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Unwilling Participants:

**The Coercion of Youth into Violent Criminal Groups
in Central America's Northern Triangle**



Report Author:
Frank de Waegh

Research Director:
Shaina Aber

Research Advisors:
Mary DeLorey
Matthew Cuff

Abstract

The crisis of insecurity affecting Central America's Northern Triangle countries - Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala - has entered a new and advanced stage. Levels of generalized violence exceed those typically associated with open conflicts: targeted killings and rape, mass migration from conflict areas, and the forced recruitment of children into armed groups are worrisome parallel traits. This research is devoted to the little-studied practice of forced and coerced recruitment of youth by Northern Triangle street gangs, or *maras*. The coercive enlistment of children has become widespread and sustains a growing need for fresh recruits. A reevaluation of the concept of youth membership within Northern Triangle street gangs is called for - specifically, reevaluating the participation of children in gangs in light of their own victimhood, is critical in addressing the complex root causes of the violence epidemic. Finally the research highlights the need for creative approaches to breaking cyclical youth violence, and the need to draw lessons from methods used to counter violent extremism and reintegration of child soldiers.

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The society-wide impact of organized criminal violence and state-sponsored violence in Central America's Northern Triangle countries - Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala - increasingly has manifested in ways typically associated with open conflict zones. Levels of generalized violence meeting or exceeding those typically associated with war, and indicators of conflict including targeted killings and rape, mass migration from violent areas, and the recruitment of children into armed groups are such parallel traits.¹ This research focuses on one of these dimensions: the little-studied and oft-overlooked practice of coercive recruitment by Northern Triangle street gangs, or *maras*. Analyzing the coercive practices imposed on Northern Triangle youths uncovers one of the principal mechanisms sustaining the continuity of gangs and the perpetuation of cycles of violence.

Reevaluating the participation of youths in street gangs through the lens of coercion is essential in formulating a contemporary understanding of this particular aspect of the regional violence epidemic,² as well as crafting appropriate mechanisms to address this complex matter. Fundamentally, demonstrating that widespread coercion into Northern Triangle gangs exists, directly challenges perceptions of the willing criminal complicity of children linked to criminal entities. Not only is this notion challenging to a U.S. audience, but even more so within the Northern Triangle where public opinion demonizes *maras* and their youthful participants or members, often justifying knee-jerk *mano dura* solutions to the problem. Rather, this work suggests a definition of involvement in gangs' criminal

enterprises that emerges in a situation of victimhood.

The vast majority of literature surrounding Central American gangs focuses on their origins and transformations, presence and prevalence, violence and negative social impacts, and more recently on quantitative analyses outlining the economic burdens they generate through widespread insecurity. Such information is critical in framing this research: it documents the trajectory of street gangs from their origins in the 1980s and 1990s as localized citizen security concerns to their contemporary omnipresence and chokehold on Northern Triangle communities today. The present-day situation shows that the *maras* phenomenon has entered an advanced stage and feeds into a regional humanitarian crisis rather than representing a localized security threat.

This research begins by drawing on Central American gang literature in order to attain a working understanding of organized crime and violence in the region. The first segment is dissected into three subsections which describe the status of *maras* in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Here, a basic overview of the pervasiveness of street gangs in society and a selection of important recent developments in the world of organized crime are offered. The second section of this piece is dedicated to the various forms of coercion which gangs exert on Northern Triangle populations. Geographical control and extortion are identified as examples of how criminal complicity results from gang *modus operandi*. The practice of forced recruitment of children is analyzed through the limited

1 Cawley, Marguerite. "Is Central America's Gang Violence a Humanitarian Crisis?" InSightCrime, 18 July 2014.

2 It is worth noting that the authors of violence in the Northern Triangle are not limited to organized criminal actors alone, but include powerful corporate agents, private "security" companies, and state authorities among others. The focus on "maras" in this work should not detract from the need to tackle the complex and multi-layered patterns of private and public violence and the high level of impunity and corruption that perpetuates it.

information available on the topic, such as testimonies from children who have fled gang violence and reports emerging from on-the-ground organizations. Finally, the causal relationship between endemic organized violence and the increased forced migration from the region is examined as further evidence of the gravity and multidimensional nature of this crisis.

Gaging the Issue: Youth and Gangs in the Northern Triangle

Gang violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala has evolved from a localized, neighborhood-based security threat to a transnational concern causing spillover effects as far afield as the United States and Canada. The gang phenomenon exploded following the end of a period of civil wars which engulfed the region in the 1980s and 1990s. Post-conflict factors including insufficient reintegration of former combatants, government institutions lacking in accountability and capacity, and the wide-spread prevalence of firearms, created fertile ground for the subsequent emergence of gangs in the region. Into this volatile environment, Central American gang members raised in the United States were deported in significant numbers throughout the 1990s – feeding into the burgeoning gang infrastructure simultaneously surfacing in Northern Triangle countries. As renowned expert on the subject Michael Boulton has noted, countries recovering from “protracted armed conflicts which at the same time experience economic and social dysfunction are especially vulnerable to the emergence of gang and gang violence.”³

Armed conflict, however, cannot be identified as the sole precursor to the formation of pervasive control by gangs in Central America, as evidenced by the case of Honduras, which currently suffers the highest homicide rate (much attributed to

gang violence) in the world, higher even than the rate of violent deaths in many war zones,⁴ yet did not endure an open civil war. Rather, an array of factors must be considered to explain the steady growth of maras to their current dimensions. Every study on gangs since the 1990s cite poverty and inequality, poor education, the near absence of career opportunities, and the ubiquity of violence as factors which explain the emergence of Central American street gangs.⁵ On the issue of poverty, studies indicate that societies of high wealth inequality are more likely to suffer from gang problems vis-a-vis countries of widespread poverty with more equally distributed wealth.

