations by its opposition, as it represented a threat to the autonomous control of the country. After much negotiations and attempted transitions, President Chamorro agreed to respect the integrity of the EPS according to the Constitution of the country. However,

the Patriotic Military Service Law was repealed by an Act<sup>33</sup> of December 1990, and the abolition of obligatory military service was subsequently entrenched in a constitutional amendment<sup>34</sup>.

By 1986, at least 50 percent of government expenditure was devoted to defence and the army had 50,000 soldiers, two thirds of whom were conscripts. Young men and women between 18 and 24 were required to give two years of patriotic service (The New Internationalist, 1986). By January 1990, the army consisted of 96,660 soldiers, a number which was drastically reduced to 41,000 by July of the same year. By 1992, Nicaragua, which once had fielded the largest army in Central America, counted with only 15, 200 men and women in uniform (Premo, 1997). Today, Nicaragua's main military statistics stand as follows:

**Table.5 25 Nicaragua's Military Statistics, 2008**

	<b>Statistic</b>
Armed Forces Growth	-75
Armed Forces Personnel	16,000
Manpower Fit for Military Service: Males Age 18-49	65,170
Manpower Fit for Military Service: Females Age 18-49	N/A

Adapted from: Nation Master, 2008<sup>35</sup>.

It is evident that even though the obligatory military service was abolished in Nicaragua, the army has still managed to remain at the same level of personnel from that of 1992, which indicates that voluntary enrolment is much higher in Nicaragua than in Honduras. This is particularly interesting when taking into account that the Honduran

<sup>33</sup> Law that deposed the Law of Patriotic Military Service

<sup>34</sup> Law of Partial Reform to the Political Constitution, No. 192 of 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Web accessed on August 1, 2008 from: <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/nu-nicaragua/mil-military>

population is approximately 7.4 million people, whereas Nicaragua has 5.6 million people; a difference of almost 2 million, and yet the Nicaraguan army remains double than that of Honduras.

### *Military Service and Maras*

As the data suggests, both countries had strong military presence during the decade of the 1980s. In addition, they both experienced a drastic reduction of manpower and demilitarisation as the new neoliberal economic model was implemented in the Central American region. For both countries, the speed in which the reduction of the military institution was carried out clearly exacerbated unemployment, poverty, and social unrest. Now thousands of young people no longer had an institution that offered them discipline and occupation. In the case of Honduras, the timeframe of the elimination of conscription fits in with the beginning of deportation of criminals from the United States. With the end of the Contra war, Nicaragua's military obligatory service was also eradicated, which led to the rise of a new wave of relatively innocuous gang activity better known as *pandillas* (Rocha, 2006). However, as previously discussed, the nature of these gangs varies significantly from the Mara phenomenon present in the neighbouring countries. Furthermore, taking into account the rest of the Central American countries, in the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador, who also have a strong presence of Mara activity, conscription has not been officially enforced since 1994 and 1992, respectively (CONCODOC, 1998). Therefore, it appears to be that the elimination of obligatory military service is associated with the increase in youth gang activity in most Central American countries. For Honduras, the elimination of conscription aggravated already existing conditions contributing to the rise of Mara gangs. In

Nicaragua, even though conscription was abolished, gang activity of a different nature still proliferated, except that it interacted with different prevention state programs for youth and the different migratory patterns of the country. This counteracted any possibility for the specific Mara phenomenon to proliferate in that country.

An important element in the present analysis is the evaluation of the fabric pertaining to the military culture in Honduras and Nicaragua. Although both countries eliminated conscription by the start of the 1990s, this alone is not enough to discredit the factor as irrelevant to the problematic of this thesis. In reality, beyond the physical existence or presence of men in the barracks, it is important to consider the legacy and the culture that was passed on by the martial institutions of each country, and the way it affected civil-military relations. Nicaragua's armed forces and revolutionary institutions are not separate from the history of the country and were not imposed superstructures, but rather seemed to be born from the active participation of the people who laid the groundwork for the revolution to occur. Before the Sandinistas came into power, the Somoza governments were highly characterized by patterns of repression and brutality towards the general populace. The praetorian National Guard seemed to exude characteristics of an "interventionist" army who protected interests of the United States, rather than domestic interest (Envío, 1983). However, with the Sandinistas in government, the role of the army changed. Their objective was to involve all Nicaraguans in national defense and protection of the revolution. The military actively participated in tasks of reconstruction, helped in emergency situations like floods, fires, and border vigilance. Overall, in Nicaragua, the military was seen as an institution that protected its citizens and national interests, therefore it witnessed higher levels of



