



## The importance of territorial groups in Central America

UNODC's first global transnational organized crime threat assessment (TOCTA) (*The Globalization of Crime: A transnational organized crime threat assessment*, published in 2010) spoke of two ways of looking at organized crime. The first, and more common, is to focus on the groups involved.

The global TOCTA found, however, that most transnational organized crime is rather systemic, or market-based. As long as supply and demand exist, removing particular intermediaries is not sufficient to destroy the market. This is especially true in a globalized world.

For example, hundreds of thousands of people are illegally smuggled into the United States each year, a flow far beyond the capacity of any organized group to manage. Instead, thousands of smugglers ply the trade in an open market with low barriers to entry. The same is true of the illegal wildlife trade in Southeast Asia, or the counterfeit goods business in East Asia, or firearms trafficking in most of Africa. In fact, there are very few markets in which the current participants matter much. There are groups in every market, of course, of greater or lesser size and longevity, but the groups themselves are not the core of the problem.

Central America is an exception in this regard. In Central America, the groups are very much the core of the problem. As elsewhere, the markets, in particular the cocaine market, are a key issue, but eliminating any particular contraband flow would not eliminate the groups presently exploiting it. On the contrary, most of these groups predated the current cocaine boom, and can be expected to long outlast it.

In Central America and the Caribbean, there are two main headings under which all organized crime groups fall:

- Territory-bound organized crime groups
- Transnational trafficking groups

These two types of groups are completely different in character. Territorial groups are focused on controlling territory and taxing activity within this domain. Trafficking groups are hardly groups at all, but rather networks of suppliers, transporters, and receivers, as would be encountered in any licit supply chain. In the region, they are often referred to as “*transportistas*”. Much of the violence in the region today is about the growing control of territorial groups over transnational trafficking. This produces conflicts between territorial groups and the *transportistas*, as well as conflict between territorial groups.

Within these two broad headings, there are many distinct variations. Some territorial groups focus almost exclusively on preying on cocaine traffickers, and are known as *tumbadores* in the region. One type of territorial group, the street gang, is more about identity than illicit commerce. There are street gangs throughout the region, but those in the north, known as *maras*, are particularly violent. Each of these groups is discussed in turn. Most of the information in this chapter comes from interviews with law enforcement officers in the region, including CICIG,<sup>20</sup> in early 2012.

### Territory-bound organized crime groups

There are very few parts of the world where there is truly no one in control. Human beings are social creatures, and when left to their own devices, naturally self-organize along hierarchical lines. Even in the most war-torn and desolate areas, strongmen emerge to monopolize force and to bring order to people's lives.

The classic territorial organized crime group is a kind of state-substitute, imposing order in areas that the formal

20 CICIG: Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala

state has neglected or cannot fully control. In industrialized societies, this typically involves a geographic area, often urban, often peopled with new immigrants or others whose status is marginal. New immigrants and other socially excluded people often lack access to security, to adjudication of disputes, to job markets, to credit, and to other amenities provided to better-established residents. What we call “organized crime” often starts as a mechanism for providing many of these services.

For new immigrants and other vulnerable people, the first concern is security. Those who eventually become organized criminals may start out as public-minded youth, defending their community from the predation of those who would exploit its marginal status. Over time, these “neighbourhood watches” can morph into informal private security operations, where the community defenders are supported through voluntary contributions. As more time passes, these contributions may no longer be completely voluntary, but rather imposed as a kind of tax, and the operation becomes a protection racket. Once the neighbourhood is completely dominated, the racketeers may victimize, unopposed, the community they once protected.

This sort of territorial domination requires enforcement capacity; in other words, something like an army. There must be a clear hierarchy and a chain of command, or control will soon be lost to better-organized groups. Families may form the head of the group, often a patriarch or patriarchs and their sons, with bonds of blood allowing trust in pursuits where trust is often lacking. There must be captains, foot soldiers, informants, and aspirants: concentric circles of authority radiating from the central leadership. Without the formal mechanisms for mediating disputes, loyalty and fealty are paramount, and disloyalty is punishable by death.

These territory-bound groups are intensely concerned with local affairs, and this limits the scope of what they can do. They can demand tribute (extortion), give credit at usurious rates (loan sharking), and dictate local employment conditions (labour racketeering) within their zones of influence. With their money and community standing, they can even affect voting outcomes and wield considerable political clout. They may move into high-level corruption, such as public procurement fraud. Once secure in their status as political patrons, they can engage in acquisitive crime at will, selling stolen property and smuggled goods with impunity.

Vice markets are, of course, a key component of organized crime. Since vice markets have security implications, they are the first to be targeted, and the credibility of any organized crime group rests on how well it controls its vice markets. In many cases, though, the groups themselves do not run these rackets. Rather, they provide protection for those that do, and derive a tax or tribute from street operators.

In addition to this broad portfolio of local activities, many groups have to fight with rival outfits within or outside their community to maintain their dominance. They have to ensure that they are paid due “respect,” or the whole system collapses. This means they spend an undue amount of time addressing symbolic infractions, sending messages to their constituencies about who is in control.

