ODUMUNC 39

Economic and Social Council

Curbing Gang Violence and Membership

By: Jared Walker

Introduction

In many regions of the world, gangs are emerging as a leading problem of crime and social disruption. Criminal gangs are present everywhere, but pose the greatest challenges to human security and sometimes political stability in Central America and West Africa. They also are serious problems in the Caribbean, North and South America, Southern Africa and South Asia. Gangs have a greater effect on ordinary lives, causing immediate and long-term problems. Where gang problems are worst, such as in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, homicide rates are the highest in the world, surpassing rates of violent death in countries at war like Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

But gangs also have a degree of popular support. They provide their members with a strong sense of identity and can represent the needs of their communities. Political leaders may cultivate them as a base of political support, albeit sometimes violent. States that try to fight them violently tend to lose. Gang problems often require careful, nuanced multinational responses, something individual states may find difficult, where the UN sometimes can lead more effectively.

Because of their power over immediate social affairs—day to day life—can be very strong, gangs are widely seen as a greater security problem than traditional threats to state security. The danger of foreign attack or rebel uprising usually is small and remote, but the effects of gangs can be immediate and unavoidable. States often are unsure how to respond. The instruments that are easiest to use, especially the military patrolling and heavy policing, may be ineffective against gangs, who are dexterous enough to avoid such crude responses. State actions may even be counterproductive,

worsening the problems of afflicted regions and cities, making people's lives harder, and contributing to anger against the state and support for the gangs. The problem can be much like the challenge of insurgent warfare, and require the same delicate response, something states often are very bad at.
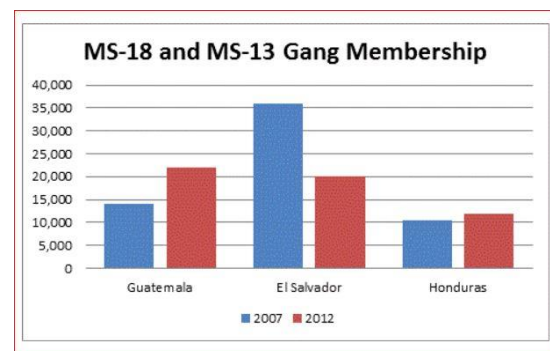
Estimated membership in major gangs in
three Central American counties

Gangs directly cause serious social problems, and indirectly lead to enormous lost opportunities, including lost economic development. With hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of members, gangs can be a pathological response to social dislocation and lack of opportunity. They can serve important social purposes, often giving their members a sense of personal and social identity, safety from other gangs and the economic opportunities of illegal enterprise.

They also cause great destruction to the lives of people they touch, and block economic development for the individuals, neighborhoods, regions and societies they afflict.
Gangs include youth gangs, composed mostly of younger members, especially boys, who have not reached the legal age of consent or majority. Other gangs include large numbers of older

members. Both types of gangs are a form of organized crime.

Reducing gangs and the impact of lives requires international collaboration. Through globalization, illicit trade and migration, gangs have become a multi-national phenomenon. They often rely on family, neighborhood and ethnic relationships to build cross-country connections, gaining opportunities for enrichment, and spreading their pathologies. While most states prefer to respond to gang problems alone, using their own resources, sovereign action may be ineffective or even counterproductive, making gang problems worse, or pushing them to other countries.

Gang members in El Salvador

Basic problems of gangs

Gangs are extremely diverse, organized in many different ways. What unites them is a tendency to engage in organized crime and require major social commitments among their members. Unlike other organized crime, their members do not gather exclusively for criminal projects. Instead they are part of daily life, offering social identity and protection to their members, but also making escape difficult or impossible. Whether they teenage street gangs, well-organized North American gangs like the Crips and Bloods, Central American Maras, or long-established gangs like the Italian Mafia and Cosa Nostra, the effects are similar:

- Gangs cause direct suffering from violence and intimidation, including homicides, non-lethal violence, crime against property and trafficking in illegal drugs and human trafficking (especially women and girls enslaved for prostitution). They rely on extortion, demanding money from residents and business for protection (against rival gangs but also from their own threats to local residents).