voluntary participation, transpiring a high sense of patriotism and duty. According to the Sandinistas, the legalization of conscription was seen as the institutionalization of the military service which the reservists and militia had been doing voluntarily since the revolution; it was never perceived as a forceful, imposed service to society. Conversely, the Honduran military institution did not appear to receive the same respect from civil society as the Nicaraguan army did. The military in Honduras was highly influenced by U.S. interests and rather than offering protection and a sense of security among its citizens, it further institutionalized a culture of violence. The sycophantic nature of many of its officers and members, combined with ruthless drafting methods, led to severe tensions between civil society and the military, as well as a marked anti-military sentiment. Furthermore, the nature and methods of conscription did not sit well with society in general, potentially leading to disdain and lack of respect to authoritative figures. Hence, Honduras has never seen high levels of voluntary military service.

It would be presumptuous to conclude that the different military cultures of each country eventually led to the proliferation or lack of Maras, however, the legacies that each martial institution left to their respective societies is evident. The elimination of conscription in Nicaragua left thousands of youths without an ideological base, but who were rescued by prevention programs and alternate social inclusion strategies. Whereas in Honduras, the elimination of conscription appeared to be a social triumph against repression and persecution from an institution they disrespected in the first place, potentially leading to a more defiant, arrogant attitude of youth towards authority. This combined with other factors, such as government approaches to youth, deportation trends, and marginalization, could then represent a significant factor to the proliferation of gangs.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, it is evident that the elimination of obligatory military service *by itself* did not give rise to the Mara phenomenon in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador; however, one can extrapolate that the elimination of military recruitment represents a crucial element to the genesis of Maras. Although it further perpetuated a culture of violence, the military represented an institution of rigorous discipline and stability for the young population. In a speculative manner, if conscription would not have been eliminated in Honduras, this could have potentially neutralized or delayed the effects of migratory and deportation trends by offering idle youth alternative occupation and source of income, thus the effects of Mara transculturization could have occurred in a lesser degree if not at all.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *CLOSING THOUGHTS ON A GLOBAL ISSUE*

A major criticism in the discourse of crime in the Latin American context is that governments fail to address the underlying causes of such violent societal dynamics. Thus, with an erroneous comprehension of the violent state, crime in all its forms, will perpetuate, if not worsen within this region. The case is no different for the hostile gang situation in Central America. Although the study of Maras in Central America has gained popularity in the academic arena, the discussion appears to be superficial and relegated to blaming the United States for exporting its crime problems to poorer Central American countries. With this, expectations for solutions are globalised and left to the international community to contend with, assuming little or no local state responsibility.

Taking on a different analytical perspective, through method of historical comparison, the previous chapter has managed to present key issues that might offer a far more introspective and appropriate analysis of why Maras predominate in Honduras and are virtually inexistent in Nicaragua. More specifically, the analysis takes into consideration local probable causality. After analyzing the data, one can begin to observe the interrelatedness of such factors and attribute weighing importance to them accordingly. Migration and deportation patterns clearly play the central role on the transfer of Mara know-how into the Central American region. As the data has suggested, it is unquestionable that Honduran migratory paths aim north to the United States, whereas Nicaraguans mobilize south to Costa Rica. Moreover, it is the obvious difference in deportation processes that suggest the origin of the problem. Nevertheless, this factor alone is insufficient to provide full reason behind the stark difference of Mara