As a result, they usually have little attention span left for matters beyond their geographic area of dominance. Territorial groups in Central America may dabble in transnational trafficking, but this is unlikely to persist in the long term. By controlling wholesale supply and distribution territory, they already command the highest value links in the supply chain. Since they are unlikely to be challenged in their own territory, they can subcontract out almost all of the risk. In most cases, they subcontract street distribution as well, and so can focus on what they know best: controlling territory.

There is one exception: territorial groups can become directly involved in trafficking if their geographic position demands it. Local affairs become international affairs when the territory concerned abuts an international border. Nearly every pairing of countries differs in internal regulations, and most are still protected by some sort of tariff barriers. These represent revenue opportunities to criminals stationed near the frontier. For example, if cigarettes are taxed at a high rate in one country and a lower one next-door, great profits can be made exploiting this differential, particularly by those with the distribution networks. This is true for agricultural controls, fuel subsidies, pharmaceutical regulations; disharmony in national policies creates a kind of potential difference between neighbouring states, and this is the voltage on which many border-bound organized crime groups run.

Nowhere in the world is the potential difference between states greater than along the border of Mexico and the United States. The crossing points between these two countries – known locally as “*plazas*” – are the basis for many of the Mexican territorial criminal groups. But the groups are heterogeneous, and the most successful are those that do not fit the traditional model. There are two that today eclipse all the others, and these are the only two relevant to Central America and the Caribbean: the *Cartel del Pacífico* (an alliance between the Sinaloa Federation and the Gulf Cartel) and the *Zetas* (*Los Zetas*).

The “Sinaloa Cartel” (1969-2005) originates from the state in Mexico most associated with drug production, and this has given it some unusual characteristics. Unlike many of the other drug trafficking organizations, the “Sinaloa Cartel” has not focused exclusively on cocaine, but has long produced and trafficked cannabis, heroin, and methamphetamine. Sinaloa is not a border state, so the group has had to make alliances with those along the border to allow contraband to pass through their *plazas* into the United

States. This is why the group went from being called the “Sinaloa Cartel” to being called the “Federation”<sup>21</sup> (2006-2010)– its need for allied or subordinate groups has given it an expansionary quality not seen in strictly territorial organizations. This has given it a more business-like approach, but it has also led it into conflict. More recently the “Federation” joined forces with the Gulf Cartel to create the so-called *Cartel del Pacífico*, for the purpose of fighting the Zetas.

The Zetas did not start out as a territorial group at all, but as the coercive wing of the Gulf Cartel. They have no territorial affinity, but they do, as a illegal armed group, have the ability to conquer and hold trafficking areas. These areas, run by semi-independent cells, facilitate transnational trafficking by securing nodes of safety. In the areas in which they operate, the Zetas don’t just engage in drug trafficking, however, but in a range of predatory activities: taxing and directing drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking. They are like *tumbadores* in many respects – criminals in the criminal world.

These two rivals conduct their affairs in Central America through proxies and local allies for the most part. Representatives of the *Cartel del Pacífico* or the Zetas may be spotted negotiating deals abroad, but it is rare for them to be directly involved in foreign operations. When they need something accomplished south of the Mexican border, they can generally contract this work out to their contacts in the region.

The exception to this rule involves the Zetas in Guatemala. Their influence in the south started with their recruitment of Guatemalan special forces soldiers (*kaibiles*), evidence of which emerged when some were arrested in Mexico in 2005, long before the Zetas split from the Gulf Cartel.<sup>22</sup> The Zetas are said to have moved into Guatemala itself around 2008 and created a local chapter. Since then, they have featured prominently in the violence in the country.<sup>23</sup>

Around 150 members of the Zetas have been arrested in Guatemala, both Mexican and Guatemalan nationals.<sup>24</sup> While it appears that the Guatemalan branch has some autonomy, they report to their Mexican superiors. As will be discussed below, they have been involved in a number of violent incidents, particularly in the northern provinces of Petén and Alta Verapaz.

### Guatemalan criminal groups

In addition to local chapters of Mexican organizations, Central America has its own territorial groups. Historically, they have been most active in Guatemala, where there are at least four major borderland territory-bound organized crime groups, but they have also grown in prominence in Honduras since the 2009 coup.

Starting in the northeast of Guatemala, the Mendoza family is said to operate in the department (province) of Izabal, on the border of Honduras. Izabal contains the important port of Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean, and is along the most direct path from the Honduran coast to Petén and onward to Mexico. After the death of its patriarch, four brothers assumed leadership over this family, which is active in both licit and illicit commerce.<sup>25</sup>

Although its interests extend into Petén, the Mendoza crime family has long been centered in their hometown of Morales, along the road from the Honduran border to the north. They are landholders (*ganaderos* – “cattle ranchers”), and the territories they control are of interest to international agribusiness. As a result, in addition to running drugs, the Mendozas have been implicated in anti-union violence and other attacks against local farm workers.<sup>26</sup> They have a mix of legitimate and illicit business interests and longstanding political connections. One of the brothers is both the spokesperson of the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Football and the President of the Heredia football club. This is not unusual for crime families: many dabble in football and horse racing. These sports provide a way to turn profits into instant social capital.

