

The Phenomenon of Maras and Gangs in Central America: Criminal Justice System Responses

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Abstract: Maras and gangs in Central America have become a serious socio-political and security predicament over the last 30 years. Growing out of systemic poverty, social exclusion, legacies of civil conflicts and transnational migration, such groups e.g. Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 have become extremely powerful in such countries. These gangs are involved in violent crimes, extortion, drug trafficking, and human smuggling, destabilizing their communities and causing people to lose faith in governmental agencies. As the Central American governments react to this problem, mass incarceration, militarized policing, and anti-gang legislation, whereas mano dura (iron fist) policies, are some of the most predominant punitive criminal justice strategies. However, the problem has been aggravated in the past by these repressive practices, which have led to overcrowding of prisons, strengthening of gang identity, and raising human rights issues. This paper takes a critical approach to

examining the effectiveness of criminal justice system responses to the gang crisis, considering both the impact time frame of these responses in reducing crime and the integral repercussions on the social fabric. Based on case studies, policy analyses, and International Human rights reports, the analysis further examines other approaches through the paradigm of community policing, rehabilitation ideas, regional cooperation systems. These data reflect that excessive application of harsh methods without solving underlying causes of crime, like unemployment among the youth, failure of state institutions, and the lack of education, has hampered the effectiveness of crime justice reaction. The paper recommends an approach which balances law enforcement, social intervention, and reintegration to destroy the structural basis on which the gangs thrive.

Keywords: Phenomenon (PP), Maras and Gangs (M&G), Central America (CA), Criminal Justice system (CJS).

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I. Introduction

Maras and Gangs are violent groups in Central America which has become a matter of concern for Central America. These kinds of violent groups are recognized by specific characteristics, which we will discuss here. The most important characteristic is that these groups are known for having brutal and pathetic tactics which can prove harmful to the public of Central America. In this way, we can say that these groups are the main cause of violence in Central America. The other most important characteristic of these violent groups is the aspect of extortion¹. It means that they compel business people and other individuals to pursue personal gains. They mostly blackmail the businessman and the public in different ways. It has also been seen that there is somehow territorial control related to these violent groups because these gangs mostly control some specific territories in Central America. If we discuss important impacts of these violent groups, we may come to know that insecurity is the most important impact of these violent groups². As we know, peace is the basic need of any society that brings mental health to citizens. However, when fear or insecurity arises, people tend to lose trust in their government, and this insecurity can lead to widespread fear within the society. In this regard, we can say that these violent groups are responsible for insecurity in any community. Crime is also another important impact of these violent groups in Central America³. There are a variety of crimes that are prevalent in Central America, for example, murder, human trafficking, substance abuse, robbery, and others. Recent studies have shown that these violent groups are behind this increasing crime in Central America. There was an important and positive aspect of social stability in Central America, but this social stability has been distorted because of these violent groups. These violent activities are responsible for destabilizing the economy of Central America, thus contributing to social instability in the society⁴. If we comprehend important factors which contributed to such violent activities, we may come to know that poverty is the main driver of such violent acts. When there is discrimination and a lack of opportunities in any society, it will push youngsters towards violent activities. Economic instability is the main reason for the involvement of youngsters in gangs. The other most important reason is the aspect of lack of education. Although Central America has made significant improvements in recent years, particularly in education, there are still some rural areas where the public lacks access to quality

¹ Arias, E. D. (2011). State power and Central American Maras: A cross-national comparison. In *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (pp. 123-136). University of Texas Press.

² Dudley, S. S. (2013). Central America besieged: cartels and maras country threat analysis. In *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas* (pp. 177-200). Routledge.

³ Sullivan, J. P. (2008). Transnational gangs: The impact of third generation gangs in Central America. *Air & Space Power Journal*, 2, 2-10.

⁴ Estrada, B. C. (2008). Youth gangs in Central America: A comparative analysis of Las Maras in Honduras and Nicaragua.

education. The involvement in these violent groups is also related to family background⁵. It is mostly seen that those children who are neglected in childhood do not have trust in building relationships. These children are more prone to be involved in violent groups. Recent studies have shown that there is also the risk of gang formation because of migration. When there is cultural diversity, it will lead to more conflict, and such conflict will result in gang formation⁶. Before discussing criminal Justice System Responses in Central America, we have to understand the criminal Justice System in Central America. After reviewing previous important studies, we found that the Criminal Justice System in Central America faces numerous problems and challenges. The first and foremost challenge is corruption, which has become a common practice in Central America, leading people to lose trust in their government. Currently, many people in Central America do not believe in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system⁷. The second most important challenge is the inadequate infrastructure of the Criminal Justice System in Central America. Central America lacks sufficient resources, resulting in a lag in developing proper and adequate infrastructure that could enhance the effectiveness of the criminal Justice System in the region. It is also common practice that criminals may use many kinds of intimidation or violence, so that they can escape justice. This aspect acts as the most common hurdle in the way of justice in Central America⁸. Overcrowding can also be considered the most important challenge for the Criminal Justice System in Central America. These prisons are mostly in pathetic and unsanitary conditions. In recent years, Central America has given importance to these aspects of the Criminal Justice System. As a result, we have seen some important responses in the Criminal Justice System some of which we are going to discuss here. The first and foremost response related to the Criminal Justice System in Central America is law enforcement efforts. In these efforts, they have paid heed to the presence of police to reduce the increasing crime rate. They had also made efforts to enhance the capacity of police to deal with such criminal cases⁹. The second most important response related to the Criminal Justice System in Central America is improvement in prosecution. The primitive ways of prosecution have changed. Along with this, we have seen that the efficiency of courts has been enhanced. This is an important step towards justice in Central America that will improve the criminal Justice System. As we have described earlier, there are some challenges which are related to prison. So recent efforts have

⁵ Nagle, L. E. (2008). Criminal gangs in Latin America: the next great threat to regional security and stability. *Tex. Hisp. J. L. & Pol'y*, 14, 7.