Across El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala an estimated 143,000 people have died due to criminal violence between 2004 and 2013. This is equivalent to 41.9 daily homicides for a sustained period of nearly a decade on a regional level.⁷ The region accounts for .5% of the total population of the Americas, yet is responsible for 8% of its homicides.⁸ Despite variations in crime and in the response of national authorities to high rates of violence, the transnational nature of both the gangs that control street level crime and the drug cartel elite has left all three countries struggling to chart a path forward. Weak state institutions struggle to limit the power criminal groups exercise in the best of circumstances, and are often compromised by internal corruption or outright complicity with illicit actors.⁹ As this study will indicate, the groups operating throughout the Northern Triangle share similar characteristics and use almost identical practices—such as coercive techniques to force children to commit crimes on their behalf. These similar patterns of crime and violence, lack of economic opportunity, and the migration of children across international borders prompted President Obama July of 2014 to urge the presidents of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, to jointly present a plan for regional development for funding from the U.S. and other international donors.¹⁰ The three presidents, eager

3 Boulton, Michael. “Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon.” *UNHCR*. UNICEF, 2011. 9.

4 Cawley, Marguerite. “Is Central America’s Gang Violence a Humanitarian Crisis?”

5 See: Sampo, Carolina “Violencia en Centroamerica: las maras de El Salvador, Guatemala, y Honduras.” “Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,” UNODC, and Boulton, Michael, “Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon.”

6 Otras Situaciones de Violencia en el Triángulo del norte Centroamericano- -Impactos Humanitarios.” *Assessment Capacities Project*. ACAP ReliefWeb International, 28 May 2014. 1.

7 “Central America and the Caribbean: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras.” *World Fact Book*. CIA, June 2014.

8 “Global Study on Homicide.” *United Nations*. UNODC, 2013. 43.

9 Illicit actors are not limited to street gangs, but rather to transnational organized criminal cartels that play a role in corruption at more elite levels.

10 Lederman, Josh. “Obama Urges Central American leaders for help.” *PBS World*. 25 July 2014.

for international assistance, presented such a plan with a heavy security emphasis in November of 2014 in Washington, DC – a historic occurrence which required setting aside vast ideological differences among the leaders (see: *Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle*).

Honduras

Honduras is home to the most violent and gang-ridden city on earth. In San Pedro Sula, the 2013 homicide rate stood at 173 deaths per 100,000.¹¹ At this rate, someone was murdered every hour and fifteen minutes in the country's industrial hub. Country statistics indicate that Honduras is deadliest country in the world outside of war zones; it eclipses violence rates found in open conflicts such as in Sudan, while as many people were killed daily in 2012 in Honduras as during the height of El Salvador's civil war.¹² Further complicating the public security crisis is the fact that homicides and other violent crimes are rarely if ever solved, with impunity rates above 90%.¹³

A recurring trait of weak states around the world is seen in the exertion of brutal force onto members of the citizenry deemed societal deviants. In Honduras, gang violence is 'treated' by the systematic use of *mano dura* policing. Techniques include the incarceration of youth based on suspicion rather than facts, unlawful detention, disregard for due process and extrajudicial killings. The implementation of these methods was documented in Honduras with *Plan Libertad Azul* (2002) and have since been replicated extensively throughout the Northern Triangle.¹⁴ In one highly controversial anti-gang campaign, former President Manuel Zelaya launched *Operacion Trueno* (2006) which temporarily allowed some 60,000 private security guards to partake in anti-gang policing.¹⁵ The

resulting mass incarceration of gang members has given them more time to organize criminal hierarchies and plan activities from within the confines of prisons in which they enjoy near-total control.¹⁶ Street gangs have strengthened and violence increased under this form of policing. Given its counterproductive results, *mano dura* as a security policy has been described as "one of the most apparent examples of the failure of states to provide protection."¹⁷ A new and worrisome program called *Guardianes de la Patria* was launched by the Honduras state in January 2015.¹⁸ The program places rifles in the hands of at-risk youth, introduces them to military training techniques. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recently denounced the forcible recruitment of children into gangs in Honduras and expressed particular concern about the *Guardianes de la Patria* program for furthering the worrisome trend of placing children at the center of conflict.¹⁹

A critical juncture in Honduras's public insecurity crisis can be traced through the country's 2009 coup d'état. As Manuel Zelaya was forcefully removed from office, a social and political crisis rocked the country. Attention was deviated away from an already fragile situation of rampant criminal violence. The interim government of Roberto Micheletti partook in a series of abuses in the coup's aftermath, instilling an unconstitutional 'state of exception' which included nightly curfews, the suspension of civil liberties and media restrictions. State institutions were abolished and reconfigured, civil servants driven from their posts, the judiciary was decimated in a series of dismissals of judges, and criminal elites took advantage of the chaotic atmosphere to gain further foothold within the structures of state power.

