

Gangs in Honduras

Prepared by InSight Crime

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By InSight Crime and the Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa

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Executive Summary

In the last two decades, Honduras has seen a significant increase in gang membership, gang criminal activity, and gang-related violence. The uptick in violence has been particularly troubling. In 2014, Honduras was considered the most violent nation in the world that was not at war. Although high impunity rates and lack of reliable data make it difficult to assess how many of these murders are gang-related, it's clear that the gangs' use of violence -- against rivals, civilians, security forces and perceived transgressors within their own ranks -- has greatly contributed to these numbers.

Among the areas hardest hit are the country's urban centers. Honduras' economic capital, San Pedro Sula, is, according to some, the world's most violent city, with a homicide rate of 142 for every 100,000 people.¹ The political capital Tegucigalpa has a homicide rate of 81 per 100,000.² The third largest city, La Ceiba, has a murder rate of 95 per 100,000.³ These are also the areas where the gangs, in particular the two most prominent, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and Barrio 18, have the greatest presence and influence.

The emergence of hyper-violent street gangs happened relatively quickly in Honduras. In the late 1990s, following legislation in the United States that led to increased deportation of ex-convicts, numerous MS13 and Barrio 18 members arrived in the country. By the early 2000s, these two gangs, along with several local groups, had begun a bloody battle for territory -- and the extortion revenue and drug markets that goes with it -- that continues to this day. The government responded by passing so-called "iron fist" legislation and arresting thousands of suspected gang members. Instead of slowing the growth of gangs, however, the policy allowed them to consolidate their leadership within the prison system, expand their economic portfolios and make contact with other criminal organizations.

This report covers the current state of gangs in Honduras. Specifically, it examines the history, geographic presence, structure and modus operandi of Barrio 18 and MS13 in the country. It also analyzes how the gangs may be developing into more sophisticated criminal organizations. It looks closely at examples that illustrate how some parts of these two gangs are winning the support of the local communities in which they operate. Finally, it gives an overview of some of the other street gangs operating in Honduras.

¹ Observatorio de la Violencia, "BOLETIN Enero - Diciembre 2014," no. 36, February 2015. Available at: <http://iudpas.org/pdf/Boletines/Nacional/NEd36EneDic2014.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Major Findings

Barrio 18 and MS13 are smaller operations than previously understood. Membership comes at a high price, and those seeking entry are frequently used as cannon fodder. The youngest members may be forced into service, and many of them leave without ever becoming full members.

Both gangs are nominally hierarchical in structure, but the true nature of their operations is more horizontal. Many leaders have relative autonomy in their zones of influence, especially those in Barrio 18's structure.

Barrio 18 remains dependent on extortion within their areas of influence, which is turning the local population against them. MS13, meanwhile, has a policy of eschewing local extortion, which has helped the gang forge a more benevolent image compared to its rivals.

MS13 relies heavily on revenue from local drug peddling. Barrio 18 is increasingly seeking to control this criminal economy, and authorities believe that the battle for the proverbial "corner" is driving much of the violence in areas where the two gangs operate.

All major gangs in Honduras rely on extortion revenue from the public transport sector. A gang that is extorting public transportation in Tegucigalpa can net as much as \$2.5 million per year. There is possibly some participation of authorities -- particularly the police -- in these extortion rings.

A comparison of areas in Tegucigalpa controlled by Barrio 18 with areas controlled by MS13 showed no statistical difference in the number of homicides. This is despite the fact that Barrio 18 has the reputation for being the more violent of the two gangs.

Barrio 18 has a policy of fighting the security forces if officials enter their territory, while MS13 has a policy of not fighting. The different approaches may impact their ability to corrupt security forces.

There is little evidence to suggest that Barrio 18 is close to developing deeper relationships with transnational drug trafficking organizations. It remains a subsistence-level criminal group whose modus operandi primarily depends on extortion and its willingness to use violence.

Many authorities say the MS13 leadership in both El Salvador and Honduras are moving towards becoming a transnational criminal organization, deepening their involvement in the wholesale drug trade and possibly becoming international traffickers. Cases in Honduras illustrating this tendency, however, remain scant, notwithstanding the US Treasury Department's recent designation of the group as a transnational criminal organization.

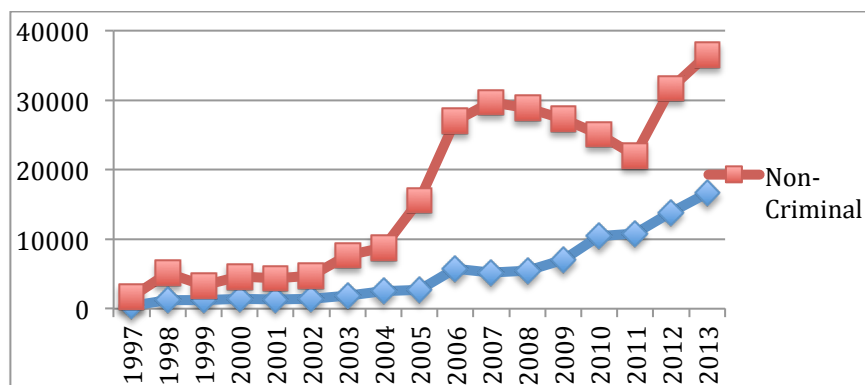
Gangs in Honduras - A Short History

In Honduras, street gangs have existed for decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, these gangs were mostly small and local in nature. They took on names designed to provoke fear (La Killer, Los Fantom, Los Nazi), or recall origins (Latina 1, Latina 2). One gang, the Union de Vagos Asociados (UVA), loosely translated as the Union of Associated Bums, was a precursor of sorts to the regional gangs of today. It had a presence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and required members in Tegucigalpa to carry proof of membership. But the UVA was the exception. According to Honduras' state intelligence agency, in Tegucigalpa alone there were some 298 neighborhood gangs in the early 1990s.⁴

While they were territorial, few of these youth gangs engaged in large-scale violence or organized crime of the type we see from today's gangs. The weapons used in their largely ritualistic battles were chains, baseball bats, machetes, knives, or simply fists. In these confrontations, the underlying objective was to dominate, not kill, your rivals, and thus live to "tell the tale" of your exploits, says a former gang member and gang expert.⁵

However, this dynamic changed in the late 1990s. In 1996, the US government passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. The law expanded the categories for which immigrants could be deported, and the result was a sharp rise of criminal deportees arriving in Central America (see graphic below). This coincided with a shaky transition from war to peace in the region during which the Northern Triangle governments struggled to adapt to a new reality where police and prosecutors, and not their armies, would be on the front lines of the fight against crime. The countries were also changing demographically, and they were becoming more urban-based societies.

Honduran Criminal and Non-Criminal Deportees from the US, 1997-2012



Source: US Department of Homeland Security

⁴ Interview, National Directorate of Investigation and Intelligence (DNII) Director Ever Mejia, Tegucigalpa, 31 March 2015.

⁵ Interview, San Pedro Sula, 22 March 2015.

All of this laid the groundwork for gangs to thrive. The deportees that arrived in Honduras included members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13), the Barrio 18, the Mau Maus, and the Vatos Locos -- California gangs whose rivalries were already filling juvenile detention centers, jails and morgues in the United States. At first, they referred to themselves as “cholos,” a nod to their Mexican progenitors: the biggest gangs -- the MS13 and Barrio 18 -- were and remain part of what is known as the Sureños, a loose conglomeration of gangs associated with the Mexican Mafia, a powerful prison gang in the United States. Other gangs were defined by their favorite music or their neighborhood. All of them drew on their cache as US-founded and forged. Their appeal was as much about their cultural superiority (or inferiority of the Hondurans) as it was about their leadership and methods.

“When they came,” explained an ex-gang member and gang expert interviewed by InSight Crime, “they brought clothing, haircuts, music. They brought a dynamic that was obviously very attractive.”