⁶ Wolf, S. (2014). Central American street gangs: their role in communities and prisons. In: JSTOR.

⁷ Boraz, S. C., & Bruneau, T. C. (2006). Are the maras overwhelming governments in Central America?

⁸ Rodgers, D., & Baird, A. (2015). Understanding gangs in contemporary Latin America. *The handbook of gangs*, 478-502.

⁹ Miguel Cruz, J. (2010). Central American maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets. *Global crime*, 11(4), 379-398.

been made to prevent overcrowding in prisons. There were also some important efforts made to improve the poor conditions of prison. These are all important responses that are related to law enforcement and courts, but some responses are related to the community. Central America has focused on this aspect, and there is the need for the formulation of various community policies that can help in preventing crimes. There is still a need for further improvement in Central America's criminal Justice System. Institutional strengthening is also an important step towards the effectiveness of the justice system. We need to establish strong and independent institutes. The second most important opportunity is the international collaboration, where mutual efforts will be made to eradicate crime from society. International collaboration can help us in various ways to improve the justice system in Central America. Last but not least, opportunity can be the aspect of community engagement. This engagement will work to foster trust between government institutes and the local community. In this way, the community will have a firm belief in the justice system in Central America.

1. *Origins and Dynamics of Maras and Gangs*

Maras can be traced to the US-based street gangs that were formed by Central American immigrants in cities such as Los Angeles in the 1980s and the 1990s. With a spate of deportations of undocumented criminals, most of these gang members went back to their native countries. By having low law enforcement and a lack of economic opportunities, these deportees enforced and created gang structures in the process that quickly infiltrated the urban neighborhoods. Both MS-13 and Barrio 18 are not only criminal organisations but also social organisations, as they provide a kind of identity, protection, and belonging to the disadvantaged. They are all over, invading schools, transportation systems, small businesses, and even political institutions. Violence Gangs are characterized by violence used to assert control over a particular area, which may be against civilians, other gangs, and state law enforcers. The consequences are staggering and, by the estimation of the Insight Crime Observatory, in 2015, the level of homicides in El Salvador was among the highest level in the world, with a peak of 103 homicides per 100,000 of population.

2. *Criminal Justice System Responses*

2.1. *Mano Dura Policies*

Early responses of the government mainly focused on the repressive mano dura policies during the first round at the beginning of the 2000s. Other countries like El Salvador made such laws, which even enabled the police to have suspected members of gangs arrested simply because they looked like a gang member, e.g.,

due to tattoo markings or other clothing. The police were militarized, and jails were full of suspected or confirmed gang members. Although these policies seemed effective in decreasing crime rates in the short term, they were mainly detrimental in the long run. Arbitrary arrests and jammed prisons could only help cement gang structures because hardened leaders could be in a position to organize activities even in jail. These jails turned into gang-controlled places of extortion and recruitment. In addition, the brutal policies served to create a loss of trust between the people and the law enforcers since many innocent people were persecuted.

2.2. Targeted Law Enforcement and Intelligence-Based Operations

By recognizing the ineffectiveness of blanket offensives, smaller governments shifted toward more targeted approaches. It was done by establishing specialized police forces, enhancing forensic services, and expanding intelligence-sharing channels. As in 2019, El Salvador introduced the phased program, entitled Plan Control Territorial, which creates a new connection between enhanced policing, recapturing territories, and digital tracking¹⁰. Intelligence-based policing has seen the arrest of some of the top-ranking gang members and infiltration of big criminal groups. Nonetheless, these measures have not been proven to be effective due to corruption within the police and judiciary systems.

2.3. Judicial Reforms and Anti-Corruption Measures

Many countries have initiated judicial changes to enhance the rule of law and address the weaknesses that exist in the system. The global community, such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS), has contributed to the fight against corruption and judicial training of personnel as well as enhancing the case management system. Between 2007 and 2019, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) made remarkable efforts in bringing to book corrupt politicians and taking down the criminal rackets. Despite their subsequent dismantling of CICIG under political pressure, its example demonstrates the power of independent oversight mechanisms.

2.4. Prevention and Rehabilitation Programs

The last couple of years have seen a growing recognition of the need to examine gang membership in terms of its origins. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and foreign donors have invested in prevention and rehabilitation plans targeting those vulnerable children and the imprisoned. A well-known example is of Honduras, where young gang members are reintegrated into the community through the Program for the Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Reinsertion

¹⁰ Cruz, J. M. (2011). Government responses and the dark side of gang suppression in Central America. In *Maras: Gang violence and security in Central America* (pp. 137-158). University of Texas Press.

of Youth in Conflict with the Law, which supports them with employment opportunities and mentorship. Such programs have the potential, but due to scalability and funding issues, as well as a lack of evaluation programming, there is a tendency to fail in terms of evaluating impacts over the long term.