21 In 2006 the criminal organizations from Juárez, Sinaloa, Guadalajara and Milenio created the “Federation”. The objective was to gain strategic territory over the Pacific corridor, the Yucatán peninsula and some border points along the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, in order to facilitate their trafficking activities (in particular, cocaine) to the United States. However internal struggles arose within the “Federation” leading to its implosion.

22 Otero, S. ‘Confirman presencia kaibile.’ *El Universal*, 31 October 2005. [http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id\\_nota=131520&tabla=nacion](http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_nota=131520&tabla=nacion)

23 Some examples include:

-The March 2008 ambush and murder of Juancho León and his brother, Haroldo in May 2011.

-A series of incidents in Alta Verapaz in 2010, including a gun fight at a shopping mall, resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency in that province from December to February.

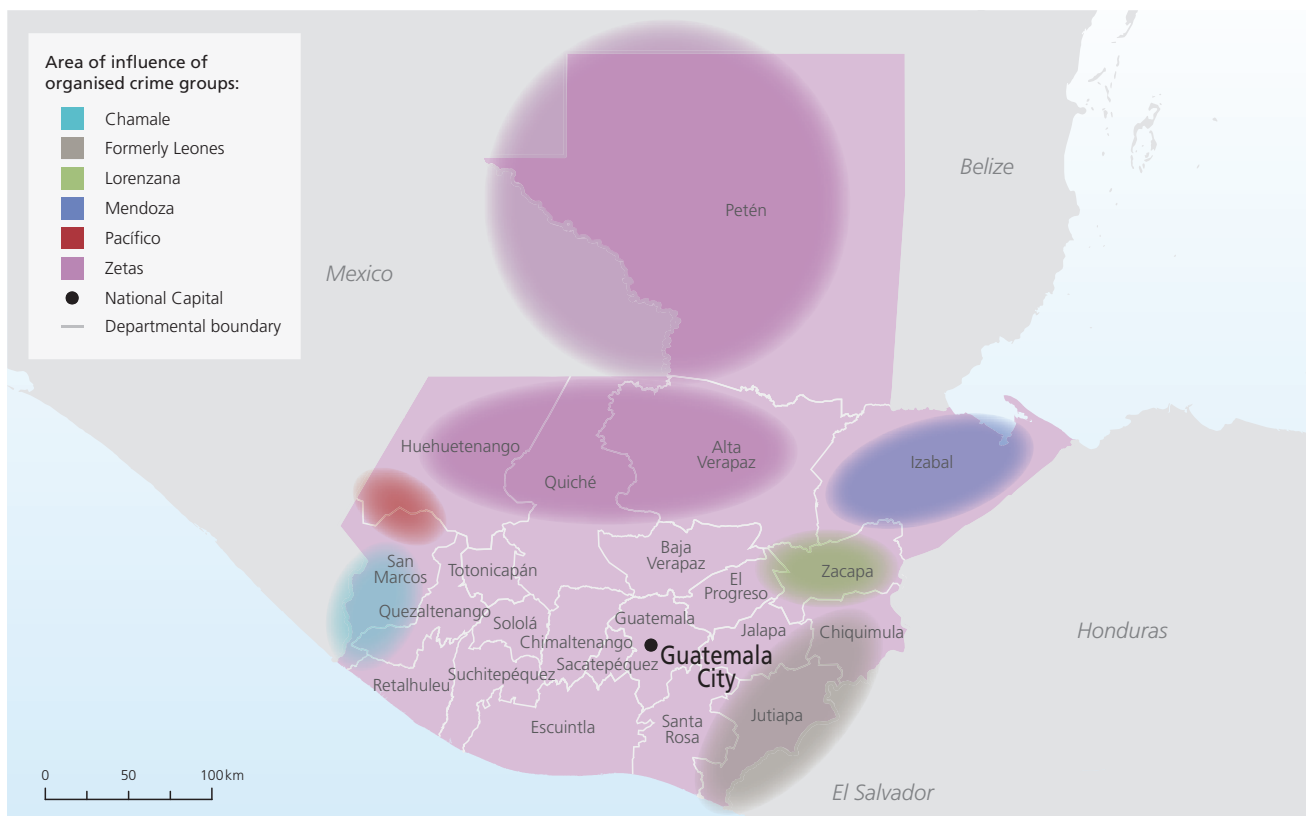
-The massacre and beheading of 27 farmworkers at a Petén ranch in May 2011, resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency in that province.

-A series of incidents, including grenade attacks, that resulted in the extension of the Petén state of emergency.

24 Interview with CICIG. Among these were the alleged second-in-command, Marvin Campos Pena (known as *El Chombo*); Alvaro Gomez Sanchez (known as *El Sapo*), purported head of logistics; and Hugo Alvaro Gomez Vasquez (known as *La Bruja*), a former *kaibil*.