Over time, these “brands” gave way to a more local pride that mixed with long-time tradition and rituals picked up in the United States. These included the initiation ritual: in order to become a member of the group, recruits had to endure savage beatings for an allotted time period. This ritual, known as “el brinco,” or being “jumped in,” remains a fundamental part of gang identity.⁶ Still, the local gangs were more akin to “bad copies” of their US role models, in the words of the gang expert, and the deportees did not necessarily enjoy more prestige than native Hondurans. More gangs gradually formed, taking their names from neighborhoods in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. And deportees in Honduras did not have the power they had in other countries, particularly in El Salvador. “It’s not as though as though the deportees arrived and said, since we’ve been deported, we’re establishing order and imposing this,” said the gang expert. “That’s not how it worked.”

Nevertheless, the US gang members’ arrival led to a surge in activity. San Pedro Sula was the first city in Honduras to see what we might call hybrid gangs that combined local traditions with international brand names.⁷ This is partly why gangs in San Pedro Sula remain much more numerous and diverse than those in Tegucigalpa, and more experienced and violent as well. By the late 1990s, the Barrio 18, for example, had five operational cells, or what are called “clicas” or “cliques,”⁸ in San Pedro Sula. Some of these retained the names of the Los Angeles neighborhoods where they were founded, such as “Leeward” (from Leeward Avenue) and “Hollywood

⁶ This Spanish colloquialism is a literal translation of “jumped in,” a term first introduced by deportees from the United States and later integrated into slang used by Central American gangs.

⁷ If gangs in San Pedro Sula were “copies” of the Sureño gangs, those in Tegucigalpa were “copies of a copy,” says the gang expert. According to the gang expert, the first two Barrio 18 members in San Pedro Sula were known as alias “Bullet” and “Scrappy,” and were “unprepared” for just how powerful the gang would eventually become in the city. Bullet’s historic importance to the establishment of the Barrio 18 in San Pedro Sula was not enough to protect him when intra-gang rivalries intensified in later years. According to the gang expert, Bullet was killed a month after leaving prison in 2008.

⁸ “Clicas” are relatively autonomous groups that have their own name and hierarchy but are subject to the leadership’s overall, strategic decisions.

Gangsters.” Others took on the names of the families who ran them or of the area from which they hailed.

Some of the clicas were associated with certain criminal activities -- the Leeward clica, for example, dabbled in the drug trade, while the Normandie clica was involved in car theft. Extortion was not a major activity, and when it did take place, it involved extremely small sums of money -- asking the neighborhood milkman or the local “pulperia” (a corner store) to give a “donation” on an occasional basis.

A period of consolidation began in the early 2000s, during which time the bigger brand name gangs, particularly the MS13 and Barrio 18, absorbed some of the smaller “bad copies.”⁹ This period of upheaval intensified the rivalry between these two gangs and others, and it became more common to apply lethal force in their confrontations. Using .38 revolvers, 12-gauge shotguns and homemade weapons fashioned from old pipes and other scraps, the gangs began a violent bid for territorial control that continues today.

The MS13 and Barrio 18 eventually emerged as the dominant, if not monolithic, forces in most of Honduras. Experts told InSight Crime that, in part, this was due to their weaponry: they were better armed than other California offshoot gangs like the Mau Mau, and other older, “traditional” Honduran gangs. The MS13 and Barrio 18 also proved more adept at applying their superior force without remorse against the leadership of rival gangs, and capitalizing on their brands.

This period of violence alarmed the Honduran government and society enough to open the way for hardline, zero-tolerance anti-gang legislation in 2002. The legislation essentially criminalized “illicit association” with gangs.¹⁰ The security forces used this broad interpretation of gang membership as a pretext to round up thousands of suspects, often on the basis of appearance (tattoos, wardrobe, and supposed gang paraphernalia). This resulted in a boom in the prison population. Between 1999 and 2014, the number of incarcerated Hondurans grew by about 50 percent.¹¹ Currently, the country’s prisons are at 189 percent capacity, with most inmates being held in pre-trial detention.¹²

This mass incarceration has contributed in many ways to the development of gangs. To begin with, the top leadership of the gangs was removed from the streets. While this meant they lost complete control over day-to-day operations, it also granted the leaders a respite from the violence and allowed them to regroup. As the prisons filled with more suspected gang members, the gangs’ control of the facilities

⁹ Some smaller, local street gangs, instead of being totally absorbed by the MS13 and Barrio 18, have struck formal alliances with these organizations. In the neighborhood of Rivera Hernandez in San Pedro Sula, for example, a local gang -- the Parqueños -- is currently allied with the Barrio 18.

¹⁰ The law raised the penalty for “illicit association” from between three and six years imprisonment up to between nine and 12 years, which contributed to the serious overcrowding in Honduras’ prisons.

¹¹ International Centre for Prison Studies, “World Prison Brief: Honduras.” Available at: <http://prisonstudies.org/country/honduras>

¹² Ibid.

increased. Over time, gang leaders found that prison provided a safe operational headquarters from which they could manage their most important street-based operations across a wide expanse of the country.

Secondly, this mass incarceration of suspected gang members changed the gangs' criminal economy. Faced with an increasing number of prosecutions, the gangs sought more funds to pay for legal and other costs associated with trials and jail time. The result was a concerted effort to move from occasional to more systematic extortion of small businesses and public transport, a subject we will address later in this report.

Thirdly, the mass incarceration forced the gangs to change their *modus operandi*. Members quickly stopped putting known gang tattoos in visible places on their body. And they recruited more selectively, so that the core membership were fewer, but more dedicated -- and more willing to demonstrate their dedication through the use of violence. This recruitment strategy has been described as “*pocos, pero locos*” -- fewer, but crazier. One ex-gang member told our researchers that the formal recruitment process for Barrio 18, for instance, can now last up to two years, and that for the MS13 it can take even longer.

“You can’t show up anymore and say, ‘Hey, I want to join up,’” he said. “If I show up and say that, they’re going to put me to one side. They pick you if they want you.”¹³

That is not to say that the gangs stopped recruiting. Because Honduras’ anti-gang legislation did not have the same penalties for minors involved in gang activity, the gang has increasingly sought underage youth for operations. Pre-teens, for instance, now frequently work as lookouts (“*banderas*”) and collect “war taxes” (extortion payments), a subject we will cover in more detail later in this report. The shift helps explain why areas around schools are frequently battlegrounds for rival gangs.

The ultimate result is a more horizontal structure and, in at least the case of the Barrio 18, less discipline within the gang itself. While MS13 and Barrio 18 still take orders from incarcerated leaders -- and still send money into the prisons, feeding the gangs’ centralized budgets -- this leadership structure is not always strong enough to exert total control the “foot soldiers” on the streets. This helps explain why there are so many derivative groups and why there are so many other powerful local brands. Still, the two most recognizable brands, Barrio 18 and MS13, remain the predominant forces in Honduras, and it is around those two gangs that we have concentrated our research.

¹³ Interview, ex-gang member, Tegucigalpa, 9 April 2015.

Counting Gang Members in Honduras

Estimates of the number of gang members in Honduras vary widely. In general terms, non-governmental organizations' estimates are considerably lower than official estimates, but both have a difficult time gauging the size of these organizations. The Honduran police, in particular, give a very high estimate of gang membership.¹⁴ The organization that gives the lowest estimate, the National Program for Prevention, Rehabilitation and Social Reinsertion, has a ground-level view of how many gang members are in the country, but its numbers, especially with regards to the gang members in the country's prison system, seem particularly conservative.