2.5. International Cooperation and Migration Policies

As gang networks are transnational, cooperation within regions, as well as abroad, is required. US has been funding and training, at least, via the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). However, the US remains a hub of activities in perpetuation of the cycle, as its deportation policies render back to weak states people involved in gangs, back to states that are unable to deal with others. Transboundary information-exchange and local-level law enforcement collaboration are immature. There is also a need for a more coordinated approach to criminal justice in the region to overcome the mobility and adaptability of maras.

3. Evaluation of Effectiveness

Until today, despite the development of criminal justice strategies, there are obstacles. Mano dura policies have been somewhat unsuccessful, and this has been a cycle of prison and recidivism. The intelligence-based measures have greater future but are hampered due to poor governance. Although rehabilitation programs have potential, they are underfunded and politically sidelined. To put it briefly, adaptability is observed in criminal justice systems of Central America, which are sometimes lacking coherence, continuity, and a human rights-based approach.

II. Research Objective

The main objective of this research is to understand Mara and Gang Activities in Central America. We have also studied various responses in the Criminal Justice System in Central America.

III. Literature Review

Researchers suggest that most violent acts are promoted in society by the vulnerable male population. Young males who feel socially vulnerable tend to join crime gangs to make themselves strong. Understanding the cause of vulnerability in people helps in identifying the factors that push them to join violent activities. Various violence-preventing policies are encouraged in societies that have a high percentage of gender vulnerabilities¹¹. Studies explain that in El Salvador, women are associated with criminal gangs. Their association with these gangs is to regain

¹¹ Baird, A. (2025). Masculine Vulnerability, Gangs, and Perpetual Violence. In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (pp. 70-80). Routledge.

their lost identity in society. Often, women's association with criminal gangs has a complex life history that gives them no choice but to be part of such criminal associations. To help women in society and to stop their involvement in such criminal groups, policy-based programs should be developed. This program ensures that the stigmatized population of society gets basic human rights¹². Studies show that some individuals leave their gangs when they see that their gang is under the control of crime organizations. Under this agreement, individuals have the right to leave the gang whenever they want¹³. Scholars predict that violent gangs in Haiti have extended to its rural areas. However, their extension was not prominently announced due to the attention given to Port-Au-Prince. Numerous factors are involved in expansion of the criminal gangs in rural areas. These factors include crime activities, kidnapping as well as violence based on gender inequality. Understanding the main cause of these activities in rural areas help in lowering the incidence rate of these criminal activities¹⁴. Studies determine that violence in crowded, criminal-based prisons is less compared to prisons with fewer criminals. In Brazil, the prisons are often crowded with a large number of criminals, which decreases the risk of prison violence in these areas. In states with poor governance control over the prison system, the inmates tend to control the violent actions in the prison¹⁵. Studies declare that society views violent gangs in two ways. The first view is that these gangs are heroes, protecting them from extremist groups. The other group of society considers these gangs to be fully evil gangs that are destroying society. These two views portray gangs as either good or bad. Also, some individuals in criminal gangs tend to harm the people of their communities to gain power. This situation makes society poorer and vulnerable¹⁶. Studies declare that criminal actions performed in Northern Triangle regions result in worse human rights policy conditions. The violation of human rights policy in these regions due to extreme violent activities makes people's lives complex. In these triangular northern region countries, the violence against the LGBTQ+ community and women is higher¹⁷. Studies explain that the condition of Central Americans gets worse when they are provided aid by the US through CARSI. The poor condition of

¹² Chévez Reinoza, C. I., & Melenge Escudero, J. A. (2025). Researching Young Women Associated with Gangs in El Salvador: The Role of Emotions, Trust, and Participatory Methodologies in Social Research. *Social Sciences*, 14(4), 201.

¹³ Cruz, J. M., & Rosen, J. D. (2024). Leaving the pervasive barrio: Gang disengagement under criminal governance. *Social Problems*, 71(1), 254-270.

¹⁴ Cyprien, G., Iqbal, M., & Pongen, Y. (2025). The Ruralization of Haiti's Gang Violence After the Presidential Assassination. *Deviant Behavior*, 1-19.

¹⁵ Fondevila, G., & Vilalta-Perdomo, C. (2024). Prison violence in Latin America: criminal governance and an absent state. *International Criminology*, 4(2), 149-165.

¹⁶ García, F. (2024). *Clicas: Gender, Sexuality, and Struggle in Latina/o/x Gang Literature and Film*. University of Texas Press.