25 The four are said to be Walter Obdulio Mendoza Matta (50), Milton Oswaldo (47), Edwin Alfredo (52) and Haroldo (46).

26 See *Aldana et al v Del Monte Fresh Produce*. Case No. 01-3399, United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, and the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Appeal (16 F.3d 1242 (2005)). [http://www.rightsaction.org/pdf/izabal\\_full.pdf](http://www.rightsaction.org/pdf/izabal_full.pdf) <http://www.villagevoice.com/content/printVersion/178143/>

**Map 2: Territorial groups in Guatemala, 2012**

Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region

The Lorenzanas, in contrast, are longstanding *transportistas*, and smuggled a variety of goods prior to becoming active in the cocaine trade. Their territorial characteristics are relatively new, and may be prompted by their alliance with the Zetas. They are centered to the south of the Mendozas in Zacapa department, particularly the municipality of La Reforma, but also have interests in the provinces of Alta and Baja Verapaz, and Petén. Like the Mendozas, they have lost their patriarch, Waldemar Lorenzana Lima, but to prison, not death. The 71-year-old patriarch was arrested in April 2011, during a rare trip without bodyguards outside his area of control. Police also arrested his son, Eliu Elixander (41). The business continues to be run by his other sons.<sup>27</sup>

The Mendozas had been traditional allies of the Gulf Cartel, transporting cocaine northward to the east coast of Mexico, the Gulf's area of influence, while groups allied with the former "Sinaloa Cartel" were trafficking along the west coast. After the Zetas split from the Gulf Cartel, the Mendozas became their enemy, and the Zetas formed an alliance with the Lorenzanas. As the Gulf began to lose its influence further south, the Mendozas allied with the "Federation". This created a tricky situation for both groups, because the trafficking routes lost their clear

geographic delineation. As Honduras became an increasingly attractive destination for both groups, the logistics became more complicated still.

The Mendozas and the Lorenzanas are said to have once had a non-aggression pact, based in part on their joint opposition to a third group, *Los Leones*. This group, headed by Juan José "Juancho" León Ardón, was traditionally involved in trafficking along the Salvadoran border, and later became an ally of the Gulf Cartel in cocaine trafficking. Perhaps due to the Gulf's loss of power, *Los Leones* became *tumbadores*, focusing on robberies of other group's cocaine shipments. This led to the assassination of Juancho and 10 of his men in 2008. *Los Leones* continued to operate under the leadership of his brother, Haroldo, until he was murdered, allegedly by the Zetas, in 2011. Today, very little of the organization appears to remain, with the Zetas assuming control of their former operations. This led to further geographic disarray, because Juancho's territories extend into the south of the country, near areas associated with the *Cartel del Pacífico*.

A fourth territorial Guatemalan group of note are *Los Chamales*, followers of Juan "Chamale" Ortiz López and his brother, Rony. This group worked closely with the "Federation" for some time, focusing on the department of San Marcos, running from the Pacific coast along the Mexican border, an area long used for smuggling people, foodstuffs, subsidized Mexican petrol, and other goods. *Los*

<sup>27</sup> These are said to be Waldemar Lorenzana Cordón (46), and Haroldo Jeremias (45). There is also a fourth son, Abaldino, about whom little is known.

Los Mendozas	
Origin	Traditional territory dominating group with roots in Morales and the border areas of Izabal. The family developed its business interests in the 1980s, extending their influence into Petén. In the 1990s, they moved into drug trafficking and are now one of the most powerful drug-trafficking organizations in the country.
No. of members	Unknown. Believed to have hundreds of members in Guatemala.
Areas of influence	Guatemala: Petén, Izabal, some areas of the Caribbean coast (Livingston, Río Dulce); centered in Morales.
Organization	Family-based organization led by the Mendoza brothers.
Relations with other groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formerly allies of the Gulf Cartel.</li> <li>- Currently allied with the <i>Cartel del Pacífico</i>.</li> <li>- Had a working agreement with the Lorenzanas, the status of which is unclear.</li> <li>- Enemies of the Zetas due to their former Gulf alliance.</li> </ul>
Activities	Drug trafficking (mainly cocaine), agriculture, other businesses (hotels, gas stations, construction), procurement fraud. Agricultural land provides landing strips and storage areas for cocaine trafficking.
Violence	The Mendozas have been accused of kidnapping and sometimes killing local farmers in order to acquire land. In the late 1990s, the United States fruit export company Del Monte hired them as a private security agency to deal with local labour unrest and land acquisition. They are well-equipped and make use of military-style firearms.

Los Lorenzanas	
Origin	Traditional contraband smuggling family that started operations in the 1990s in the department of Zacapa, Guatemala.
No. of members	Less numerous than the Mendozas, they have about one hundred members.
Areas of influence	Guatemala: western states (parts of Izabal, Zacapa), Petén, border area with Honduras and Belize.
Organization	Family-based organization composed of a father (Waldemar Lorenzana Lima) and his four sons, with other relatives also involved in their business. After the patriarch's arrest, son Haroldo appears to be in charge.
Relations with other groups	Alliance with the Zetas.
Activities	Evolution from contraband activities of all kinds to narco-trafficking, in particular cocaine trafficking.
Violence	In Guatemala, they are believed to be responsible for 20 to 25 homicides/year, that is to say less than 1% of the homicides recorded in 2011. Many of the murders they are responsible for may remain unrecorded as they often hide bodies in remote areas.