<i>Source</i>	<i>Estimated number of gang members</i>
The National Program for Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Social Reinsertion (Programa Nacional de Prevencion, Rehabilitacion y Reinsercion Social)	4,728 active gang members 447 active gang members in prison
Jovenes Honduras Adelante - Juntos Avancemos (JHA-KA) ¹⁵	5,000 to 6,000 active members of the MS13 and Barrio 18
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	12,000 gang members in the country (7,000 in the Barrio 18 and 5,000 in the MS13)
Honduran police	25,000 active members of the MS13 and Barrio 18
US Agency for International Development (USAID) ¹⁶	36,000 active gang members

Part of the difficulty in coming up with firm figures is that there is little consensus on what a "gang" is. US federal law, for example, defines a gang as an association of

¹⁴ It is still less than the most oft-cited number for gang affiliation, published in a 2006 USAID report. See: US Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, Office of Regional Sustainable Development, "Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment," April 2006. Available at: <http://www.lb7.uscourts.gov/documents/09-19321.pdf>

¹⁵ A Honduran non-governmental organization that tracks youth justice issues.

¹⁶ USAID, "Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment," op cit.

three or more people that uses violence as a means to a criminal end.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Honduran law -- specifically, Article 332 of the country's penal code, known as the "anti-mara" law -- has no clear definition of what constitutes a gang member.¹⁸ Gang experts consulted for this report also suggested that inflating estimates may be in the interest of Honduran authorities in order to make the problem seem bigger than it is and to distract from other issues afflicting the country.

For its part, InSight Crime defines a gang as a group of people -- usually young and from a low socio-economic background -- that is made up of relatively autonomous cells, each with a clearly identifiable leader. These cells define themselves, in part, around constant, reciprocal violence against other groups of youths; and it is this conflict that makes them a cohesive organization, and that is the means for establishing internal hierarchies and awarding status and power.

But even our definition has its limitations. As we shall see, there are some Honduran gangs, such as the Barrio 18, that fit neatly into this definition. However, there are others that do not. Additionally, the gangs are not static. Some groups, like the MS13, are mutating into something that has street gang tendencies combined with the mentality of a higher-level drug trafficking organization.

There is also no consensus about who should be considered a "gang member." Those at the periphery of the gangs -- young children who watch, admire, and occasionally collaborate with their local neighborhood gang, or teens who associate with gangs but are not fully committed to them -- are often considered "gang members" in the eyes of law enforcement officials but not by the non-governmental community or even the gang members themselves.

The reality is that for every actual gang member, there are several who act as collaborators. These include lookouts, drug dealers, drivers and messengers; family members, girlfriends and friends. The gang rehabilitation report cited above excludes gang "sympathizers," and would-be recruits (or what are called "aspirantes") from its count. However, the police count as member those who provide the gang's logistical support within a given neighborhood -- the young lookouts known as "banderas," for example -- which results in the higher estimates.

¹⁷ National Institute of Justice, "What Is a Gang? Definitions." Available at: <http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/gangs/Pages/definitions.aspx>

¹⁸ Article 332 states that the "founders, leaders, and facilitators" of gangs or illegal groups may face between three and six years in prison and a fine of 100,000 lempiras (approximately \$4,750), while other gang members will face a prison sentence a third lower. However, the law does not explicitly state what the legal difference is between a "pandilla" (a youth gang) and other types of illegal criminal groups. In Honduras' Law of Police and Social Affairs, Article 90 states that a "pandilla" is "a group of adolescents from age 12 to 18, who meet and act aggressively against third parties or each other, damaging public or private property, or else act to disrupt the public order." As of August 2015, the proposed reforms to Article 332 was approved by Honduras' Congress. The reforms increase the penalties facing gang members to between 20 and 30 years in prison, while gang leaders would face up to 50 years in prison. Additionally, gang leaders or members could see their sentences increase by an additional third if they are found to have conspired to commit crimes against state authorities, or to have used minors, pregnant women or the elderly to carry out tasks for them.

Geographic Distribution of Gangs in Honduras

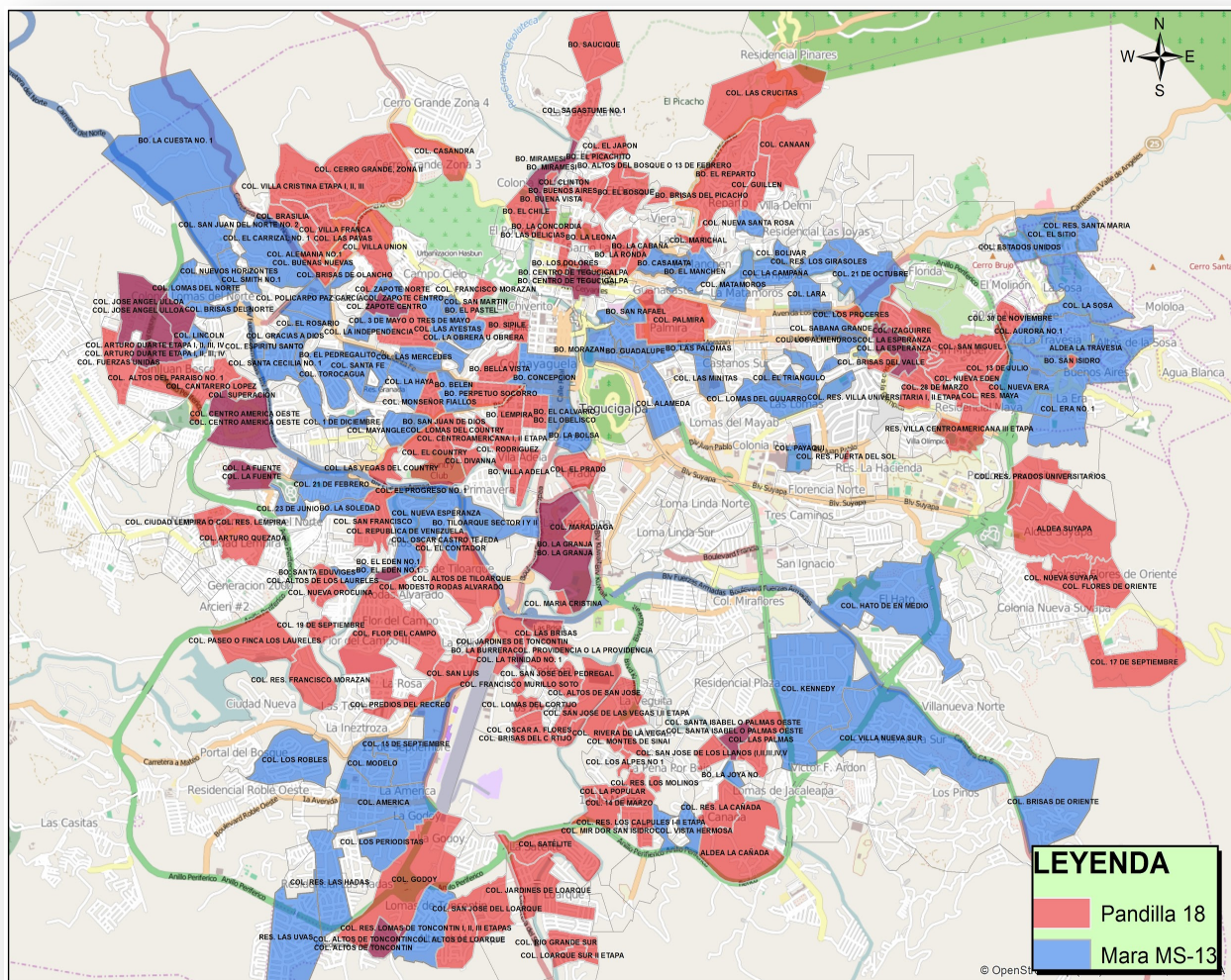
The question of whether Honduras' gang problem is a more urban than rural phenomenon is less straightforward than it might initially appear.¹⁹ Broadly speaking, gangs have little presence outside the three largest urban areas: the capital city of Tegucigalpa and its surrounding metropolitan area; the city of La Ceiba, the third-largest in the country; and Cortes province. In Cortes, most gangs are concentrated in greater San Pedro Sula, the country's industrial and economic capital. That is not to say that there is not gang presence in some rural areas. A prime example is the municipality of Tela, between La Ceiba and San Pedro Sula, where the MS13 has established a strong base of operations.