11 "Boletines San Pedro Sula." *Instituto Universitario En Democracia, Seguridad, Y Paz*. UNAH, Dec. 2013. 2.

12 Cawley, Marguerite. "Is Central America's Gang Violence a Humanitarian Crisis?"

13 "Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean." *Threat Assessment*. UNODC, Sept. 2012. 19.

14 Mencia, Tomas A. "Las Maras En La Sombra - Ensayo De Actualizacion De Fenomeno Pandillero En Honduras." *Inter-American Dialogue*. Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Canas. 12.

15 Boulton, Michael. "Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon." 26.

16 McDermott, Jeremy. "Maras in Guatemala Increasing in Sophistication." *InSightCrime*, 3 Jan. 2014.

17 Boulton, Michael. "Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon." 26.

18 "Honduran military aims to fill in for 'absent' parents with program targeting at-risk kids" *Tico Times* <http://www.ticotimes.net/2015/01/23/honduran-military-aims-to-fill-in-for-absent-parents-with-program-targeting-at-risk-kids>. Accessed on May 30, 2015.

19 "La ONU pide a Honduras que actue para evitar que las maras recluten niños" *La Vanguardia*. <http://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20150610/54432194457/la-onu-pide-a-honduras-que-actue-para-evitar-que-las-maras-recluten-ninos.html> Accessed on June 10, 2015.

El Salvador

El Salvador's contemporary gang violence stems in part from the legacy of its bloody civil war which raged between 1979 and 1992. One of the most salient lasting effects of this armed conflict which fuels current gang violence is the inheritance of and widespread availability of weapons. It is estimated that some 500,000 firearms are in circulation in El Salvador, while only half are legally owned and registered.²⁰ The deportation of Salvadorans from the United States pursuant to the country's civil war also significantly contributed to the rise of maras through the exportation of U.S.-born gang culture.²¹ As of 2014, the number of Salvadoran gang members had swelled to an estimated 60,000 people, with as many as 300,000 dependents - a total of 6% of El Salvador's total population.²² The large majority of *mareros* belong to either the MS-13 or Barrio 18 street gangs.²³

The severity of gang violence in El Salvador is such that in 2012 it resulted in a highly controversial state initiative which brokered a truce between the MS 13 and Barrio 18. Despite distancing itself from the move, the government under former President Mauricio Funes partook in ceasefire negotiations between the two warring gangs - quite an extraordinary measure by most standards. A sustained ceasefire was agreed upon and enforced from within the jails occupied by high-ranking gang members.²⁴ Based on reports that the state was involved, the 2012 agreement has been scrutinized as turning criminal activity into political capital in a country in which a majority of the citizenry support a hardline approach toward gangs.

Prior to the truce, over 5,300 children and adolescent Salvadorans died as a result of gang

violence between 2005 and 2011.²⁵ Homicide statistics indicate that the MS-13-Barrio 18 ceasefire - despite early successes in reducing the homicide rate - broke down over the last two years. By the middle of 2013 homicides had dropped to four killings a day, as opposed to the first half of 2012 which saw an average of 14 daily assassinations.²⁶ Last year, however, murders were once more at an all-time high with killings increasing by 44% in the first three months of 2014.²⁷ Depending on the month, 2014 levels of violence eclipsed statistics from the time of the country's civil war. Adding to the failure of a sustained ceasefire, disappearances reached 1,000 in the year following its signing, with the uncovering of mass graves suggesting that the agreements had been secretly flaunted.²⁸ This may jeopardize the search for alternative solutions to resolving gang-fueled violence, in turn defaulting to a return of *mano dura* tactics.

Guatemala

Organized crime in Guatemala today is a mix of 'traditional' narco-trafficking families and the maras which have taken root in Honduras and El Salvador. Four main trafficking families operate in Guatemala: the Mendoza, the Lorenzana, the Leon, and the Chamal.²⁹ However, the bulk of violent crime in the country is at the hands of street gangs. In the nation's capital, Guatemala City, the homicide rate was (76 per 100,000) in 2013.³⁰ Similar to El Salvador, the country's civil war legacy has left an estimated two million guns in the streets, with only around 250,000 of them registered.³¹

Guatemala is host to an estimated 434 gangs, most of which are cliques of the larger MS-13 and Barrio 18 organizations or copycat groups.

20 "El Salvador: An Early Example of Peacebuilding." *Crisis Prevention & Recovery*. UNDP.

21 "Central American Gang-Related Asylum Guide." Washington Office on Latin America, May 2008. 3.

22 "El Salvador's Gangs: Breaking Good." *The Economist*. Feb. 8 2014.

23 "Mision a Centroamerica: Viaje a Estados Unidos De Menores No Acompañados." *Informe Del Comité*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2013. 3.

24 Negroponete, Diana. "MS-13 and Barrio 18 Truce: Can This Be Successfully Replicated in Honduras and Guatemala?" *Brookings*. The Brookings Institute, June 2013.