Los Chamales	
Origin	Started operations in the 1990s in the department of San Marcos in Guatemala, working for the <i>Sinaloa Cartel</i> as "transportistas".
No. of members	Unknown-believed to have a couple of hundred members.
Areas of influence	Guatemala: northern province of San Marcos (Malacatán, Tecún Umán), at the border with Mexico (strategic location close to Mexico and the Pacific coast).
Organization	Family and territory-based organization believed to be recruiting among police and military ranks. Leaders: Juan Ortiz López (until his arrest in March 2011), his brother, Rony, and Mauro Salomón Ramírez.
Relations with other groups	Alliance with the <i>Cartel del Pacífico</i> and the Mendoza family.
Activities	Cocaine trafficking, opium poppy and cannabis production, corruption (at the local level in the areas they control), money-laundering (shell companies).
Violence	Believed to be responsible for approximately 50 homicides per year in Guatemala. Engaged in kidnapping, extortion and land expropriation.

*Chamales* have long cultivated community support in this largely mestizo area, and Juan Ortiz is himself a pastor in a church he funds.

Due to this support and the preponderance of smuggling activities in the region, the people of Chamale territory have little use for the state, and many of the municipalities, including some on the border, have no police presence at all. Residents have actually detained police for attempting

to enforce the law, before ejecting them from the municipality. *Los Chamales* have suffered from a series of high-level arrests, including Juan Ortiz himself (in 2011), his associate Mauro "León del Mar" Salomón Ramírez (2010), and Alma "La Tía" Lucrecia Hernández (2011). Despite these setbacks, the organization appears to remain viable.

### Transnational trafficking networks (*transportistas*)

Transnational trafficking networks can be seen as a second kind of organized crime group, although they are “groups” only in the loosest sense of the word. As with any business, relationships between suppliers, transportation agents, and buyers may be longstanding, but they are not exclusive. Each link is free to form bonds with others, and there is no common source of authority or pooling of funds. So long as all are satisfied, these linkages may endure, but like any commercial supply chain, the loss of a link is easily accommodated. They are essentially economic entities.

These *transportistas*, as they are known locally, operate very much like any licit transportation company. They do not need the rigid structures essential to territory-bound groups, because they do not seek to control territory and, for the most part, they are not in direct competition with one another. Their goal is to bring merchandise from point A to point B, and there are generally many ways of doing this. Quite often, both point A and point B are under the control of territory-bound groups, and so they may become peripherally embroiled in conflicts between them. But their goal is fly under the radar, and they do best when they are least noticed.

Cartel de Taxis	
Origin	This group gained visibility at the beginning of the 2000s. They are historically based in the municipality of Metapán and Texistepeque, in the northwest region of El Salvador (department of Santa Ana), where they smuggle drugs from Honduras to Guatemala through El Salvador.
No. of members	Unknown.
Areas of influence	Based in Metapán, they transport drugs from Honduras through the northwest regions of El Salvador to Guatemala, controlling the route known as “ <i>el caminito</i> ”.
Organization	No vertical hierarchy. The “cartel” consists of transportation agents, allegedly controlled by its three high-level founders.
Relations with other groups	Work with Honduran and Guatemalan trafficking organizations. Links with high level politicians, security authorities, judges, prosecutors.
Activities	Smuggling of drugs (mostly cocaine), corruption, money-laundering.
Violence	Characterized by their business approach to cocaine trafficking, they use bribery and corruption rather than violence to manage their activities.

Los Perrones	
Origin	First appeared in Santa Rosa de Lima, a municipality of the province of La Unión, in the eastern part of El Salvador (close to the border with Nicaragua) as a transport company owned by Reynerio de Jesús Flores Lazo. They started their illicit activities in the late 1990s, becoming involved in smuggling all types of contraband (food, clothes, cheese etc.) from El Salvador to Honduras and Guatemala. They soon shifted to cocaine trafficking and expanded their activities to Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica, becoming one of the most famous transportista groups in the region.
No. of members	Small organization, about 15 key members.
Areas of influence	Two geographical divisions in El Salvador: <i>Los Perrones orientales</i> : San Miguel, Usulután, La Unión. <i>Los Perrones occidentales</i> : Santa Ana. Also present in Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (through establishing transport companies).
Organization	All original members have been captured, including Reynerio de Jesús Flores Lazo (the historical leader of the organization) but some claim the organization is still operating in parts of the country. The organization was composed of a national leader and members who are in charge of transportation logistics and drivers (mostly truck drivers).
Relations with other groups	- Alliances with Mexican criminal organizations, in particular the <i>Cartel del Pacífico</i> (Chapo Guzman hired Reynerio Flores to smuggle cocaine to Guatemala and transport money to Panama). - Local political alliances and links with businessmen. - Believed to have established some links with the <i>maras</i> (hired as an additional force for some operations).
Activities	Contraband of any type, cocaine trafficking.
Violence	Not believed to have generated particular levels of violence, mostly due to their support from the police and local authorities.