The maps of gang presence in these cities gives no clear pattern of why gangs occupy certain territory and not others. According to police intelligence, the Barrio 18 is currently operational in approximately 150 neighborhoods, or "colonias," in Tegucigalpa. As can be seen in the map below,²⁰ Barrio 18's largest extension of territory is in the southern part of the Capital District, including Tegucigalpa's sister-city, Comayaguela. Meanwhile, MS13 is operational in some 70 colonias in the capital district, while the gang's largest concentration of forces is believed to be in the western part of the city. There are thought to be just 12 colonias out of 222 in which both gangs are present at the same time, including Tegucigalpa's city center.

¹⁹ The parameters Honduras uses to determine whether a district is urban or rural are often arbitrary -- an "urban" area is defined based on the number of inhabitants, its proximity to a city, or lack of agricultural activity. Nevertheless, some of these so-called "urban" areas look and feel more like rural areas, in terms of transport, access to state services, and infrastructure.

²⁰ Map provided to InSight Crime by police intelligence unit the Sistema Estrategico de Recoleccion, Cotejamiento, Analisis y Archivo de Informacion (SERCAA).

MS13 and Barrio 18 Presence in Tegucigalpa

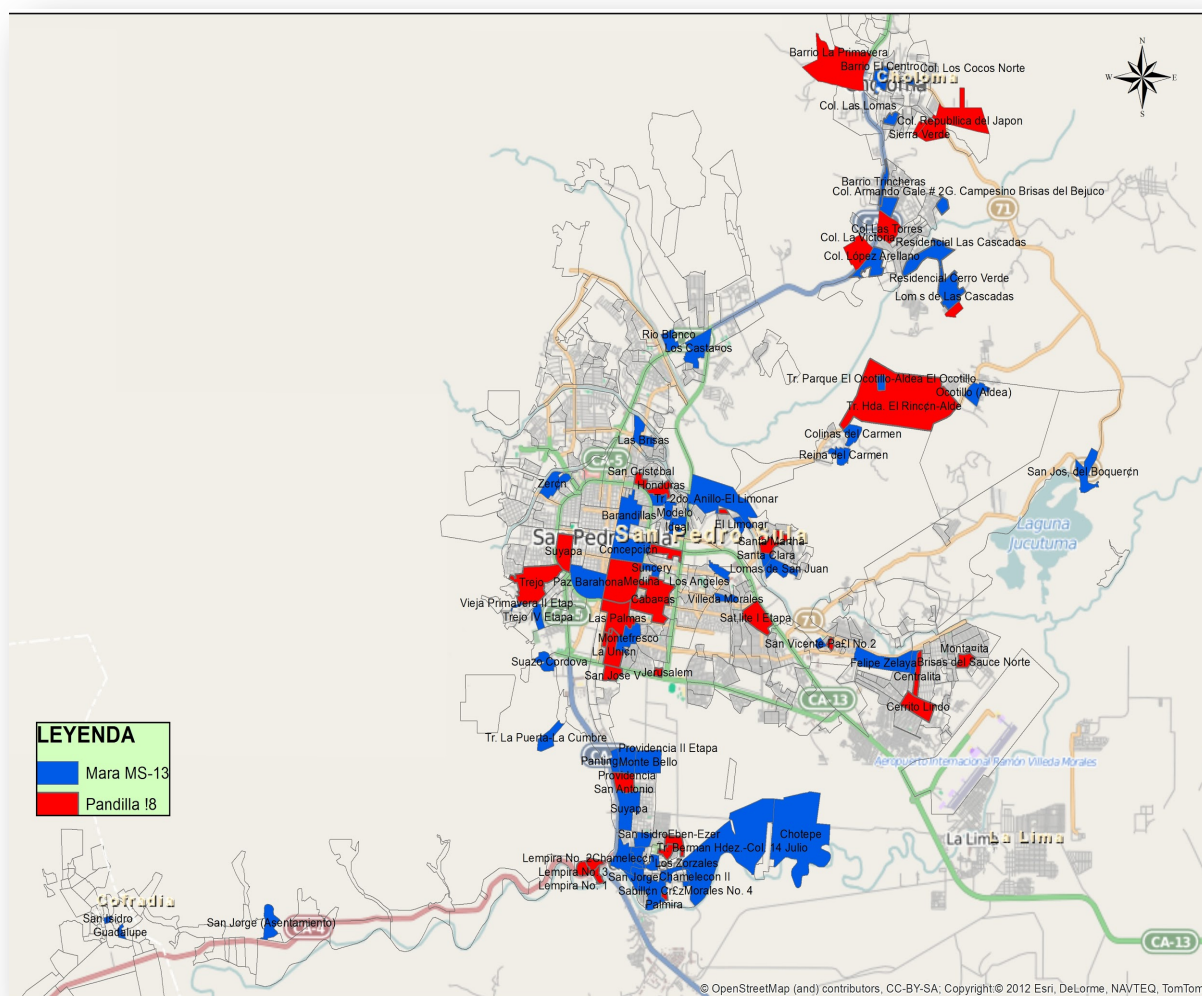


Source: Honduras Police Intelligence

In San Pedro Sula,²¹ meanwhile, Barrio 18 is present in 22 colonias. The MS13 is also present in 11 of those, explaining in part why the city sees so much violence, as the gangs jostle for dominance within these contested areas. In addition to those 11 colonias, the MS13 is present in another 58 colonias in San Pedro Sula. It should also be noted that other gangs are interspersed in both San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. (See section entitled, “Other Gangs,” below)

²¹ The scope of this report does not include La Ceiba.

MS13 and Barrio 18 Presence in San Pedro Sula



Source: Honduras Police Intelligence

The boundaries dividing up gang territory in these urban areas are fairly dynamic. These frontiers tend to change in small increments, colonia by colonia. Indeed, the invisible borders that divide these territories appear to shift regularly amongst

colonias but not within them: as stated above, according to police intelligence there are few colonias in Tegucigalpa where both MS13 and Barrio 18 are present.

While the colonia is not an official demarcation of territory, it appears to be fundamental to the way that the gangs are organized and expand. This point bears more explanation. Gangs are organized through clicas, or small cells of operators.²² Clicas still tend to be clustered by colonia. This approach has its logic, as well as real-life implications. The colonia's demarcation is related to history, geography and other shared characteristics, just as a clica's is. Thus, when gangs seek to expand their territory, they aim to conquer an entire colonia and vanquish any vestige of the previous gang's presence. This may include displacing multiple residents from this newly conquered territory in an effort to rebrand the colonia as its own. Offensives by gangs can have horrible consequences for those who remain. For example, if a local school is in a rival gang's colonia, students in the area may face threats, or worse, if the area is successfully conquered by another gang.

²² The essence of a clica has evolved over time, and, according to a former gang member and gang expert consulted by our researchers, clica identity within the MS13 and the Barrio 18 in Honduras is not as strong as it used to be during the 1990s. Now a gang's clica is more akin to "a last name," says the gang expert -- a way of differentiating one sub-group from another -- but members are not expected to place loyalty to their clica over loyalty to the overall Barrio 18 or MS13 structure.

Gang Violence in Honduras

When asked why there is so much gang-related violence in Honduras, most give a short answer that centers on a single concept: territory. Territory is a useful catchall to describe what motivates the gangs, as it encompasses both the micro and macro levels of this ongoing battle. At one level, territory is about physical space. Conquering that space grants access to revenue streams, via activities such as extortion and drug peddling. Control of territory also ensures more recruits and enhances a gang's status. But territory can also be a more personal matter. A fight for territory can be a struggle to gain power within a gang, or a show of fortitude with internal or external rivals. Territory is also a central part of many gangs' ethos. Even the name of the Barrio 18 refers to the Spanish word for "neighborhood," while "salvatrucha" is a reference to El Salvador.