¹⁷ Garrison, E. (2024). "Kill, Rape, Control": Gender-Based Violence by Gang Members in El Salvador as Crimes against Humanity under International Criminal Law. *Fordham Int'l LJ*, 47, 137.

people in the Central American region pushes them to leave their country and seek asylum¹⁸. Studies explain that El Salvador uses extreme emergency protocol to fight against violent gangs. These emergency measures taken by EL Salvador's governance system are harsher than those taken by Nicaragua's governance system. The difference in violence repression action taken by Nicaragua and El Salvador is due to the difference in the infrastructure of these regions¹⁹. Studies emphasize that in Honduras, the youth's emotional security is linked to the violence they face in their region. The youth's emotional well-being in a region is based on the police activities to eradicate violent gangs to make their region violence-free²⁰. Studies predict that people who involve in romantic relationships with criminal gang members tend to make their lives miserable by engaging in substance use activities. Studies explain that people in such relationships face numerous emotional challenges in life, and their developmental period is significantly disrupted²¹. Studies show that Latin America has a bad reputation for being a hub of violent gangs. In urban areas of Latin America, the rate of homicide is relatively higher than in rural Areas due to higher levels of organized criminal gangs in urbanized areas²². Scholars' studies reveal that Colombian state businesses face problems due to criminal gangs' involvement in big business agencies. This situation creates challenges for businesses to fully operate their tasks in Colombia²³. Studies explain that in Latin Americans states the transnational crimes are prevalent due to the inadequacy of governmental system to control criminal actions at global level²⁴. Studies of scholars determines that managing crime gangs that are threat to the state is done by developing big prisons. In these prisons, strict protocols are followed to control criminals from becoming people's enemy²⁵. Studies explain that Maras gangs are one of the prominent gangs of Central America that are involved in implementing a war tax system in the region. Imposing tax on people is the main agenda of Maras gangs²⁶. Moreover, the people who migrate from Latin America to

¹⁸ Gonzales Toribio, A. (2025). Dependent Neoliberalism, US Aid and Central American Asylum Seekers. *Latin American Perspectives*, 52(2), 21-42.

¹⁹ Grant, S. (2024). *Imprisonment as State Repression: Recent Carceral Approaches to Gang Violence in Central America*

²⁰ Hoegler Dennis, S., Moreno, F., Boxer, P., & Cummings, E. M. (2025). Measures of adolescents' emotional security and exposure to violence in relation to the community, police, and gangs: Evidence for validity in a sample of Honduran youth. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*.

²¹ Kevorkian, S. S., Meldrum, R. C., & Cruz, J. M. (2025). The Impact of Dating a Gang Member on Adolescent Delinquency in Central America. *International Criminology*, 1-15.

²² Koonings, K. (2025). Urban crime in the global south: the experience of Latin America. In *Handbook on Cities and Crime* (pp. 222-241). Edward Elgar Publishing.

²³ Ley, S., & Rettberg, A. (2024). Conflict, crime, and violence: Security challenges for businesses in Colombia and Mexico. In *A Business History of Latin America* (pp. 175-190). Routledge.

²⁴ Lopez, A. (2025). Transnational Threats in Latin America and the Challenges for Public Administration. In *Public Administration in the New Reality* (pp. 361-386). Springer.

²⁵ Miravalle, M. (2025). Gangs, mafia, organised groups in prisons: the formal and informal strategies of managing the "public enemy. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 1-24.

²⁶ Ramos Obando, R. (2024). 'War Tax': Central American Gangs and their Informal Tax System.

Mexico face a lot of violence-related problems in Mexico. The immigrants face violence during their migration process at the border of Mexico²⁷. Scholars declare that violent acts performed in Honduras are often done through collaboration between police and criminal gangs. This cooperation between legal and illegal groups is often used to gaining resources from police or to make the police system corrupt²⁸. Scholars' approach predicts that in El Salvador, educational institutions face violence problems even though they are designed to educate people to stop violence. The international programs implemented in the school system are incapable of providing safety to these institutions from violent acts based on crime²⁹. Scholars suggest that OAS in America helps in identifying the dangerous activities of criminals, which ultimately increases the threat to the American security system. OAS effectively works with international agencies to prevent criminal acts from becoming common in a state. Also, the OAS manages the threats faced by Latin America by establishing advanced security systems³⁰. This endurance of maras and gangs in Central America is a complicated combination of historical wrongs and socioeconomic marginalization, and poor institutions. The responses of criminal justice, including being iron-fisted to community-based rehabilitation, have yielded mixed fruits. To bring effective change, the area will have to follow a more comprehensive evidence-based style of approach that employs a balance of enforcement and social inclusion. Moreover, assistance should encompass not only security funding but also structural reforms, development aid, and adjustments to migration policy. This complex, rights-based and area-coordinated approach is the only one that can be expected to free the maras' grip and bring security and dignity to society in Central America.

IV. Methodology

This study follows the qualitative, comparative case studies approach to investigate the phenomenon of maras and gangs in Central America and to discuss how the criminal justice systems of the region respond to this phenomenon. It is explicitly examining the three most impacted countries towards gang violence, which include El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, which are also known as the Northern Triangle. The applied methodology is carried out on the synthesis basis of

²⁷ Rojas-Wiesner, M. L. (2024). Violence and Central American migrants on Mexico's southern border. In *Forced Migration across Mexico* (pp. 17-35). Routledge.

²⁸ Sanchez, J., & Cruz, J. M. (2024). The dynamics of criminal cooperation between the police and gangs in Honduras. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 27(4), 475-495.