Outside of Guatemala and Honduras, most Central American and Caribbean drug trafficking groups are networks of *transportistas*. The most famous are found in El Salvador, a country where territorial drug trafficking groups do not seem to be a factor. *Los Perrones* and *El Cartel de Taxis* are two Salvadoran *transportista* groups that have received a good deal of attention, but they are unlikely to be unique. *Los Perrones* are simply a shipping company gone criminal, providing the vehicles and the drivers to move a wide range of contraband, including drugs. The *Taxis* organization is entirely different, and a rare example of high-level corruption preceding the trafficking. In neither case is violence much of an issue, because both groups focus on moving drugs, not controlling territory.

### Predatory groups (*tumbadores*)

Popular portrayals of drug traffickers depict them as predators, heavily armed and ruthless. While this is true of the territory-dominating groups, *transportistas* are actually highly vulnerable, moving in small teams and operating in out-of-the-way places so as to avoid the attention of law enforcement. Given the value of their cargo, it is not surprising that gangs specializing in drug robbery, known locally as *tumbadores*, have emerged all along the trafficking chain.

*Tumbador* groups are often founded by former *transportistas*, but most appear to be based on territorial groups. They ambush cocaine shipments using surprise and larger numbers of personnel. Once established as a credible threat, they may also extort money from traffickers, and may engage in other street crime.

### Street gangs (*maras*)

Street gangs are a variant of the classic territorial organized crime groups, their main distinguishing feature being that they are comprised almost entirely of youth (with “youth” being extended into the 20s and even 30s in societies where education and opportunities are limited). In the region, they are usually not classified as “organized crime groups” because their focus is not on financial gain. While this is true, it is also true of many territorial groups. Acquisitive crime is but one means to dominating territory.

Being comprised of impulsive young people, most street gangs lack the capacity to engage in pseudo-state functions. They may provide security from interlopers, and their money may benefit family and friends, but they generally do not engage in any pretense of being community servants. They are intensely concerned with local affairs, however. For them, territorial control is about identity, about “respect,” and about their place in the world. This orienta-

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)	
Origin	Created by Salvadoran immigrants who fled the country during the civil war and settled in Los Angeles in the 1980s, the gang first appeared as a way of protecting the Salvadoran community from the gangs of other ethnic communities and other Central American immigrants joined rapidly. At the end of the civil wars in Central America (1996), the United States started deporting Central American immigrants convicted of certain offences. These deportees effectively imported Los Angeles-style gang culture to the post-conflict societies of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.
No. of members	El Salvador: 12,000 Honduras: 7,000 Guatemala: 5,000
Distinctive signs	Tattoos, graffiti, hand signs, slang. <i>Mano dura</i> laws that made gang membership a criminal offence have forced gang members to abandon some of these signature behaviors, such as tattooing the face.
Areas of influence	Present in urban areas of El Salvador (San Salvador, Santa Ana, Sonsonate, La Libertad, San Miguel), Guatemala (Guatemala City, Chimaltenango, San José Pinula, Mixco, Villanueva), and Honduras.
Organization	Organized by “cliques” ( <i>clicas</i> ) in control of a small territory, the “barrio”. Local leaders are often referred to as “cabecillas,” “palabrerros” or “ranfleros”. <i>Las Maras permanentes</i> are the members with the longest experience inside the gang, whereas the <i>Novatos</i> and <i>Simpatizantes</i> have less experience and therefore less power. Members in charge of killings are known as “sicarios” or “gatilleros”. The nine leaders of the most powerful <i>clicas</i> form the “Comisión,” whose functions may include the right to activate the <i>luz verde</i> , a green light to the death sentence on a mara member found guilty of insubordination. As a result of <i>mano dura</i> policies which contributed to massive imprisonment of mareros, incarcerated members now organize their main operations from jails, communicating with the cabecillas through mobile phones.
Relations with other groups	Historical rivals of Mara 18. May work on an ad-hoc basis for drug trafficking organizations.
Activities	Mainly extortion (bus companies, local businesses, individuals), street-level drug trafficking (cannabis and some cocaine), theft and robberies, murder-for-hire.
Violence	While undeniably violent, the share of national homicides attributable to MS-13 varies between countries, and remains controversial.

Mara 18 (M-18)	
Origin	Unlike Mara Salvatrucha, Mara 18 (or the "18th Street Gang") was created by Mexican immigrants in 1959 in the Pico Union district in Los Angeles, California. At the time, the gang was created to protect themselves from other ethnic gangs, and they incorporated other Latinos, including Central American refugees. Under the United States immigration policies of the 1990s, foreign-born residents with criminal charges were deported to their home countries, which contributed to the spreading of the gang culture in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle.
No. of members	Guatemala: 14,000-17,000 El Salvador: 8,000-10,000 Honduras: 5,000
Distinctive signs	Tattoos, graffiti, hand signs, slang, but as with MS-13, <i>mano dura</i> laws have forced M-18 members to be less publicly-identifiable in appearance.
Areas of influence	Present in urban areas of El Salvador (San Salvador, Santa Ana, Sonsonate, La Libertad, San Miguel), Guatemala (Guatemala City, San Marcos, Xela, Antigua etc.), Honduras (Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula), Mexico, and the United States. Some members have been recently arrested in Panama and Costa Rica.
Organization	Like MS-13, Mara 18 is also organized by local subdivisions known as <i>clicas</i> which are more or less independent from each other. There is also an internal hierarchy inside the <i>clica</i> : the " <i>ranflero</i> " is the leader, the " <i>llaveros</i> " his close partners and the " <i>soldados</i> " obey the " <i>llaveros</i> ". The " <i>chequeos</i> " are the members who have recently been integrated. Their putative national structure, the " <i>rueda de barrio</i> ," brings together the " <i>ranfleros</i> " of the 15 most powerful <i>clicas</i> in the country.
Relations with other groups	Historical rivals of the MS-13. Opportunistic alliances with other M-18 members and <i>clicas</i> in other countries.
Activities	Extortion (bus companies, local businesses, private individuals), street-level drug trafficking (cannabis and some cocaine), theft, murder-for-hire.
Violence	While undeniably violent, the share of national homicides attributable to M-18 varies between countries, and remains controversial.