- Gangs undermine human potential. When children and teenagers join gangs their chance of social and economic advancement declines. Most gang members are poor, with little hope of rising above it. With imprisonment they become further marginalized. Physical marks of gang membership, such as extensive tattoos, condemn them to lives outside the mainstream of society. Gangs harm everyone by blocking economic development. Banks and business are unwilling to invest in areas where gangs will tax or destroy their investments.

- Gangs undermining order. Where gangs rise, governments recede. Gangs become the effective rulers of their regions or territories. Because they are permanent residents, they have advantages over state agencies, which tend to be intermittently there. Gang authority replaces state authority. Local residents, whether they want to or not, must go to gang leaders to get their problems solved, and are often forces to become supporters or contributors to the gang. The region becomes isolated. Outsiders no longer will visit or invest there. The opportunities for regional investment and economic development become less and less likely, and

residents become trapped, unable to escape.

- Gangs encourage transnational crime, spreading through the same methods of globalization familiar from legitimate economics, trade and human movement. They spread between countries, effectively exporting criminal problems and pathologies.

Role of the UN

Gang violence issues pose a serious problem for the United Nations. Because the UN is its member states, it reflects their specific interests. Above all, states are concerned to strengthen their national sovereignty. They fight gang violence because it undermines their power and authority, as well as the welfare of their people. They are careful when turning to the UN; since international measures tend to force states to act and restrict their freedom. They do not want to replace their gang problem with a UN problem. But international action is essential to deal with issues like transnational gang activity, international trafficking, and support weak states struggling to cope with gang problems originating on their territories. How to balance these needs?

The usual UN solution has been targeted resolutions, offering assistance to the most seriously afflicted countries. Attention to specific situations establishes valuable precedents for further action, targets assistance, and avoids antagonizing other states who wish to continue acting alone. But targeted responses come at a cost. They limit the ability of international community to respond effectively to the transnational aspects of the problem, the sources of gang criminality and violence.

Proposals for further action

Possibilities for UN action span a spectrum from helping specific countries and addressing specific gang problems, to universal proposals for international action by the entire world community. The choice is up to the member states as they deliberate:

- *Studies of the problems of gang violence* are the easiest possibility for international agreement. Although they do nothing immediately, a study by the UN Secretary-General may point to acceptable long-term responses to the problem.

- The UN can call upon all states to *protect the vulnerable*, especially known and likely victims such as migrants and refugees, women and girls, and all children. The UN can target the vulnerable in specific countries, as it has in the past.[1] Or it can establish global problems to protect the vulnerable.

- Establish *new mechanisms for cooperation* among police and prosecutors (Ministries of Home Affairs or Justice) to share intelligence and cooperate in prosecution transnational gang crime.[2] Such measures are popular in the UN because they support national sovereignty and they are relatively cheap. They work best over the short run, but gangs are adaptive so they offer less promise in the long term.

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[1] "Adopting Resolution 2180 (2014), Security Council Approves One-Year Renewal for United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti." *UN News Center*, October 14, 2014. http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11599.doc.htm

[2] "Security Council, Adopting Resolution 2195 (2014), Urges International Action to Break Links between Terrorists, Transnational Organized Crime | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." *UN News Center*. December 19, 2014. http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11717.doc.htm

- *Facilitate conflict mediation* between rival gangs, especially where gang disputes are causing violence. The UN can support creation of mediation centers and offer financial incentives for participation. The best known example is El Salvador's 2012-14 gang truce, which temporarily cut the homicide rate in half.[3] Such measures are not always popular with traditional advocates of police or military response to gang problems.