25 Gurney, Kyra. "Homicides in El Salvador Reach Pre-Gang Truce Levels." *InSightCrime*, 8 July 2014.

26 Negroponete, Diana. "MS-13 and Barrio 18 Truce: Can This Be Successfully Replicated in Honduras and Guatemala?"

27 Gurney, Kyra. "Homicides in El Salvador Reach Pre-Gang Truce Levels." *InSightCrime*, 8 July 2014.

28 "El Salvador's Gangs: Breaking Good." *The Economist*. Feb. 8 2014.

29 "Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean." *Threat Assessment*. UNODC. 24-25.

30 Sampo, Carolina. "Violencia En Centroamerica: Las Maras En El Salvador, Guatemala, Y Honduras." *Estudios De Defensa*. Dec. 2013. 152.

31 "Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean." *Threat Assessment*. UNODC. 19.

Estimates about gang membership run as high as 80,000 in Guatemala.³² Gang members vastly outnumber the ranks of policemen, as the national police force (PNC) registered some 21,000 officials in 2013.³³ Institutional limitations of the judiciary have created further frustration. As former PNC Director Erwin Sperrisen remarked in 2005, "in one year we captured 50,000 persons... but there were only 48 firm sentences; it's ridiculous."³⁴ This symptom is common throughout the Northern Triangle, in which the institutions of public security and justice cannot complement each other's efforts.

As in Honduras and El Salvador, Guatemalan street gangs have become increasingly sophisticated and organized in response to official state policies targeting them. Maras have organized themselves under centralized leaderships, allowing for previously loosely affiliated cliques to interact directly with each other. In Guatemala, the top leadership of the MS-13 is called the 'Council of Nine', while the Barrio 18's equivalent is deemed the 'Wheel of the Barrio'. Each *clica* is headed by a *ranflero*, who serve as interlocutor between the top leadership and its subgroups. Below them are *sicarios*, or assassins, and *paros*, the rank and file of street gangs.³⁵ Unlike in the past, this hierarchy means that conscious decisions are made at the top and put into practice on the streets. Of chief concern is that such vertical decision-making has pursued and amplified the practice of forced recruitment of children.

This brief overview of the gang phenomenon in each Northern Triangle country uncovers significant parallels within organized crime in the region. The youth gangs of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala have grown to outnumber security forces in each instance. Further, the *maras* of these three countries have become more hierarchal and rigid organizations, as such even tougher opponents to law enforcement. Finally, they have also become more violent. Sporadic drops in homicide rates fall within a broader trend of worsening regional insecurity. El Salvador's

marked increase in the number of disappearances during its 2012 gang ceasefire is case-in-point.

The Many Faces of Coercion

A diverse and wide ranging array of strong-arm tactics have come to define the *modus operandi* of street gangs. These include the imposition of codes of conduct and curfews in gang-controlled neighborhoods, widespread extortion, systematic threats to community members, physical and sexual assault, assassination, torture, and kidnapping. In the following section, the *maras'* use of geographic control will be examined, as well as the manner in which this approach facilitates one of their primary sources of revenue: extortion. These two fundamental elements, require gangs to rely on a plethora of look-outs, informants, and accomplices within the neighborhoods they are victimizing. This necessity has increasingly led gangs to target and coerce children and young adults to join their efforts. The coerced are forced into prostitution, to be the collectors of "war tax," and other unsavory tasks that bring the gang membership income or other valuable assets, but for which the coerced children and youth draw no benefit. Additionally, the perception that young people are less noticed by police—a grave misconception—has greatly fueled the plummeting age of recruitment. The next section focuses precisely on the inner mechanisms of coercion of youths into street gangs. These activities ought to be measured in terms of their combined impacts on society, rather than individually. As in wartime, it is the combined impact of loss of life, restriction of basic liberties, and the paralyzing effects of violence on the economic and social fabric of communities which collectively make situations unlivable.

Geographic Control & Extortion

Gangs seek out areas with limited state regulation in order to carve out enclaves in which they can carry out illegal activities, make profit, and gain

32 Corsetti, Jeffrey D. "Marked for Death: The Maras of Central America and Those Who Flee Their Wrath." *USCRI Refugees*. Georgetown Immigration Law Journal, 2006. 409.

33 Ibid, 412.

34 Perez, Enrique. "Erwin Sperrisen: It Is Frustrating." *Prensa Libre Guatemala*, 14 Feb. 2005.

35 McDermott, Jeremy. "Maras in Guatemala Increasing in Sophistication."

control over populations.³⁶ Operating in densely populated areas throughout Northern Triangle countries, *maras* interact daily with residents who live within their spheres of influence. In gang-controlled neighborhoods, cooptation of the citizenry is achieved through force, terror and intimidation as well as the imposition of implicit codes of conduct.³⁷ Territorial control thus provides both an economic boon to gangs through extortion (variably called a “war tax” or “rent”), tolls levied by gangs to enter or leave their territory and control over local drug trafficking. Gang enclaves provide great challenges to Northern Triangle governments. While it is not the aim of *maras* to achieve ‘state capture’, gang control over significant neighborhoods represents a loss of state sovereignty. Further, the police and military lose power over the use of lethal force—a right reserved by most constitutions to official forces.