tion often causes them to act against their financial interest, feuding with similar groups over perceived insults or symbolic incursions. Conflict seems to be an essential part of their existence, their group identity rooted in whom they oppose.

The *maras* of Central America are street gangs. They are often referred to as "transnational gangs," but this term is misleading. They do have an international origin and exist in several countries, but there is very little evidence that this has changed their central focus on local affairs. The two major factions – *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Mara 18* – both trace their origins to East Los Angeles, and their presence in Central America is almost certainly a result of the wave of criminal deportations from the United States to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras after 1996. There remain *mara* members in the United States and Mexico, in addition to those in the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador). But these facts should not be mistaken for evidence that they operate transnationally, or that they all respond to some international chain of command.

The emergence of the *maras* in Central America was not an act of colonization. Rather, the influence of the deportees appears to be primarily cultural. *Pandilla* groups in the region predate the emergence of the *maras*.<sup>28</sup> Countries that

received relatively few deportees, or those whose expatriates were not located in the gang areas of the country, did not pick up the *mara* culture. For example, Nicaragua has long had a history of street gangs, but does not have a *mara* problem because most Nicaraguans who migrated to the United States settled in Florida rather than California. Pre-existing *pandillas* may have been converted to one *mara* or the other based on personal connections or in reaction to the allegiance of other *pandillas*.

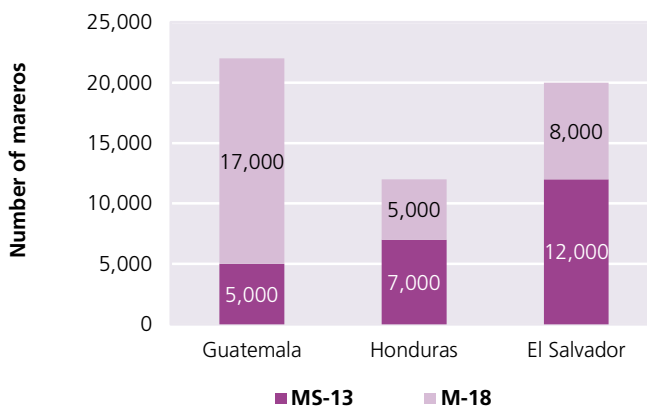
It has also been claimed that *mara* groups have gone beyond their street focus to acquire a political or even insurgent character, engaging in behavior that has been described as "terrorism," such as mass executions of innocents. In most instances, however, these incidents were tied to pre-existing extortion operations, particularly regarding public transport. Whatever the rhetoric surrounding them, these acts appear to be instrumental, ensuring that local communities know their place in relation to the *maras*. No street gang has aspirations of overthrowing the state.

Local police assert that there exists a national leadership hierarchy, with larger "programmes" (MS-13) or "tribes" (M-18) giving direction to local "cliques" (MS-13) or "courts" (M-18). In MS-13, it is even alleged that there is a top leader called "Master Homie," an anonymous figure who keeps a very low profile. The authorities do concede,

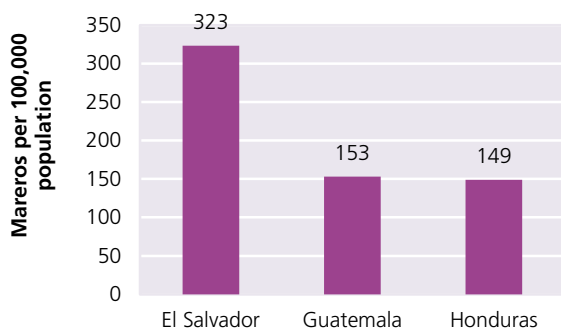
<sup>28</sup> The *pandilla* doesn't necessarily imply criminal activities, but rather refers to a group of people linked together by a set of beliefs, an identity, or common

interests. In El Salvador, *pandillas* were often based on a common school affiliation, and were known as *pandillas estudiantiles* or *pandillas juveniles*.



**Figure 20: Mara membership in the Northern Triangle, in 2012**

Source: Law enforcement interviews

**Figure 21: Mareros per 100,000 population, in 2012**

Source: Law enforcement interviews

however, that the degree of cooperation varies considerably, and that some cliques or courts are at war with others within the same *mara*. The power of this centralized authority over the various local chapters was recently put to the test, when the two major *mara* factions in El Salvador agreed to a church-brokered truce that has apparently dramatically reduced homicide levels. Time will tell whether cohesion can be maintained.