- The UN can support programs to *reduce and prevent crime*. Measures range from training programs, including conferences and foreign training missions, to support better law enforcement, especially *community policing*, which shifts police from posts outside affected communities and makes them a cooperative part of the communities they are responsible for. Under community policing, police cease to be fighting primarily *against them*, and instead start working *for us*.[4]

   The effectiveness of community policing is widely accepted, but it remains controversial, especially among 'law and order' traditionalists. For many police forces, which can tend to think in terms of fighting crime, this cooperative approach to identify gang members and

even working with gangs does not come naturally. Community policing can be targeted to specific countries or supported regionally or globally.

- The UN can work against the *sources of gang activity*. Above all, the international community can support programs for economic development, especially community-level development, to give people an alternative to gang memberships and give gangs positive programs they have an interest in supporting too. Such programs can be difficult to build support for, since their effects are long term, but their long term effectiveness is well documented.

Country positions:

Africa: Many African countries have rising gang problems, which their weak police forces and Justice Ministries struggle to address. Foreign assistance has been most forthcoming from the European Union, and to a lesser degree from the United States.

Central America: Central American states play a leading role on this issue, which affects them seriously. They also face pressure from neighboring regions (the Caribbean, North and South America) to be more active. Some, especially El Salvador, have been active and creative. Others resent the pressure and seek their own national solutions. This tendency is reformed when political parties enlist gang support, getting gangs to work for them.

China: has historically wrestled with its own gangs, especially in the south of China. One result is periodic Strike Hard campaigns, such as the program in 2006 that led to the arrest of 87,000 suspects. By 2008 China had created a new unit that would go after organized crime and crack down on illegal gambling, drug

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[3] Carlos Martinez, 'El Salvador: More Weapons, More Recruits, More Chaos', *InSight Crime*, 29 September 2015.
http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-more-weapons-more-recruits-more-chaos
[4] *Contribution of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice to the ECOSOC Integration Segment on Issues Related to Sustainable Urbanization*, May 2014.
http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/integration/pdf/commissiononcrimepreventionandcriminaljustice.pdf

production, prostitution and the many other crimes associated with this. China, and many other Asian countries, prefer entirely national solutions. They are willing to cooperate, especially when it involves cooperation between the police forces of countries in the region. China is skeptical of the role of the UN in these issues.[5]

Europe Union: the 28 member states of the EU have gang problems to varying degrees. These are most serious in Italy, as well as Southeast Europe. The four largest Italian organized crime gangs have approximately 25,000 members and 250,000 affiliates worldwide.[6] The EU supports cooperation between Justice and Home Ministries to prosecute gangs. It also supports programs in other regions, especially Africa and the Caribbean, to keep transnational gangs from developing.

Russia: Russia has a growing problem with gangs, which are highly transnational, heavily integrated into criminal enterprises in Europe and North America. Within Russia, gangs have found greater acceptance through strong nationalism. As advocates of national identity and power, gangs are more accepted. They key is they do not challenge the authority or power of the government.[7]

The United States: With approximately 1.4 million gang members as of 2011, and more than 33,000 active gangs, the United States has a large problem. It also includes foreign gangs— especially from Central America, Italy and Russia. In 2010 President Barack Obama he

directed the Departments of Education and Justice to tackle youth and gang violence and bring national attention to this issue. The program that came out of that was the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention Forum.[8] This organization also brings together a variety of people from across the country and with the participation of many cities hit hard by gang violence such as Detroit, Michigan and New Orleans, Louisiana. The United States supports efforts to deal with the causes of gang activity abroad and works extensively through the UN, but it is hesitant to spend money.

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[5] "Triads And Organized Crime In China." *Facts and Details*. http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat8/sub50/item300.html#chapter-23

[6] 'Italian Organized Crime—Overview'. *FBI.gov*

[7] Fred Burton and Dan Burges. "Russian Organized Crime." *Stratfor*. November 14, 2007. https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/russian_organized_crime

[8] "About the National Forum," http://youth.gov/youth-topics/preventing-youth-violence/about-national-forum

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