hosting for both countries. Thus, a factor that appears to have sound impact on the levels of gang activity in each country is the individual state approaches to youth violence. Prior to the migratory and deportation phenomenon, Honduras and Nicaragua historically had the presence of youth gangs. However, as reflected by the data, the approaches in dealing with such social deviance have been completely bipolar as Honduras has opted for repression and institutional violence, whereas Nicaragua has implemented prevention strategies. In both cases, the nature of such approaches can be traced to even before Maras reached their contemporary state. At this point, the combination of both factors begins to delineate the separate ways youth gangs have expressed themselves in each country. Atop these fundamental aspects, a third factor, the elimination of obligatory military service, presents an interesting, separate correlation for each country. In the case of Honduras, it is evident that the elimination of conscription, when combined with the previous factors, played an essential role that contributed to the proliferation of Maras in the country. In other words, the influx of thousands of youth with newly acquired criminal skills, combined with inexistent social programs to receive them, as well as the disappearance of a draconian disciplinary institution, likely contributed to the emergence of the Mara phenomenon in Honduras. However, the elimination of conscription does not appear to be of significant relevance in determining the absence of Maras in Nicaragua. In my judgement this is mainly due to the fact that the first two factors were sufficient to counterbalance any impact demilitarization could have inflicted on the youth population in the country. Finally, the data suggests that the state of drugs and availability of firearms do not contribute to the reasons why Honduras has Maras and Nicaragua does not. Nicaragua shows similar levels of activity for both issues; therefore

it becomes problematic to positively correlate Maras with drugs and weapon activities. Furthermore, if the problem of drugs and firearms ceased to exist in each country, it would be hard to say that the Mara phenomenon in Honduras would disappear as well. Nonetheless, drugs and access to firearms, in my opinion, tend to aggravate the Mara problem in Honduras as much as they would the *pandilla* problem in Nicaragua.

**Figure.6 1 Elements of Comparative Analysis: Weighing the factors**

Migration and Deportation Patterns	<b>Direct:</b> contributes to the transculturization of Mara culture from the U.S. to the Central American region. Deportation processes are the vehicle for such criminal know-how. Constitutes the key factor for Mara genesis.	<i>Honduras:</i> main country for migration is the United States where Maras originate. Thus the majority of deportees proceed from this country. <i>Nicaragua:</i> main country for migration is Costa Rica where there is no presence of Maras.
Government Approaches to Youth Gangs	<b>Direct:</b> repressive approaches to youth gangs further aggravate the problem, fomenting them to organize themselves better. Preventive approaches and inclusive programs tend to have more positive results.	<i>Honduras:</i> historically has adopted repressive approaches to address youth problems. Applied U.S. "Zero Tolerance" campaign to address the Mara problem. <i>Nicaragua:</i> Sandinista government implemented inclusive programs for youth which have managed to transcend to present day policy. Today, the country's police strategy has a preventive approach with reintegration programs for youth.
State of Drugs and Weapons Trafficking	<b>Indirect:</b> further aggravates the already existing Mara problem when combined with previous factors. By itself it does not originate it.	<i>Honduras:</i> Shares similar conditions of drug trafficking as the rest of the Central American corridor. Consumption levels are relatively low in comparison to North America. <i>Nicaragua:</i> Shares similar conditions as Honduras in terms of drug trafficking. Levels of consumption are higher than in Honduras.
Elimination of Obligatory Military Service	<b>Indirect:</b> potentially contributed to the aggravation of the already existing Mara problem. The elimination of OMS led to the creation of a large number of idle youth, which combined with other factors, could have contributed to the proliferation of Maras. By itself it does not originate it.	<i>Honduras:</i> Eliminated OMS in 1995. The surplus of youth without any alternate occupation, no social programs, repressive state policies and deportation influxes from the U.S., could have made Honduras prone to the proliferation of Mara presence. <i>Nicaragua:</i> Eliminated OMS in 1990. However the idle youth was met with inclusion programs and preventive approaches to avoid further gang activity.

Preliminary Honduran police statistics for 2007 indicate that 3,855 homicides occurred in a country of 7 million people. This represented an estimated 400 to 750 more homicides than in 2006 (OSAC, 2008). Clearly, violence and crime are integral parts of life in Honduras which are still on the increase. The last record of 2007 stated that the country's homicide rate was 40.41 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (OCAVI, 2007). Despite some positive steps, government corruption, impunity for violators of the law, and gang violence has exacerbated serious human rights problems in the country. Honduras remains the Central American country mostly affected by Maras. According to the U.S. Department of State (2007), year end statistics indicated that the country had approximately 30,000 to 40,000 gang members; many of them minors, belonging to nearly 500 separate groups. An estimated 5,000 actively participate in criminal activities and they are deemed responsible for 20 to 50 percent of the violent crime in the country. MS-13 and M-18 are the largest and most violent gangs, accounting for approximately 40 percent of gang membership countrywide.