²⁹ Savenije, W. (2024). When Schools Become Gang Turf: Schools and Government-Sponsored Prevention Programmes in El Salvador. In *Education and Development in Central America and the Latin Caribbean* (pp. 140-160). Bristol University Press.

³⁰ Sossai, M. (2024). Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime as Challenges to Multidimensional Security: The Response of the Organization of American States. In *Organized Criminal Terrorism* (pp. 205-226). Brill Nijhoff.

the content analysis, policy review, and the secondary data to produce full-scale insight into the character of gang violence and the success of state responses.

1. *Comparative Case Study Design*

The comparative approach enables the identification of similarities and distinctions in the experiences and responses to gang violence across countries, as well as the criminal justice facilities employed. However, this has been done through the comparison of policy frameworks, law enforcement strategies, and rehabilitation processes in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, thereby portraying trends, successes, and failures within and between given national contexts. The analysis of each case is placed about the respective socio-political history, legal framework, and institutional ability. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of how policies such as *mano dura* (iron fist), targeted policing, judicial reforms, and social reintegration programs may impact individuals.

2. *Data Collection*

This research will rely primarily on secondary sources of information such as:

- Reports of ministries of justice, security, and interior of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala
- Statistical information on regional observatories such as homicide rates, incarceration rates, and recidivism rates.
- International reports and policy briefs of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Organization of American States (OAS), World Bank, and USAID.
- Scholarly articles, published journal articles, and dissertations about gang violence, criminal justice, and human security in Central America.
- Media inquiries and human rights accounts that give background to policies in the spotlight and their social implications. The selection of data was made depending on their relevance, credibility, and recency, where priority was given to the sources released in the past 20 years in a bid to highlight both the history and the recent trends.

3. *Technical content and Policy Analysis*

Content analysis, as utilised in the research, critically evaluates government policy documents, legislative and strategic plans, such as the Plan Control Territorial and the Violence Reduction strategy of El Salvador and Honduras, respectively. Analysis of the papers has been conducted in terms of the objectives stated, implementation modalities, and congruence with norms of human rights. The print discourse and scholarly comment are also examined to understand the societal perception and impression regarding the criminal justice interventions. The

policy outcomes are also cross-checked with the trend of the crime and the institutional indicators to measure effectiveness.

4. *Limitations*

The reliance on secondary data also creates a drawback in this methodology because direct data, like interviews with the gangs or law enforcement officials, is not available. There are also language complications and variations in data across different countries. Besides, some crime statistics reported by states might not be very reliable since crime statistics in the region are politicized. However, the multi-source triangulation and like-for-like analysis can be considered a reasonable basis to make conclusions concerning the effectiveness of criminal justice reaction toward gang violence in Central America despite these limitations.

V. Numerical Analysis

The numerical analysis of gang violence and criminal justice responses in Central America—specifically in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—provides quantitative evidence of the scale, trends, and consequences of the *maras* phenomenon. The following data offer insights into homicide rates, incarceration trends, police and judicial capacity, and investment in prevention programs.

1. *Homicide Rates*

One of the most striking indicators of gang-related violence is the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (Table 1).

Table 1: *Homicide Rates*

Country	2015 Homicide Rate	2020 Homicide Rate	2023 Homicide Rate (estimated)
El Salvador	103.0	20.2	7.8
Honduras	86.0	37.6	31.6
Guatemala	29.5	15.3	17.3

(Source: Insight Crime, UNODC, World Bank)

- In El Salvador, the dramatic drop from 103 to 7.8 homicides per 100,000 between 2015 and 2023 is attributed to *Plan Control Territorial* and controversial government-negotiated gang truces.
- Honduras and Guatemala have also seen declines, but their homicide rates remain well above the global average of 6.1 per 100,000 (UNODC, 2022).

2. *Incarceration Rates*

Central America has some of the highest incarceration rates in the world, mainly linked to gang policies (Table 2).

Table 2: Incarceration Rates

Country	Inmates per 100,000 population (2023)	Prison Overcrowding (%)
El Salvador	1,086	235%
Honduras	222	165%
Guatemala	144	142%

(Source: World Prison Brief, 2023)

- El Salvador leads globally in incarceration rate, mainly due to mass arrests under the 2022 emergency security measures.
- Overcrowding facilitates gang control inside prisons and undermines rehabilitation efforts.

3. *Police and Justice Resources*

The effectiveness of criminal justice systems is also impacted by investment in law enforcement and the judiciary (Table 3).

Table 3: Police and Justice Resources

Indicator	El Salvador	Honduras	Guatemala
Police officers per 100,000	275	157	180
Judges per 100,000	8.4	5.6	6.3
Conviction rate (%)	~6.0%	~4.3%	~4.8%

(Source: OAS, CEJIL, UNDP, 2023)

- All three countries face a justice bottleneck—low numbers of judges, limited forensic capacity, and high case backlogs.
- Low conviction rates reflect a lack of prosecutorial efficiency and reinforce impunity.

4. *Public Investment in Crime Prevention*

Preventive strategies are underfunded compared to policing and incarceration (Table 4).