The mass imprisonment of tattooed youth under the *mano dura* (“iron fist”) policies of the region did much to build connections between cliques previously affiliated only by a common name. Still, the quantity and quality of these linkages vary considerably, and there has been little evidence of substantial transnational activity. While individuals may rise to higher levels of criminality, the *maras* as a whole remain very much street gangsters, focused on local affairs.

One distinguishing characteristic of the Central American street gangs is that the “streets” in question are often made of dirt. In the Northern Triangle, a large share of the population is found in the capital cities, which generally represent the only cities with populations in excess of one million. The *maras*, however, are found in a much wider range of locales, including many towns with less than 50,000 inhabitants. For example, in Guatemala, the municipality of Coloma in the department of Quetzaltenango has a

population of about 40,000, yet 22 *mareros* were arrested there in 2011. In the same province, the municipality of Sibilia, with a population of 8,000, still managed to arrest three *mareros*. At the same time, some municipalities with more than 100,000 residents arrested no *mara* members at all.

Much has been made of potential synergies between *maras* and the Mexican drug trafficking organizations, but it is hard to see how such cooperation could proceed. Typically, drug trafficking organizations find street gang members bothersome, and “social cleansing” operations by territorial groups are common, in Central America and elsewhere. These programmes can win community support for territorial groups, and prevent the *maras* from growing into a major inconvenience. *Mara* members do buy drugs from traffickers for local distribution, but this comprises such a small portion of trafficker revenues that contacts are generally kept to a minimum.

If individual *mara* members could be persuaded to leave their brothers behind, they could provide potential recruits, but joining a territorial organized crime group would require a major reorientation in values. *Mara* groups could assure that drugs passing through their areas are unhindered, but these territories are generally small. They could accept responsibility for storing drugs and assuring no police interference. They could provide killers-for-hire. There is evidence that some of this has occurred in parts of the region.<sup>29</sup> But many of these functions could be provided by other groups, without all the baggage associated with street gang members.

This baggage is considerable. Street gangs are comprised of marginalized youth, who by nature are highly unpredictable. They are largely uneducated and many lack basic skills, such as functional literacy and the ability to drive a car. To maintain control of their turf, these groups are obliged to engage in periodic demonstrations of violence, drawing unwanted attention. And even with regard to violence, they are not especially skilled – most learned to shoot from their peers. Secrets shared with leadership may trickle down the chain of command, leaving the fate of millions of dollars in merchandise in the hands of reckless youth. Siding with one of the two umbrella groups – MS-13 or M-18 – can mean making an enemy of the other, entangling transnational traffickers in local feuds that generate no profit. And because each clique remains independent, a contract made with one clique will not necessarily be honored by others. Securing a land route through gang territories would mean negotiating and maintaining a series of deals with inherently undependable partners. On the whole, it is difficult to see how becoming entangled with the *maras* would be in the interest of the professional drug traffickers.

<sup>29</sup> For example, in Honduras, in Bajo Aguan, department of Colón, a group called Mara 61 is allegedly hired by local traffickers to provide security and logistical support for their operations. There has also been evidence that M-18 was hired by the Zetas to perform hits in Honduras.

It is also difficult to see why it would be necessary. Setting aside all the cocaine trafficked by sea and air, the land routes typically make use of the major highways, including CA1, CA2, and other commercial arteries, crossing at official checkpoints, concealed in cargoes, and facilitated by corruption. Given their limited presence on the road or at border crossing points, it is unclear how the *maras* would find out about these shipments, let alone be in a position to facilitate or impede them.

The Zetas are chronically short of manpower, and so may recruit *mareros* with promise, but on an institutional level, they will most likely continue to use the *maras* instrumentally. Anything beyond this should be regarded as a true act of desperation on the part of the Zetas, and would likely lead to their downfall.

### The importance of sub-state groups

All of the major territorial organized crime groups in Central America had an identity before becoming involved in cocaine trafficking. This is because cocaine trafficking does not produce territorial groups – it produces *transportistas*. If the *transportistas* could do their business unimpeded by territorial groups, they would do so, and the impact of drug trafficking on transit countries would be much less. But once trafficking routes start to transit extended areas of land, and particularly land border crossings, they collide with pre-existing interests. On borders, these interests are already controlling smuggling, with expertise in clandestine crossing and high-level connections to corrupt officials. At first, they may simply tax the trade, but soon they control it. While transiting their areas raises costs, the cargo may ultimately be more secure than on the open seas.

It is a fundamental misconception to view these territorial groups as primarily cocaine trafficking operations. They are alternative forms of governance. The cocaine has made many more powerful than they could ever have hoped to be otherwise, but because cocaine did not create these groups, removing cocaine will not destroy them. In fact, eliminating key revenue streams can actually make territorial groups become more violent, as they turn to acquisitive crime to replace lost income. The mechanics of the cocaine flow and the relationship of these groups to it is the subject of the next chapter.