By contrast, Nicaragua, despite being the poorest country in the region, is also one of the safest. By 2006, its homicide rate stood at 12.46 per 100,000 inhabitants (OCAVI, 2007). Although the country experiences some violent crime in its capital city of Managua and some rural areas, delinquency largely takes the form of pick pocketing and occasional armed robberies. Gang activity in the form of *pandillas* is present, however their nature and levels are not comparable to those found in its neighbouring countries. The policies introduced in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, have viewed the Mara situation as national emergencies that require an urgent response. Thus, they have turned to the United States and the international community for aid. Consequently, policy

packages like the Mérida Initiative have been proposed to offer support in the combat of gangs and organized crime across Mexico and Central America. The initiative, born in May of 2007 and currently under consideration, is a multi-year purpose plan to provide equipment and training to support law enforcement operations and technical assistance for long term reform and oversight of security agencies. The budget proposal includes aid from the U.S. of US \$450 million for Mexico and US \$100 million for Central America (U.S. Department of State, 2008). More specifically, the Merida Initiative would provide funding for:

- High technology equipment for the intersection of drug and weapons trafficked;
- Technologies to improve criminal communication systems across the isthmus;
- Technical advice to strengthen the institution of justice;
- Helicopter and surveillance aircrafts to support the tracing of smuggling activities;
- Equipment and training to implement anti-gang measures (Ibid).

Interestingly enough, no prevention programs are mentioned.

At the core of this thesis lies the ultimate objective of exploring the root causes of why Maras exist in Honduras but not present in Nicaragua, despite the fact that the countries experience similar socioeconomic conditions, while being in geographical proximity to each other. Ideally, these causes should in turn suggest solutions on how to address and mitigate this growing crisis in Central America. Therefore, the discussion becomes a strategy with which I pretend to construct a conjunct vision of the diverse dimensions of the Mara phenomenon in the country through method of comparison. Although youth crime constitutes a transnational problem that affects numerous of

countries across the globe, the solutions must begin at the local domestic level before the problem becomes an international one.

Overall, the significant contributing factors that dictate the difference of Mara hosting for Honduras and Nicaragua remain evident. These dimensions have merged to contribute to the already existing systemic and structural inefficiencies that generate public insecurity in the everyday life of many Central Americans. Anathematized by poor and corrupt political leadership, Honduras has been condemned to a patronage network that controls the government and maintains insoluble links to the private sector. These issues represent further obstacles to any conflict resolution process. Furthermore, the influence of certain factors has suggested that it is not the case that young people in Nicaragua do not participate in Mara activity because they are in a better situation with respect to other Central American countries. In my judgement, however, it is the combination of especially local elements and strategies that determine the absence or presence of such a phenomenon.

So what can be done? With a holistic analysis of the data, one can conclude the following. First, the criminalization of migration and deportation does not represent a viable solution to the Mara problem in Central America. The literal construction of a wall across the United States border epitomizes the counterproductive approaches that validate repression as an effective control mechanism. Central American countries affected by such migration and deportation patterns can no longer afford to rely on the international plead to the United States to halt deportation, much less expect the local population to stop migrating. At best, countries like Honduras should be able to address the reasons why the population leaves and why migration occurs in the first place. However, one



must remember that this represents double jeopardy for the governments as financial remittances constitute a great support for the economies of Central America. Therefore, it is essential to implement reinsertion programs for deportees and construct social security nets for those forced back.

Second, the institutionalization of violence and the validation of social cleansing as solutions are highly ineffective in addressing the Mara problem. Experience, data, and time have demonstrated that repressive approaches to youth violence soundly fail in Central America. Nonetheless, these measures continue to be implemented by local authorities, squandering precious resources that could otherwise be directed to more effective prevention programs. A first step should be the adoption of policies and discourses that decriminalize young people and adolescents, and offer social inclusion.

Third, with the analysis of the impact the abolishment of conscription had on the proliferation of Central American gangs, it is not to suggest that obligatory military service be reinstated. However, this analysis does give insight to the necessity of governments to offer alternate occupational and disciplinary programs, whether they are of a martial nature or a civil one. Governments must acknowledge that idle youth combined with social marginalization and external influences are bound to exacerbate problems such as the Maras. Most importantly, governments must recognize the importance of prioritizing and including youth in active state policy.