Still, determining what motivates the gangs to violence is difficult in the best of circumstances. In Honduras, it is made more difficult because of the lack of reliable data, the limited number of judicial cases, and holes in government intelligence. Using the best available data on our most reliable proxy -- homicides -- as well as qualitative research, we can only theorize about the extent of violence and how it relates to gang activity in the country.

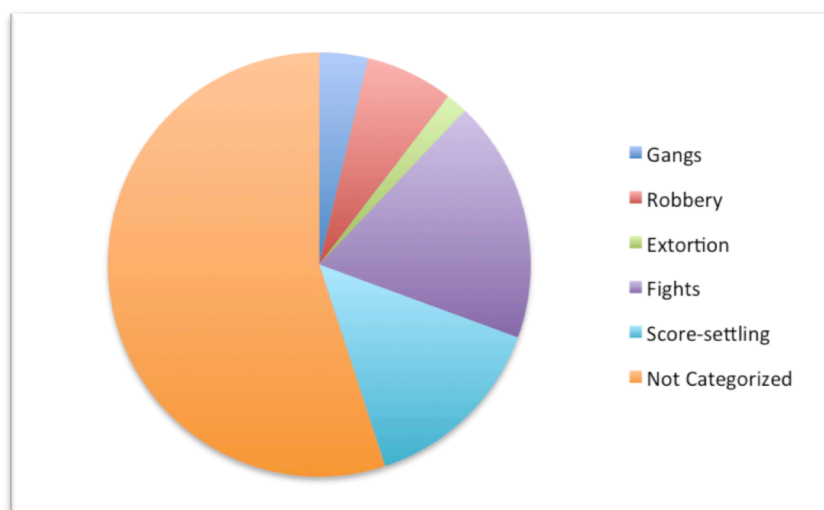
A significant portion of Honduras' homicides -- especially in the three urban areas where the gangs have their greatest presence -- appear to be what we might call "gang-related." Like the term "territory," gang-related can have multiple meanings. To begin with, gang-related can refer to any activity connected to the gang's finances, such as extortion, drug peddling, theft, or murder-for-hire, among others. Gang-related also includes violence amongst gang members or between gangs, and violence between gangs and the security forces. Finally, gang-related refers to conflicts with outsiders who are perceived to have gone against the gang or its generally accepted code of behavior in some way. This can include providing information to security forces about criminal activity, or not permitting the gang to use a house for its activities.

In Honduras' most violent neighborhoods, anecdotal evidence about gang-related murders abounds. In some instances, these stories can be partially confirmed by retrieving news reports about battles being waged over territory. A recent example is the fight for Las Torres, a neighborhood in Tegucigalpa. The neighborhood has long been controlled by the MS13. It is surrounded, however, by neighborhoods controlled by the Barrio 18. Since November, there have been three attacks in Las Torres that bore signs of Barrio 18 incursions, leading observers to believe that the murder rates in that area, which are some of the highest in the city, are related to gangs.

In the psyche of the community, gang-on-gang battles loom large. This may be partly because gang violence plays out over several months, or even years, and may involve multiple victims killed in public spaces. Nevertheless, official statistics only

hint at how much of the violence is gang-related. For example, in its report on 2014, the Violence Observatory at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) said men between the ages of 20 and 30 had a homicide rate of 270 per 100,000. Of the total homicides, the Observatory said 18.5 percent were due to “interpersonal fights” (“riñas interpersonales”), 14.4 percent to “score-settling” (“ajuste de cuentas”), 6.7 percent to “robbery/common crime” (“robo”/“delinquencia comun”), 3.7 percent to “maras/soccer hooligans” (“maras/barras bravas”), about 2 percent to “extortion” (“extorsion”); 49.2 percent lacked information regarding suspected motive.²³

Suspected Motives Behind Honduras Homicides, 2014



Source: Violence Observatory at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH)

The general perception is that the Barrio 18 is more violent than the MS13. This, however, is also based on anecdotal evidence. In an effort to test this hypothesis, we looked at homicide statistics for Tegucigalpa over a five-year period between 2008 and 2013,²⁴ and compared them to areas where the two gangs are believed to be predominant.²⁵ We found little correlation between the number of homicides and which gang controlled a particular area.²⁶ Barrio 18 areas had more total homicides, but in both Barrio 18 and MS13 areas, there was an average of 11 homicides per area over that five-year period.

This data is hardly conclusive. It presumes there is a correlation between homicides and gang presence, and that homicides in those areas can be tied to the gang that

²³ Observatorio de la Violencia, “Boletín Enero - Diciembre 2014,” no. 36, February 2015. Available at: <http://iudpas.org/pdf/Boletines/Nacional/NEd36EneDic2014.pdf>

²⁴ These statistics were compiled by the Unidades Metropolitanas de Prevención e Intervención contra el Crimen (UMEP) and furnished to the Honduras Convive! program.

²⁵ These areas were based on Honduran police intelligence assessments provided to InSight Crime.

²⁶ This was a rough estimate based on a series of assumptions. Nonetheless, the results led us to believe that this was not a fruitful investigative avenue.

controls that area, something that is not always true, as illustrated in the aforementioned example from Las Torres.

Notwithstanding, there was a consensus amongst officials and crime analysts interviewed for this report that Barrio 18 is more violent than MS13. And to understand why Barrio 18 might be perceived as more violent than MS13 -- or any other gang in Honduras for that matter -- we need to take a more thorough look at their organizational structures; modus operandi and criminal economy; infrastructure; and their codes, rules and discipline.

Barrio 18

The Barrio 18 in Honduras is an organization that combines extreme violence, rudimentary streams of income, and contacts with high-level criminal groups. It operates in some of the most poverty-stricken areas where much of Honduras' violence is concentrated. It permits limited entry into its highest circles, but recruits collaborators from varied backgrounds.²⁷

Barrio 18 - Organizational Structure

The structure of the Barrio 18 is nominally hierarchal. At the top is a figure they refer to as the “toro,” or bull. Most of these toros reside in prison, although some are on the streets. Depending on their status and longevity in the gang, each toro has a certain number of cells under his command. These cells are referred to as “clicas.” They constitute the most clearly defined unit of the gang.

At the top of the clica is a “homie.” Each homie has a number of “soldados,” or soldiers, below him. Soldado is an all-encompassing term that can denote numerous positions within the gang. The different roles within the rank of “soldado” are not easily distinguishable for outside observers. The rank depends on numerous, and sometimes, arbitrary factors, ranging from perceived loyalty to the gang, to propensity to commit violent acts to friendships within the gang.

A soldier can have a single area or multiple territories under his command, depending on his rank. Soldiers also take on different roles. Some may specialize in the financial side, collecting money from extortion and drug peddling. Others become “gatilleros,” or hitmen. Given the importance of violence to the group's ethos, it is not surprising that the gatilleros often have a symbolic importance as well as serving a critical function.