The geographic spread of gangs, coupled with their sheer numerical growth over the years, “enables them to have de facto control over the areas in which they operate.”³⁸ Within gang-controlled areas, police are often in collusion with gangs and/or terrified of them, routinely avoiding them and even refusing to enter gang-affected areas.³⁹ This results in highly insecure conditions for those people – and in particular children – living within communities in which the state does not have a monopoly over the rule of law. Adding to a general lack of protection in gang controlled neighborhoods is the routine retribution directed at those who report illegal activities to police or other authorities, lack of victim or witness protection, and generalized impunity, which has led to a culture of silence in which residents self-censor to prevent themselves and their families from becoming targets.

Extortion rackets offer one of the best documented sources of money for street gangs. In the context of the Northern Triangle – where the

relationship between youth gangs and international cartels continues to evolve – extortion is commonly referred to as the economic bread and butter of gang activity.⁴⁰ Three general categories can describe how this process works. In the first, households living within gang-controlled communities are asked to pay an *impuesto de guerra*, or *la renta* to support the gang members and their activities. This generates a situation of forced complicity by the population in exchange for supposed protection and freedom of movement within gang-controlled territories. In the second category, gang members regularly extort businesses in broader zones of gang influence which often fall outside of their central enclaves.⁴¹

Geographic control additionally facilitates extortion. This practice is defined as a “parallel system of illegal taxation that governments are unable and/or unwilling to control.”⁴² The transportation sector has been particularly affected by extortion, with hundreds of bus drivers killed in recent years. In the San Pedro Sula suburb of Comuna de la Planeta, *maras* are targeting public transport by charging fees to operate within their areas of control based on the number of vehicles and passengers on board.⁴³ In the first three months of 2013, 86 public transport officials were killed in Honduras alone.⁴⁴ In San Salvador, it is estimated that street gangs made a daily \$25,000 USD from transportation companies by 2006.⁴⁵

The third and least examined category of extortion involves youth. Children are particularly susceptible to extortion for two reasons. First, a significant portion of Northern Triangle children have one or both parents currently residing outside of their native country. This increases the vulnerability of youth as the perceived recipients of resources in the form of remittances. Second, children living in single parent households or with

36 Boulton, Michael. “Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon.” 9.

37 Cantor, David J. “The New Wave: Forced Displacement Caused by Organized Crime in Central America and Mexico.” 11.

38 Corsetti, Jeffrey D. “Marked for Death: The Maras of Central America and Those Who Flee Their Wrath.” 10.

39 Boulton, Michael. “Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon.” 28.

40 See: Boulton, Michael, “Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon,” Corsetti, Jeffrey, “Marked for Death: The Maras of Central America and those who flee their wrath,” and “Otras Situaciones de Violencia en el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica.”

41 Cantor, David J. “The New Wave: Forced Displacement Caused by Organized Crime in Central America and Mexico.” 11.

42 Boulton, Michael. “Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon.” 23.

43 “Otras Situaciones de Violencia en el Triángulo del norte Centroamericano - Impactos Humanitarios.” 31.

44 Sampo, Carolina. “Violencia En Centroamerica: Las Maras En El Salvador, Guatemala, Y Honduras.”151.

45 “El Salvador: The Gang Called the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13); Its Activities and Recruitment of Members; Protection Offered to Witnesses and Victims of Violent Acts Perpetrated by Gang Members.” *Refworld*. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 7 Apr. 2006. 7.

extended family do not receive enough oversight or protection by family members to the perils of gang life. In Honduras, for example, 50% of families are single-parent households, with comparable rates in Guatemala and El Salvador.⁴⁶

A recent study by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops reveals how common the extortion of children has become. Through interviews with unaccompanied child migrants, the report reveals that around one third of children reported having to pay obligatory extortion fees.⁴⁷ Indeed, years before youth are viewed as likely recruits into the criminal activity of gangs, the children of many neighborhoods in the Northern Triangle fall prey to their coercive techniques and recognize the power the gangs wield, as primary victims of their extortion tactics.

Maras & the Rise of Forced Recruitment

Forced recruitment of children into gang activities is an inherently difficult phenomenon to analyze. Because gangs rule by intimidation and repression, the exact ways in which forced participation takes place rarely come to light outside *maras* enclaves. However, information about this practice can be drawn from a combination of a limited amount of academic enquiry devoted to the subject, interviews with experts on the ground, official accounts from youth who have fled coercion, and accounts from non-governmental actors who work directly with affected youth. Another important source of information stems from the correlated secondary effects of rampant violence, such as the spike in numbers of children and families fleeing the Northern Triangle to neighboring countries.

Like any economic enterprise, gangs seek profit for their members. As previously discussed, this is done by asserting control over existing and new territories. Territories come with 'extortable' and exploitable populations, and increased low-level drug trafficking also presents a highly lucrative enterprise for the Northern Triangle's street gangs. The exploitation of children and their forced

participation as informants, war-tax collectors, sexual servants and assassins sustains the future of gangs and continues a cycle of violence.