Table 4: Public Investment in Crime Prevention

Country	% of Security Budget for Prevention (2022)
El Salvador	7%
Honduras	5%
Guatemala	4%

(Source: Inter-American Development Bank, 2022)

- Only a small fraction of the total security expenditure goes toward education, youth development, and community rehabilitation, despite evidence that these have longer-term positive effects on reducing gang recruitment.

5. *Youth and Gang Membership*

Youth remain highly susceptible to recruitment:

- Estimated number of active gang members:
 - El Salvador: ~60,000
 - Honduras: ~40,000
 - Guatemala: ~20,000

(Source: Insight Crime, ICG, 2023)

- Approximately 60% of gang recruits are between 12 and 25 years old, with many dropping out of school early and lacking employment opportunities.
- Youth unemployment rates remain high: El Salvador (18.4%), Honduras (20.3%), Guatemala (17.1%) (ILO, 2023).

6. *Impact of Deportations*

US deportation trends have fueled the re-expansion of gang networks (Table 5)

Table 5: Impact of Deportations

Year	Deportees to El Salvador	To Honduras	To Guatemala
2020	13,664	14,553	21,897
2022	22,472	24,116	33,511

(Source: U.S. ICE, IOM Reports)

- A significant portion of deportees have prior criminal records or gang affiliations.
- Weak reintegration systems in Central America have led many deportees to rejoin gangs upon return, increasing violence and re-criminalization.

7. *Effectiveness of Rehabilitation Programs*

- Recidivism Rates:
 - Inmates released without rehabilitation: 65–75% reoffend within 2 years.
 - Inmates who participated in structured reintegration programs: 15–25% recidivism (UNDP, 2023).

This data underscores the potential impact of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts when properly designed and funded.

8. *Key Numerical Findings*

- El Salvador's homicide rate dropped by over 90% in 8 years, but critics question the legality and sustainability of such drastic methods.
- Prison overcrowding exceeds 200%, leading to human rights concerns and gang coordination from within.
- Conviction rates are under 10%, showing profound weaknesses in the justice

system.

- Youth comprise the majority of gang members, with recruitment fueled by economic and social marginalization.
- Prevention programs receive less than 10% of national security budgets, despite their proven long-term benefits.
- Rehabilitation reduces recidivism by over 50%, but remains underutilized.

This numerical analysis reveals that while some criminal justice interventions have had measurable short-term impacts, sustainable reductions in gang violence require rebalancing investment toward prevention, reintegration, and judicial reform.

VI. Applications

The responses of criminal justice to the maras and gangs in Central America and the study of these responses have significant consequences not only for the most affected countries, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, but also for neighboring and other countries in the region. The phenomenon is not exclusive and intersects with transnational crime, migration, public health issues, human rights, and international development. The knowledge regarding the practical consequences of these analyses helps stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organisations, international organisations, police, educators, and community leaders, construct more comprehensible, efficient, and long-term solutions to gang violence.

1. *Policy-Making and Governance*

Among the most straightforward translations of the research example is evidence-based policy-making. These lessons can assist governments in Central America and other places in abandoning reactive and punishment-oriented policies, such as the *mano dura* policy, in favor of policies based on prevention, rehabilitation, and human rights. One of the lessons learnt is the need to prevent over-criminalization and random arrests, which in the past have turned back to haunt the authorities. The research paper can help policymakers develop national security policies based on preferred strategies that emphasise focused law enforcement, community-oriented policing, and de-militarising security enforcement agencies. It also demands changes to the law, which can only assure due process and judicial independence, leading to the increased confidence of the people in the state. The involvement of civil society in policy discussions ensures that the interests of affected individuals are not overlooked.

2. *Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Reform*

The case of Central America with gangs lays a notorious example, which should

be emulated by criminal justice systems in Latin America and some other parts of the world experiencing gang violence. The historical experience of failure of mass incarceration and indiscriminate crackdowns can be used in training programs for police, prosecutors, and judges. The police force can transform to intelligence-driven operations that destroy the networks of crime without leaving a trail of civil damages.

It also implies making corrections to the prison management system to prevent its activity from becoming a hub for criminal organisation. The essential reforms proposed by this research include the use of classification systems, segregation of high-risk prisoners, and the establishment of rehabilitative programs in prisons. The applications can also be used to enhance case management, digital court systems, and transparent legal processes by judicial bodies.

3. Youth Engagement and Education

The other important application is the creation of education and youth empowerment programs. Most of the gang recruits are young adults or teenagers with a background of poverty, breakdown of family structures, abuse, or educational marginalization. This can be achieved by schools, non-governmental organisations, and government agencies collaborating to develop programs that offer alternatives to the gang lifestyle. It can be after-school activities, vocational programs, mentorship programs, and scholarships. We can use life skills, conflict resolution, and trauma-informed methods of teaching to make the school setting a safe environment that discourages the recruitment process. This knowledge can be implemented in national education policies by encouraging the involvement of civic education and gang-prevention practices in the educational process.

4. Community Development and Urban Planning

There remains a firm entrenchment of gang violence in spatial documentation. The inner-city neighborhood having poor access to service, infrastructure, and work opportunities tends to be the breeding ground of gangs. The results of this study can be utilised by urban planners, architects, and local governments to design more accessible and safe cities. This involves the investments such as lighting, safe transport, recreation, and affordable housing that have come to be known as crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED). Projects led by the community, incorporating the local youth, women, and neighborhood associations, are practical. Participatory budgeting can also be used as a tool by municipal authorities to ensure that local voices influence crime prevention efforts.

5. Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs

One of the areas of application is in the design and implementation of

rehabilitation programs for former gang members. These programs should be designed in such a way that they focus on psychological support, skills development, and long-term employment. This study helps to unite mental health professionals, social workers, and religious or community leaders as members of reintegration teams. The models of rehabilitation established in states like Colombia and Chile can be adapted and implemented in Central America, taking into account the specific setting. Additionally, the union of the private sector can also establish a way through which ex-members of gangs can obtain a dignified occupation, and prevent recidivism. The lessons of this analysis can be used to finance scalable models of security, healing, and opportunity supported by NGOs and international donors.

6. *Migration and Asylum Policy*

One major cause of forced migration of people out of Northern Triangle to the United States and Mexico is Gang violence. Implications of this are profound to an immigration policy, adjudication of asylum, and protection of refugees. Immigration courts and policy analysts can use the findings of the present study to evaluate asylum claims with a greater understanding of gang threats. The needs of migrants who have fled gang violence can be met by migration services, both government-based and humanitarian, such as the provision of trauma-informed support, legal, and protection services. These findings can guide the US policymakers and their Mexican partners to design reintegration programs for deportees.

7. *International Development and Human Rights*

The phenomenon of maras presents both a challenge and an opportunity for development agencies, including USAID, UNDP, and the World Bank. This study recommends shifting international assistance from military aid and training of security forces to development assistance, thereby ensuring more balanced support. Development actors can use these understandings to formulate development projects that integrate economic empowerment, youth inclusion, and institutional reform. The findings can also be used in advocacy activities by human rights groups on arbitrary arrest, torture, and abuse in prison. They can employ case studies in Central America to advocate international pressure on governments that flaunt due process and democratic laws under the pretext of an anti-gang campaign.

8. *Media and Public Discourse*

Criminal justice reform can either be enabled and promoted by the way the media represent gangs or stopped and prevented. Repressive reactions are usually justified by the spread of sensationalized coverage that produces fear. Journalists,

filmmakers, and educators can use this research finding to change the blame discourse to discourse of understanding. The media outlets can contribute to the destigmatization of negative attitudes and promote prevention, education, and rehabilitation programs.

9. *Technology and Innovation*

In partnership with local governments and tech companies, applications that are used to report street gang activity anonymously (and connect high-risk youth with social services) can be created. One may apply artificial intelligence and machine learning to research the trends of gang communication, forming hotspots, and enhance resource allocation to law enforcers. However, the technologies should be implemented with moral precautions so that the surveillance does not go too far, and the data should remain confidential. Maras and gangs in Central America are a phenomenon that requires solutions, which are as multidimensional as the problem itself. Criminal justice alone cannot define the problem, and it cannot eliminate the problems without the help of education, the development of the community, international collaboration, and reforms of the system. Stakeholders in all fields of interest can create more inclusive, peaceful lessons that previous generations of policies took decades to learn. These applications indicate that the security struggle against the gangs is also a fight about social justice, opportunity, and dignity. Regardless of whether you prefer to approach it through legal reform, the youth, urban innovation, international solidarity, or all of them at once, this research has the potential to change not just Central America but every other region.

VII. Discussion

The reaction of criminal justice system to the phenomenon of maras and gangs in Central America has unveiled a cyclic, reactive, and often counterproductive approach to policy design by the criminal justice agencies. The first strategy of relying on *mano dura* punitive policies was not only politically popular but did not tackle the structural impetus of the gang violence. Some of these policies, which were applied in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, specifically involved mass arrests, militarised policing, and criminalising young people because of shallow factors such as tattoos or dress. This had led to overcrowding, bad management of prisons, and conversion to radicalising breeding grounds and recruitment centres of new gangs. The policies only strengthened the grip of the gangs both inside and outside of the correctional facilities instead of breaking them down. In addition, due process of the law was not followed, leading to arbitrary arrests, violation of human rights and reinforcing mistrust between communities and law enforcement agencies. One of the most urgent security issues the region is facing nowadays

might be linked to the appearance of the concept of maras and gangs in Central America, especially in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. These countries are popularly referred to as the Northern Triangle. They comprise the infamous Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 among many others. They are ensconced in both the urban and rural areas, and their activities stretch far and wide into drug trafficking, murder, and smuggling of persons. Gang violence has its historical basis on a mixture of historical, economic, and social factors, including civil wars, mass deportation of United States in the nineties to the US, poor state institutions, and abject poverty. Furthermore, Central American governments have developed different approaches to criminal justice, such as the punitive nature of the *mano dura* (iron fist) measures in the past and current reform measures with a focus on the rehabilitative and preventive aspects of criminal justice. This examines what maras and gangs are and the critical evaluation of the responses of the criminal justice system to such a complex and ever-changing threat in the region. The people in most of the gang-ridden neighbourhoods have higher chances of seeking the protection of the gang than the state. With the emphasis made on intelligence-led policing and crackdowns on gang leaders, only slight improvements were witnessed. There have been claims in certain instances of backdoorings by state officials and gang leaders at the expense of the rule of law, and there is no longer confidence in state institutions. Weaknesses of the judicial system further contribute to the complexity of the issue. Most of the courts are politically compromised, underfunded, and lack independence. The rate of prosecution of gang crimes is low, and it is not uncommon to find corruption in most sections of the criminal justice system. That has given rise to an impunity culture where gangs are free to do as they want. Prevention and rehabilitation programs, on the other hand, have proved to have a more sustainable promise. The cause of gang affiliation is tackled using outreach, community development, gang education, vocational training, and reentry of former gang members. However, these programs typically lack a stable budget, political realities, and scalability. Faith-based groups and civil society organisations, however, play an essential role in this field, being locally based and not strongly supported by the government. Moreover, the US deportation policies go further and re-export the gang members to Central America without any reintegration plans, subsequently making the situation even worse than before. Overall, the reaction of the criminal justice system has advanced, although it has remained gridlocked by a lack of coordination, ineffective institutions, and overemphasis on repression. The cycle of violence and gang entrenchment is set to rise, unless an approach that is multi-sectoral, balanced both socially and legally.