Below the rank of soldier is what are called “paisas.” Soldados have a number of paisas at their disposal, normally in the range of five to 10. Some of those interviewed by our researchers cited two types of paisas: paisas “firmes” and paisas. The firmes, or solid members, are on the verge of becoming soldiers. They have shown extraordinary loyalty and/or ability to work for the gang's interests. They will, and often do, lay down their lives for the group and for their immediate superior. “They can't say no,” one former Barrio 18 member told our researchers, referring to the paisa firme.²⁸

This devotion makes the paisas and the paisas firmes the cannon fodder in the perennial squabbles that characterize the Barrio 18's antagonistic relationships

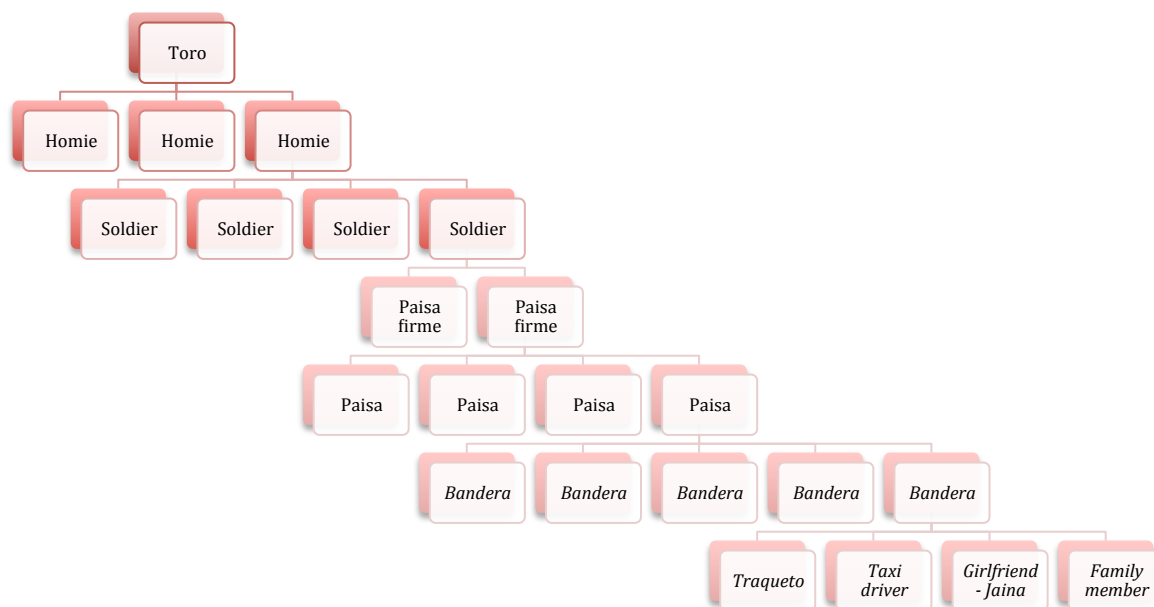
²⁷ To develop the Barrio 18 and the MS13 sections, InSight Crime and researchers spoke to more than two dozen non-governmental and governmental sources, as well as current and former members of the gangs, all of whom requested anonymity.

²⁸ InSight Crime interview with former gang member who requested anonymity, Tegucigalpa, 9 April 2015.

with rivals, security forces, and other armed actors. Some might be more expendable than others, but all of them understand that to be considered a central part of the gang, they have to be willing to die.

Indeed, these paisas firms are pinning for the day they can be “jumped in,” or initiated. It is critical to understand that whoever administers that beating will remain that member’s mentor and immediate superior within the gang. This relationship often plays out over a period of years, during which a soldado or a homie will groom numerous paisas, who will later become soldiers themselves. If the soldier plays his hand well, and keeps an eye on himself and his people, he can position them in numerous neighborhoods, thus gaining significant power within the gang.

Barrio 18 - Organizational Structure



Sources: non-governmental and governmental sources; current and former members of the gangs.

Below the paisas are what are known as “banderas.” These are bottom rung of the gang hierarchy. Not yet members and often forcibly recruited, these are boys between the ages of 6 and 14 who are the next generation of paisas. Bandera literally means “flag,” or warning, and that describes a good bit of their function: they are spread throughout the neighborhood, although frequently concentrated at entryways into the area or along the borders. They signal, text, or call when they have to alert others to a stranger’s or rival’s presence.

The banderas also do other jobs for the gangs. They are messengers and carry weapons. They pick up and drop off extortion payments. They hover around police stations, crime scenes, and other places where authorities congregate. They can pick up and drop off drugs and drug money, although this is more unusual. In other

words, they do most of the drudgework for the gangs, and take much of the risk with regards to the law. This is for good reason: they draw less suspicion, and they are less likely to face detention if they are caught.

This initiation process may go on for years and never lead to an invitation to become a paísa. The relationship could also come to a natural end, with the bandera leaving or moving on to other things in life. Being a bandera, in other words, does not automatically imply a full life in the gangs. The same cannot be said for being a paísa. Once you graduate into a paísa, there are only a few ways out.

There are, of course, numerous other gang collaborators. As noted earlier, distinguishing between those who are active, passive, and coerced participants is a difficult, if not impossible, job for crime analysts and authorities alike. One type of collaborator is the local drug seller. While the drugs may be managed by the gang itself, they have a distributor who is not part of the gang. The Barrio 18 refers to this person as a “traqueto” or “pucher” (the Hispanicized version of “pusher”). The gang also has taxi drivers and mechanics that fix their cars and provide intelligence, and lawyers who assist them in their legal battles.

Girlfriends can also play an important role in the Barrio 18. Known as “jainas,” they can deal drugs and manage finances for a homie or a paísa. They can also take money and drugs into prisons for the toros and other gang members who are on the inside. There are family members who work as messengers, carriers, or in other odd jobs. Family members may also stash drugs, weapons and other items of vital importance to gang leaders.

But gang “families” run the gamut. In some families, there are already three generations of gang members in the Barrio 18. Some of these families are completely dependent on the gang’s criminal revenue streams. But other families are victims of the one family member who joined. Telling the difference is often a near-impossible task.

Barrio 18 - Modus Operandi and Criminal Economy

Barrio 18 appears to be more horizontal in its leadership structure than what InSight Crime has observed in other places like El Salvador. They are organized into clicas, which are semi-independent but designed to control a specific territory. Control of this territory is vital since it is what they use to gather revenue and feed the core of the organization, i.e., the soldados on the streets and the toros in the prisons. It is often what defines who they are.

The Barrio 18 has shown some degree of sophistication in isolated cases with regards to gathering intelligence and acting on it, and some sporadic connection with organized crime elements. However, by and large the Barrio 18 remains a subsistence-based criminal group, albeit an incredibly violent one with large amounts of weaponry and an unbending propensity to use this firepower.

Barrio 18 - Extortion

The most important operational aspect of the Barrio 18 is controlling territory. The gang does this by establishing security rings using the aforementioned banderas, maintaining a formidable arsenal, and inflicting violent punishment on rivals, those who cross it, and, frequently, its own members.

As noted earlier, the designated leader of an area is known as the “homie.” He keeps a birds-eye view on the area under his control, sometimes micromanaging specific aspects that are important to his bottom line. In the case of the Barrio 18, this means making sure the extortion, or what they call “impuesto de guerra,” is going as planned on the micro and macro levels. To do this, his soldiers are spread through his area. Each has a number of paisas at his disposal -- between five and 10. Among those, there are two paisas firmes. Each paisa then has about a half-dozen banderas that he can call on to do errands, pick up payments, drop off ransom notes, or simply keep watch.

The targets for these extortion schemes on the micro levels are mostly the “pulperias,” or small corner stores. But any storefront business or street vendor is fair game. What they pay depends on the size of the locale or their perceived income. In most cases, as one pulperia owner and a victim of extortion told our researchers, the scheme begins with a note that demands a large sum of money.²⁹ Often the gang promises that it is a one-time payment, which it rarely, if ever, is. This “one-time” payment can be as large as 2,000 lempiras (approximately \$100). After this, it moves to a weekly payment of between 300 to 500 lempiras.

Based on the information it collects on a given area, Barrio 18 comes up with other schemes that essentially amount to extortion, although it may not involve any exchange of money. The pulperia owner said her family owned a small building with four apartments in it. The gang, she said, uses one of these apartments rent-free. She said she did not know what they used it for, but presumed it was for members to stay on occasion.