Even for a child who many would not categorize as a forced recruit into gang participation, a number of coercive elements exist. The "voluntary" recruitment process can seem remarkably benign in its initial stages. A simple narrative of this can illustrate the process: teenage gang members offer a 6 year old boy change to purchase candy at the corner shop, telling him to keep the change. As the 'bond' between local gang and child grows, it becomes increasingly inescapable. Often the state services and power are so absent in the life of the child's community, that the gang appears to a child to hold a legitimate monopoly on violence, to paraphrase Max Weber. In other cases the state is complicit or the police operate in a way that leaves little room for distinction between the behavior of representatives of state power and gang power. By the age of 9, the child has been coerced into delivering small amounts of marijuana for the *mareros* in his vicinity. Around age 12, when 'official' recruitment occurs and children graduate into violent crime, there is little alternative but to join.⁴⁸ Indeed by the age of 12, it may be too late for a child in a gang controlled neighborhood to opt-out: turning his back on the relationship developed over years of careful grooming is a decision that is more often than not fatal.

For those forced into servitude to gangs, the process may begin the same way but the threats of violence are more direct. In a comparison of criminal organizations around the world and their impact on children, UNICEF Social Policy advisor Michael Boulton found "the most extreme forms of recruitment... may be seen in the Central American context."⁴⁹ The overarching strategy employed involves threatening young and adolescent children with physical violence or death unless they join a local clique. Threats commonly extend from the targeted recruit to their loved ones, resulting in the killing of parents and siblings, as well as the rape of female family members. If the recruit is unwilling to join, "he

46 "Realizing Children's Rights in Honduras." *Children of Honduras*. Humanium.

47 "Mision a Centroamerica: Viaje a Estados Unidos De Menores No Acompañados." *Informe Del Comité*. 4.

48 "Interview with Richard Jones." Personal interview. 18 March 2015.

49 Boulton, Michael. "Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon."

puts his family and everyone he knows in danger” as gangs “do not hesitate to eliminate those who defy it.”⁵⁰

In 2005, the Salvadoran Director of Prisons expressed that gang members encouraged criminal activity by children in order to take advantage of more lenient sentencing to persons under the age of 18.⁵¹ Ironically, it is often while being held in pre-trial detention the criminal justice system on suspicion of petty offenses that potential recruits are coerced into joining. Due to a lack of holding cells, pretrial detainees are frequently sent to regular penitentiaries where they are placed with convicted criminals. In 2005, the Salvadoran state imprisoned an estimated 4,000 youths under the age of 18. From this group, 1,630 were pressured into joining MS-13, another 1,000 were recruited by the Barrio 18, and some 400 other youths joined a variety of different street gangs.⁵² In neighboring Honduras, 77% of new gang members were 15 years of age or younger in 2007.⁵³

As previously mentioned in the overview of gang activity in El Salvador, the Barrio 18 and MS-13 agreed to a ceasefire in March of 2012. The discussions that emerged between Monsignor Fabio Colindres, head chaplain of the Salvadoran military and police, government officials, and the highest leadership of each gang were critical in uncovering the widespread use of forced recruitment. According to statements from the gang leaders, the incarcerated leaders of the *maras* decided that they were fed up with years of violence and death, and “agreed to stop forced recruitment of youth in gang-controlled territories and to stop gang violence near schools.”⁵⁴ The negotiations thus brought to light much of what had remained mysterious regarding the recruitment of children. First, the Barrio 18 and MS-13 leadership for the first time admitted to this practice. The cessation of forced recruitment was

only one of two agreements struck, the other being the halting of gang-on-gang killings. Second, this evidences that the practice of recruiting children comes from a vertical line of command. That is, the decision is taken at the upper echelons of gang hierarchy and implemented throughout the country.

A 2014 interview with Rev. Ismael “Melo” Moreno, S.J. – a journalist, Jesuit priest and leading human rights advocate in Honduras – confirms that much of the literature covered thus far is supported by what he has observed in his community of El Progreso, a city in the outskirts of San Pedro Sula. Father Moreno discusses the somber mood which increasingly accompanies the 13th birthdays of Honduran boys in gang-controlled *barrios*, with family members fully cognizant that their children are “graduating” to the prime age for gang recruitment. For many youths, this implies making the hardest choice they will ever make: join a gang, flee, or die.⁵⁵

Equally worrying observations highlight how gangs are using schools as predatory grounds for conscription into gang service, causing many children to drop out for fear of continued threats. Recent studies and the 2012 Salvadoran ceasefire negotiations support the claim that schools are becoming increasingly perilous due to gang infiltration. In Honduras, 44.5% of primary school students were violently abused by classmates at least once a week in 2012.⁵⁶ In Guatemala, an average of 260,000 children dropped out of school yearly during the same period - most during their early teens. Similarly in El Salvador, in many high risk neighborhoods few students make it past the 6th grade.⁵⁷ While there are certainly economic incentives to dropping out, the increased exploitation of schools, places where gangs can cultivate and coerce children into servitude are imposing a new challenge on already precarious education systems.

50 “El Salvador: The Gang Called the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13).” Refugee Board of Canada. 28.

51 Ibid.

52 Hasbun, Cristina. “Aras Salvadoreñas Buscan Rehabilitación Pese a Menaces.” *EFE*. EFE News Service, 7 Nov. 2005.

53 “Honduras: The Recruitment of Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and 18th Street (Calle 18 or Mara 18) Gang Members; Whether Individuals Are Forced to Participate in Gang Activity.” *Refworld*. Refugee Board of Canada, 24 Jan. 2012.