VIII. Conclusion

Maras and gangs are among the most persistent and disastrous social issues in

Central America. Over recent decades, the political instability, popular migration, social-economic inequality, and state instability have led to the emergence of groups such as the MS-13 and Barrio 18. These groups have formed an alternative authority structure, challenged state authority, undermined development, and terrorised communities. The criminal justice systems in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, in turn, have implemented a range of varying strategies of adaptation. The first strategy of *mano dura* represents a firm and dramatic opposition to a group of gangsters, but it did not lead to long-term security. Such retributive policies focus on mass incarceration, police authority, and the promotion of the militarisation of the police. They brought political returns and a sense of order in the short term. The long-term consequences include counterintuitive overcrowding of the jails, abuse of human rights, and the consolidation of the gang leadership within the jails. Such policies had the effect of alienating disaffected youth and making the gangs even more potent in terms of social and territorial control, since they criminalised poverty and marginalisation. As the weaknesses of the earlier strategies became clear, the government shifted to more advanced interventions. The concept of intelligence-based policing and focused deterrence enhanced the accuracy of police action and broke a few criminal networks. Certainly, there have been uneven, politically fraught judicial reforms that have tried to deal with systemic corruption and impunity. Nonetheless, the solid institutions, political interference, and resource constraints act as a setback to the sustainability of such practices. Prevention and rehabilitation policies have become more promising in achieving the goal of breaking the cycle of violence. Social reintegration, education, employment, and community development programs indicate increasing awareness that gang violence is a problem of socioeconomic nature rather than a problem of criminal justice. However, such efforts are poorly funded, fragmented, and frequently set on the backburners of national policies. The transnational nature of maras and gangs necessitates regional and international cooperation to combat their presence. While the law enforcement support has been made possible through the existence of frameworks like the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), there has been a deficiency of investment in this framework to support institutional development, migration management, as well as social infrastructure. Moreover, the ongoing deportation trends in the United States, which give little attention to reintegration planning, have unwittingly contributed to the spread of gangs in the territory. In the end, criminal justice policing of gang violence in Central America must shift from short-term repression to longer-term transformation. This demands an inter-dimensional approach which would involve aggressive enforcement of the rule of law, depoliticising the security policy, investing in youths and communities, and holding everyone in governments accountable. Central American societies will only be able to defeat the hold of

maras and achieve lasting peace by taking action on the causes of gang membership such as poverty, rejection, unequal access to education, and failed institutions.

IX. Recommendations

To address with the deep-rooted and complicated problem of maras and gangs in Central America, the governments, law enforcement agencies, civil societies, and international partners are recommended to follow the following actions:

1. *Move to Preventive as opposed to Punitive Strategy*

Governments are supposed to focus on prevention issues as well as repression. The investments should be directed towards early intervention programs that are education-based, youthful, family-supportive, and job-oriented. At least 20 per cent of the security funding should be allocated to national budgets to reduce violence and rehabilitate affected persons.

2. *Transform and Empower*

In the Judicial System, Fair and impartial courts must be utilised. The changes should involve augmented prosecutorial and judicial training, a better case management platform, and means of avoiding political pressure. Access to justice will also be improved by expanding legal aid to underserved communities.

3. *Design Broad-Based Rehabilitation Programs*

Outside prisons and inside reintegration programs need to be expansive. There is a significant need to provide vocational training, psychological assistance, housing, and job placement to ex-gang members. Alliances with businesses in the private sector are vital in the quest for success.

4. *Build Trust and Community Policing*

The approach to policing should be local, neighbourhood-friendly, and human rights-based. Training of the police personnel should concentrate on conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, and relationships with at-risk populations to foster cooperation and eliminate fear.

5. *Facilitate Regional and Global Collaboration*

It is essential to implement a coordinated regional strategy to combat the issue of trans nationalization of gangs. The use of shared intelligence databases, common training, and a policy of deportation and reintegration between the US, Mexico, and Central America can realize the sustainability of the disruption of gang networks. Civil society, including grassroots organisations working in gang-affected

communities, should be empowered. Resilience and inclusion should be promoted through youth engagement in peacebuilding, policy-making, and community safety in the long term.

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