The testimony coincides with what others told our researchers regarding the Barrio 18’s modus operandi. According to various gang experts and victims interviewed for this report, the soldier assigns the paisas a small section of the neighborhood to carry out extortion. The paisa, using his half-dozen or so banderas, collects from the area, then hands the money to the soldier in charge. This soldier keeps the accounts. If they are short, then the paisa must investigate. If one of the banderas is stealing or not collecting the appointed amount, he can get a “calentada” (a beating, or worse, depending on the severity of the transgression and the number of times it has occurred).

²⁹ InSight Crime interview, pulperia owner who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, Tegucigalpa, 8 April 2015.

Extortion on the macro level mostly involves collection from the taxi and bus collectives. These collectives run throughout the major cities and towns. Gangs like the Barrio 18 and the MS13 organize the collection of these payments from their headquarters: prison. One leader of a prominent bus collective told our researchers that his collective -- which has about 80 buses operating along some of the main thoroughfares of Tegucigalpa -- is currently paying four different groups: the MS13, the Barrio 18, a gang called the Chirizos and another independent gang.³⁰

As occurs at the micro-level, the extortion process usually begins with a request for a lump sum initial payment. After the initial payment -- which range between about \$3,000 and \$13,000 -- the bus collective and gangs then settle into a weekly routine. The payments differ depending on the gang but range from \$300 to \$700.

The drop-off point is the same each week and has been for years, leading many in the collective to believe that there is high-level collusion on the part of the police and possibly transport officials. The collective has contacted police in an attempt to get them to act against these gangs. But the leader of the collective says it is clear to them that police only go after independent groups, avoiding capture and prosecutions of the big three: the MS13, Barrio 18 and Chirizos. They theorize that the police commanders and these officials take their cut of the extortion pie.³¹

That pie is substantial. According to Our rough estimates, with a contribution from the bus collective leader, a gang can earn as much as \$2.5 million per year from extortion of the public transport sector in Tegucigalpa alone. This assumes that the gang collects 10,000 lempiras each week from the urban and inter-urban buses -- of which there are about 70 total -- and 4,000 lempiras weekly from the 30 taxi collectives (see breakdown below).

Estimated Extortion Earnings in Tegucigalpa from Transport Sector

Collective	Weekly	Yearly
Taxi	4,000	16,640,000
Urban	10,000	20,800,000
Inter-urban	10,000	15,600,000
Total lempiras		53,040,000
Total dollars		2,545,920

Sources: InSight Crime estimate

³⁰ InSight Crime interview, leader of bus collective who wished to remain anonymous, Tegucigalpa, 9 April 2015.

³¹ The leader says the collective still believes in the Fuerza Nacional de Anti-Extortion, although he claims that one of its members stole money from them once.

The gangs do not pretend to protect the collectives from the other gangs, but having a top-down system helps the collectives avoid local problems around their dispatches. If another independent or freelance gang without sufficient muscle tries to extort them, the collectives can tell the gang leaders in that area. Or, if someone claiming to be Barrio 18 arrives at dispatch demanding payment, they can tell the actual Barrio 18 leaders. In most instances, that independent extortion gang is pushed out of the area or its leader and members killed, the collective leader told our researchers.

Barrio 18 - “Narcomenudeo” - Petty Drug Dealing

Another major source of revenue for the Barrio 18 is sales from local drug peddling. As noted earlier, while this may involve banderas and even a dealer (“traquetero”) who is not a member of the gang, this activity is managed from the highest levels of the gangs, and entrusted only to the most loyal of members. This is for two reasons: first, petty drug dealing represents an increasingly important source of revenue for the gang; and second, it can become a major source of conflict between the gangs, their rivals, and would-be business partners.

In order to run local drug deals, Barrio 18, like their MS13 counterparts, must first have a connection that can furnish them with drugs. This is where the infamous but nebulous intersection of high-level drug trafficking organizations (DTOs),³² “transportistas,” or local transport groups,³³ and gangs takes place. The origins of these connections have never been established, but the most logical starting point is the prisons. All three types of organizations have leaders incarcerated in the same prisons. They connect, if not philosophically, then for business purposes. This business happens inside and outside of the penitentiaries.

However, there is little trust between these organizations. For the most part, they have different end goals, which creates conflict. The gangs have loyalty only to themselves (rule number one, one former member told our researchers, is “Respect the barrio”; see below). For the gangs, violence is an end, not a means as it is for the other criminal groups. There is little capital accumulation in gangs; revenue is spent as it comes. Open rebellion against authority is part of the gangs’ ethos, whereas other organized crime groups seek to stay out of the view of authorities and the public. In sum, the differences between the gangs and the transnational drug trafficking organizations makes it hard to see how any organic or lasting relationship can be established.

What this means in practice is difficult to discern and appears to vary from case to case. Both the DTOs and the gangs can trade numerous types of favors with each other. The type of favor is only limited by the ingenuity of the criminal groups in

³² We define DTOs as international organizations that reach across the entire distribution chain from the point of production to the point of sale.

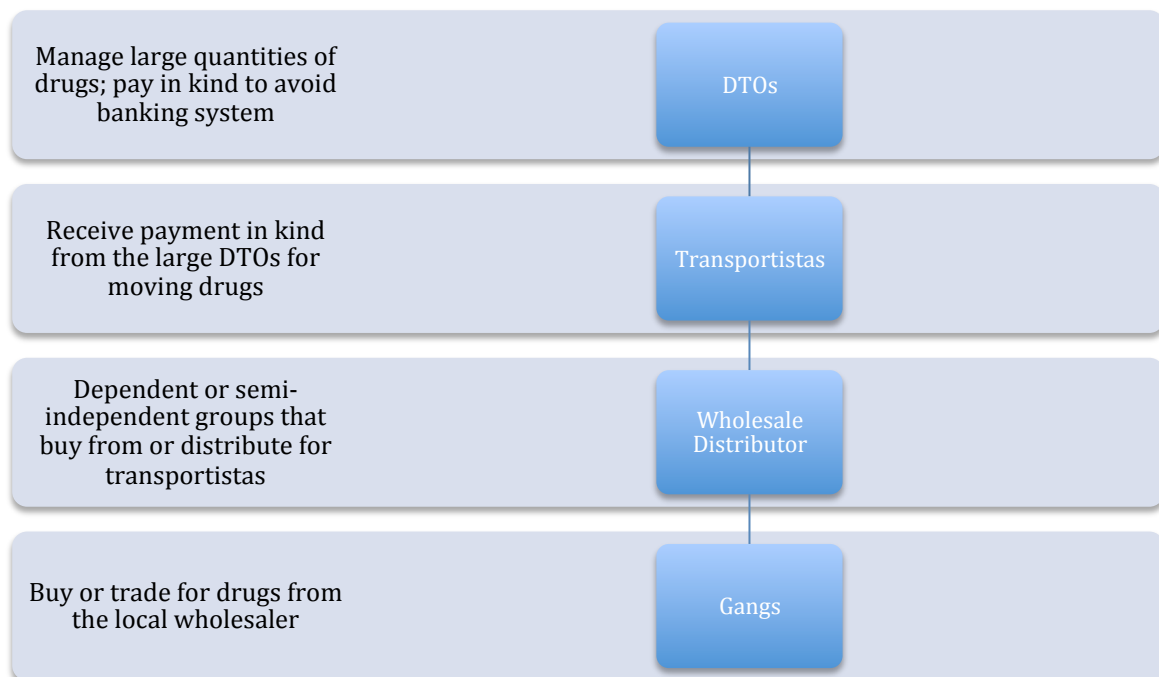
³³ We define transportistas as groups with a local base of operations that assist DTOs in moving illegal drugs across their areas of influence.

question. The DTOs have more access to weapons, for instance, which police intelligence says the gangs have sought and obtained. The gangs' control of territory, meanwhile, makes them potentially useful in various ways to drug transport groups and their DTO allies. It has been suggested by numerous observers that gang-controlled territory serve as a location for transportistas to store illegal drugs, among other items. The gangs' areas of control can also serve as a place of respite for high-level traffickers.