54 Thale, Geoff. “One Year into the Gang Truce in El Salvador.” *WOLA*. 26 April 2013.

55 “Interview with Father Ismael ‘Melo’ Moreno., S.J. Personal interview. 12 Nov. 2014.

56 Aguilar Umana, Isabel, and Jeanne Rikkens. “Nine Strategies to Prevent Youth Violence in Central America: Policy Recommendations for the European Union.” *Policy Recommendations for the European Union*. Interpeace, Apr. 2012. 8.

57 Ibid, 9.

Girls are by no means exempt from the grasp of *maras*. Once identified by gangs, girls are subject to brutal initiation rituals which include sexual violence and gang rape, such as the “notorious practice of *‘el tren.’*”⁵⁸ While the ‘traditional’ role of girls as prostitutes to bring income to the gang, and serve the sexual needs of male gang members, the role of girls in gang life has broadened recently. While Northern Triangle street gangs remain highly patriarchal, girls are increasingly being targeted as strategic recruits due to the more limited attention they attract from the police.⁵⁹ Female membership has become “increasingly criminal,” as girls are used in the transport of drugs, weapons, and to lure rival male victims for robberies and kidnappings.⁶⁰ Father Melo echoed witnessing this trend in his community. He remarked that girls are transitioning beyond their ‘traditional’ roles to being actively involved in the upkeep of extortion rackets as well as being deployed as *cicarias*, or hit-women.⁶¹

Collateral Damage: Forced Migration & Migrant Minors

The type of migration patterns currently occurring from the Northern Triangle resemble displacement and migration typical of open conflicts, and as such illustrate the gravity of the phenomenon. In the Northern Triangle context, forced migration must be understood as a last recourse to the threats and violence exerted by *maras*. While the governments of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have been slow to acknowledge the extent of internal displacement within their territories, there has been an explosion in the numbers of children and families crossing into neighboring countries as well as arriving at the U.S. Border since 2011. Recent reports indicate that the main driver of the increase in migration has shifted from primarily being motivated by poverty alone or family reunification, to

increasingly reflect the perils inherent to living in societies compromised so completely by unaccountable governance structures, corruption, and organized crime.

Given the widespread nature of the Northern Triangle’s gang phenomenon, the levels of corruption and complicity of government entities, and the control of rural territories by drug cartels, safe internal relocation, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras is increasingly not a viable option for children and families facing direct threats, coercion and violence. As Jeffrey Corsetti remarks, “it is simply inconceivable that an individual or an entire family could escape the *maras* through simple relocation within their own country and begin a new life without fear of retribution.”⁶² This claim has been supported by a 2010 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which found that “given that any of the Central American gangs... have country or even region-wide reach and organization, there may generally be no realistic internal flight alternative.”⁶³ This suggests that there are even geographic limitations to last-resort alternatives in escaping violence and gang recruitment, making international border-crossing the only viable form of relocation. As a result, tens of thousands of Northern Triangle children are making perilous journeys across national boundaries to reach the United States.

Beginning in 2011, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) recorded a dramatic increase in the number of children migrating without their parents or guardians and crossing into the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The number of unaccompanied child migrants jumped from 4,059 in 2011 to 10,443 in 2012, more than doubling again in 2013 to 21,537.⁶⁴ The Department of Homeland Security estimates that this number surpassed 68,000 in FY2014.⁶⁵

58 Ibid.

59 Boulton, Michael. “Living in a World of Violence: An Introduction to the Gang Phenomenon.” 19.

60 Ibid.

61 “Interview with Father Ismael ‘Melo’ Moreno.” Personal interview. 12 Nov. 2014.

62 Corsetti, Jeffrey D. “Marked for Death: The Maras of Central America and Those Who Flee Their Wrath.” 411.

63 “Children on the Run.” UNHCR Washington. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013. 18.

64 Ibid, 4.

65 “Mision a Centroamerica: Viaje a Estados Unidos De Menores No Acompañados.” *Informe Del Comite*. 2.

In the UNHCR's publication on the plight of Central American youths, *Children on the Run*, 404 detained children from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were interviewed regarding their motivations for leaving their homes without their parents or guardians and journeying to the United States. Of the respondents, 58% cited displacement because they feared harm which constituted the need for international protection. Within the sample, 66% of Salvadoran youth interviewed cited violence by *maras* as the principal reason for fleeing the country. Among Honduran children, 44% reported that they had experienced direct threats by gangs.⁶⁶ A 2014 American Immigration Council report had similar findings. For Salvadoran children, 59% of boys and 61% of girls cited gang threats and violence as their primary reason for fleeing.⁶⁷ Of 322 minors interviewed, 109 had been pressured to join a gang.⁶⁸

This represents a truly remarkable change in migration trends for three reasons. First, there is consensus from the literature that the nature of this migration is increasingly forced rather than voluntary. Second, the perils that gangs and generalized violence present are outweighing the option of remaining in the region, and prompting children to undertake arduous, and extremely dangerous journeys—an unprecedented event since the Central American civil wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Families with very small children have likewise similarly migrated from the Northern Triangle in larger numbers, particularly in the last year, and many are now seeking asylum based on direct threats and the current conditions in the Northern Triangle. Third, one of the principal motives for fleeing has quickly become the untenable threat to life in the form of gang-directed violence from which governments in the region have been unable and often unwilling to protect their citizens. What we are witnessing is collateral damage from the new era of the region's *mara* epidemic, measured by the massive migration refugee children, families and individual asylum seekers. It is not at all surprising that the number of Northern Triangle children and families

migrating to the U.S. and other countries in the region has spiked as gangs have increasingly sought out younger members as well as the unwilling service of other children in their criminal enterprises.