Connecting my findings back to the literature review, there are three main angles in which I have attempted to create a dynamic link between theory and practice. The first angle addressed pure criminogenic concepts of why youth gangs exist, and as previously discussed, my research and findings seem to be best supported by structural theories of

crime rather than the individual theories. For the particular case of Honduras and Nicaraguan youth gangs in the form of Maras, the four factors discussed tend to focus on societal forces rather than individual motives, especially structural ones relating to the role of the state and its policy in regards to youth gang activity. Elements of the environment are evident to be key in the analysis of the genesis of Maras, as the question is not why youth gangs exist, but rather, why the particular form of Maras are present or lacking in the regions under discussion.

Second, the literature review addressed the intersection of criminological and development theories. In this respect, the perspective on radical criminology-dependency seems to make a better fit in a more analogical fashion, rather than a literal one. The theory argues that imperialist states employ criminal law tools to exert influence on colonies. To a certain extent, the data has made this tendency evident as we can witness the issue of having U.S. crime models implemented in Latin America, where local input has been relegated to the sidelines of policy work. The case of Honduras clearly exemplifies how such models have failed to address the local problems of Maras, and have created dependency on foreign strategies and resources for a viable solution. Nicaragua on the other hand, implemented indigenous solutions to its youth gang problems, while Honduras imported its crime control policies from the United States. As it is with many other aspects of development, the aggressive nature of U.S. foreign policy in terms of crime control has once again situated countries in a position that leaves them more vulnerable and open to failures. It would be utopian to assume that the United States and other powerful nations will change their strategy-exporting ways. Clearly, the United States will not stop exporting its gang problem to countries like Honduras,

Guatemala, and El Salvador; moreover, it will not refrain from advising such governments on how to address such problems. Therefore, it is imperative that countries like Honduras halt the imposition of foreign solutions and begin creating home-grown strategies that take into consideration local realities, historical elements and domestic resources that could offer a more pragmatic solution to the problem.

Third, the literature review identified a number of implications that crime and violence had on development. Namely, these constituted consequences for the economic and social spheres of a country including the deterrence of foreign investment, increased structural costs for the state, decreased human capital, lower rates of labour market participation, poor employment productivity, and low investment incentives. In addition, violence threatens governance and the organic state of democracy. Evidently, for the Central American region, crime has a detrimental impact on stability and development. However, when conferring on the best approaches to mitigate the impact of crime in all its expressions, there appears to be a false dichotomy on the short term goals between the immediate sensation of security versus long term social development. This situation, however, precisely leads to the validation and implementation of repressive actions. With regards to gangsterism in its specialized Mara form, it is hard to think that a young person will be scared out of a gang through criminal justice threats, persecution and stigmatization. This is the case because the defiance of society and the state are the main component of the ethos of Mara gangs. Although the implications of gang activity on development are by association, one cannot deny that the Mara phenomenon has hindered the capacity of countries like Honduras to offer its citizens the basis of a secure social structure, which ultimately furthers the well-being of society in general. As there

are no absolutes, one cannot measure success or failure of development simply in terms of economic growth, but it should also include the reduction of the gap between social classes, and access of basic necessities. Moreover, my research is confident that key local and transnational factors identified in this thesis influence the presence of gang activity in Honduras, which in turn affects the social fabric and stability necessary for development to occur. This, it is not to say that the underdeveloped state of Honduras and Nicaragua is caused solely because of gang activity, as there are a number of other factors involved that are not pertinent to this research.

Maras are a transnational phenomenon that continues to expand and diversify, while they are increasingly known as “The World’s Most Dangerous Gangs” (National Geographic, 2006). Influenced by politicization, internationalization, and structural sophistication, Maras have already reached the third generation, potentially refining network designs and technological advances that threaten the sovereignty of nation states and carve out new spheres of gang activity. So the question then remains, what is the next phase for Maras? Although Nicaragua has managed to hold the line, how much longer can it do so on its own? In a globalised world, countries currently affected by Maras desperately require a reengineering of their repressive state policies, in the hope of ever controlling such a virulent phenomenon and offer their future generations what many in the developed world take for granted: freedom from fear.

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