Implications and Conclusions

In June of the year 2000, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report denouncing Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) for the practice of recruiting child soldiers to bolster their anti-government ranks. Within the HRW document, the RUF are accused of (1) abducting children and placing them on the front lines of combat, (2) using these children as transporters of looted goods and military equipment, and (3) capturing and raping girls who were then forced into sexual servitude.⁶⁹ The similarities between the RUF's use of child soldiers and the current practice of forced participation of youth in crimes from extortion collection to homicide by Northern Triangle street gangs are striking. Yet as Northern Triangle youth continue to be demonized by society at large - including the international community - their Sierra Leone counterparts sparked innovative programming to free and reintegrate child soldiers, spearheaded by the international community.

The Obama administration has begun to seek new avenues to innovate to help youth vulnerable to being coopted into violent extremism. President Obama remarked at a summit organized in February 2015, "But when people — especially young people — feel entirely trapped in impoverished communities, where there is no order and no path for advancement, where there are no educational opportunities, where there are no ways to support families, and no escape from injustice and the humiliations of corruption — that feeds instability and disorder, and makes those communities ripe for extremist recruitment."⁷⁰ Tertiary violence prevention strategies, the terms coined to describe programs that seek to support

66 "Children on the Run." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 6-10.

67 Ibid, 6.

68 Kennedy, Elizabeth. "No Childhood Here: Why Central American Children Are Fleeing their Homes." *American Immigration Council*, July 2014. 2-10.

69 Takirambudde, Peter. "Sierra Leone Rebels Forcefully Recruit Child Soldiers." Human Rights Watch, 1 June 2000.

70 Remarks by the President at the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, February 19, 2015 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/19/remarks-president-summit-countering-violent-extremism-february-19-2015>.

those and offer alternatives to those seeking to exit from the violent activities of organized criminal or terrorist networks has already been acknowledged as key to breaking patterns of cyclical violence.

The Northern Triangle's gang phenomenon has entered an advanced stage. It is long past time policy makers and larger society shift their understanding and overhaul domestic and international responses. These responses must be rooted not only in violence prevention in the form of creating educational and economic opportunities, but also should be aimed at breaking cyclical violence, reconciling youth with communities harmed and rehabilitating and reinserting them into communities. At the most fundamental level, it must be acknowledged that children are coerced, sometimes through grooming and sometimes under threat of torture to join or collude with *maras*. They are victims not only of gang members but also of an absent, complicit or abusive state and should not be seen as willing participants in lives of criminality. If this reframing gains traction with both the governments of El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and the international community, progressive steps can be taken to ensure greater protection, opportunities, and lasting solutions for Northern Triangle children.

From a regional standpoint, the Northern Triangle's governments must begin turning the tide on the criminalization of its youth. This begins on the front lines of citizen security with police forces and other institutions of public security. State security responses such as *mano dura* are counterproductive and exacerbate the problem by, revictimizing underserved populations as all residents of gang controlled neighborhoods are viewed as "the enemy" by militarized police. This alienates victims from the state and sows distrust of police and other state actors in communities most impacted by violence. From a pragmatic perspective, there is simply no institutional capacity for a prolongation of the status quo in terms of security policies. The Northern Triangle countries' penitentiary systems are overcrowded at twice their holding capacities, judicial systems are overwhelmed and inefficient, while police forces lack professionalism and suffer from rampant corruption.

Staying on this path – which reduces the complex drivers of gang crime and violence to questions of policing – will likely intensify insecurity. Statistics indicate that despite temporary and sporadic improvements, crime and violence have steadily increased in the region. The continued involvement of the military, paramilitary groups, and highly trained and armed special police units in anti-gang efforts will only continue to exacerbate violence. As in the past, *maras* will respond with force. Such a reaction may accelerate the practice of forced recruitment. These traumatized neighborhoods, communities, and societies need to begin the process of building back the social fabric from the ground up, deploying social workers and other professionals trained in trauma-informed care to form safe spaces where children and adults can begin to address the decades of insecurity and strengthen community cohesion.

Further, policy makers in the U.S. cannot continue to frame its understanding of conditions in the Northern Triangle as primarily an issue of immigration control. By placing resources into border enforcement and interdictions, lawmakers in Washington are focusing their attention on matters which have little relevance to what needs solving.

A re-evaluation needs to occur which recognizes that the phenomenon of gang violence and all of its coercive elements are a burden and challenge which must be shared society-wide. Solutions similar to those applied to help societies emerge and reconcile after years of more traditional forms of open conflict ought to be examined and applied where possible. Critically, the Northern Triangle governments and their societies must demonstrate significant political, economic and social commitment to forging a new path forward, embracing what will require at least a generation's worth of work to begin turning the tide on the region's expanding crisis.

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