There are also trades to be made. In one case described to our researchers by an ex-police officer, Barrio 18 was stealing cars, but had no place to sell them or their parts. Another criminal organization offered to provide that service and, in return for a discount on the stolen cars, they gave the gang narcotics it could sell in the area. The relationship appears to continue to this day, the ex police officer said.

In all of this, there is a presumption that gangs are trading work for drugs. But this does not necessarily imply a direct relationship between the gangs and the DTOs. More likely, there is another layer -- the wholesalers or criminal intermediaries -- who operate with or semi-independently of transportistas and provide these contacts. The transportistas, for example, are receiving drug payments and are looking for ways to offload this extra merchandise. The gangs control some of the local, neighborhood markets, but go through the wholesalers to get their supply of drugs.

Drug Trafficking Hierarchy



Sources: non-governmental and governmental sources; current and former members of the gangs.

Of course, this is a greatly simplified version. In reality, these relationships are fluid and dynamic, especially because the market for drugs in these gang-controlled areas appears to be growing. According to anecdotal evidence and observations made by our investigators, the availability of various illegal substances in even the poorest neighborhoods is rising, most notably marijuana, cocaine (in powder form), and “crack” (the highly addictive cocaine derivative).

This relatively new criminal market is so lucrative that Barrio 18 appears to be making concerted efforts to take control of this trade in various parts of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, which means usurping it from its rivals, the MS13. In at least two neighborhoods in Tegucigalpa -- Las Torres and Los Pinos -- Barrio 18 has made incursions in recent months into MS13 territory and attacked distribution points. In August 2014, for instance, Barrio 18 members wearing police flak jackets and wielding AK-47 assault rifles shot and killed eight people in Las Torres as they exited a bar called La Puerta Negra.³⁴

Yet even if Barrio 18 seizes a drug distribution point once controlled by the MS13, that does not mean that Barrio 18 controls the entire drug trade in that neighborhood. In most cases described to our researchers, there is still a wholesaler involved. In Flor del Campo, for instance, a former Barrio 18 member said the gang purchased drugs from a single individual. They do not, according to the former member, perform services for this individual in return for drugs. It is, in other words, a strictly financial arrangement regarding wholesale purchases. This appears to be the *modus operandi* of most gangs.

Just as the duties of the petty drug trade are divided between gang and non-gang members, so are the revenues. Former Barrio 18 members consulted by our researchers said that a typical sale of 2,000 lempiras’ worth of marijuana might be divided as follows: 500 lempiras for the drug dealer (or “traquetero”), 1,000 lempiras for the homie, and 500 lempiras to the toros in prison. The homie presumably shares his portion with his soldiers, lest he risk insurrection, but it is unclear how this is broken down.

Nor do we have a good sense of how much the local drug market is worth to the gangs. There are no serious efforts to track consumption or prices, making it impossible to gauge the importance of this revenue stream. However, as noted, anecdotal evidence suggests that the domestic drug market is very important and will become even more vital to the gang’s plans going forward. Should Barrio 18 shift its focus to controlling this local market, the implications would be enormous. Such a shift is described in more detail in the section concerning the MS13, which has made this criminal economy its mainstay for several years now.

³⁴ El Herald, “Siete muertos y tres heridos deja balacera en Comayagüela,” 9 August 2014. Available at: <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/736792-364/siete-muertos-y-tres-heridos-deja-balacera-en-comayag%C3%BCela>. See also: El Herald, “Honduras: Capturan a dos sospechosos por masacre en Tegucigalpa,” 10 August 2014. Available at: <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/737304-364/honduras-capturan-a-dos-sospechosos-por-masacre-en-tegucigalpa>

Barrio 18 - Other Revenue Streams

The Barrio 18 has other means of securing revenue, perhaps the most notable of which is theft and resale, particularly that involving cars. The Barrio 18's antagonistic relationship with the authorities means it can keep stolen vehicles and other illegal merchandise in their territory with relative ease because authorities refrain from entering these areas. Some neighborhoods, such as Flor del Campo in Tegucigalpa, are known repositories for stolen cars.

Dealing in stolen merchandise has both benefits and drawbacks. While it is a less profitable criminal activity compared to others, it is still a way to placate the financial needs and wants of homies, soldiers and paisas on the streets. In other words, the revenue from stolen goods can be used to pay for the services of these gang members, thus incentivizing the theft of more vehicles citywide. The stolen merchandise can also be used as a means of bartering for other goods. As noted previously, the Barrio 18 has used this as leverage in negotiations to obtain drugs. It may still be relying on stolen merchandise as a way to negotiate access to a supply of drugs.

However, stolen merchandise can also bring problems. Gang members can be easily exposed and captured in these operations: they are sloppy, visible figures carrying out very public criminal acts. What's more, the gangs often lack a way to offload this merchandise quickly or easily. This sometimes draws unwanted attention as illegal vehicles sit for weeks in safe houses or on the streets, and their attempts to obtain buyers exposes them.

Barrio 18 - Infrastructure

Barrio 18 uses limited outside infrastructure to commit its criminal acts. Members use their own homes or the homes of relatives to store weapons, drugs, accounting books and other items of importance. They also rely on "casas locas," or "crazy houses." A casa loca is a catchall phrase for an interrogation and torture center, house of respite and storage facility, all rolled into one.³⁵ They are located in the gang's areas of influence, and they are often abandoned homes or houses that the gang commandeers.

The number of casas locas fluctuates depending on how tightly a gang controls a particular area, and what the gang's needs are. The gang may also shift operations between already established casas locas. The casas locas are not just useful infrastructure, they are reminders of who is in control of these areas (the gang) and who is not in control (the state). They are the subject of widespread speculation and

³⁵ See, for example: La Prensa, "Hallan otra casa loca en Comayagüela," 21 December 2014. Available at: <http://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/778905-410/hallan-otra-casa-loca-en-comayag%C3%BCela>. See also: El Herald, "Desmembrado encuentran cuerpo de un hombre en 'casa loca,'" 1 September 2014. Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/743546-435/desmembrado-encuentran-cuerpo-de-un-hombre-en-casa-loca>

rumor about satanic rituals and other supposed secret gang ceremonies. Some of these rumors appear to have some basis in reality, and they serve to reinforce the gang's stranglehold on the psyche of these communities.

Barrio 18 - Codes, Rules and Discipline

The Barrio 18 has a loose code of conduct. In general terms, it serves as a way to keep the younger members in line, so they do not steal from or betray the organization. As a secondary concern, the rules are a way to keep the gang in good stead with the community in which it is operating. Still, in some instances, its leaders and members seem to apply the code only when it suits them. The ambiguous nature of the code and the arbitrary way it is applied can render it meaningless in certain circumstances, which could help account for the Barrio 18's reputation as an undisciplined and violent gang.

The gang's number one rule is "respect the barrio." This is an extremely ambiguous way of saying that the gang comes first -- above family, work, country, school, or any other institution that may try to compete with it. In practice, there is some room for maneuver, but this rule covers quite a bit of daily life in a gang: if the boss wants something done, it has to be done; if a fellow gang member is in trouble, the other gang members must help; snitching is punishable by death, and revealing gang secrets can lead to severe disciplinary measures. In other words, if there is any doubt, the Barrio 18 member must always side with, obey, and offer all of his services to the gang.

However, the term "respect the barrio," is open to widely different interpretations. Accusing one gang member of not "respecting the barrio" may become an excuse for attacking him. In the gang's volatile world, how that person "disrespected" the barrio may be less important than the fact that someone just accused another of what amounts to high treason. The accusation can climb through the gang hierarchy, and depending on the circumstances, a homie or even a toro may weigh in on the final decision. Other transgressions -- some of which are delineated below -- may result in beatings or demotions. But "disrespecting the barrio" has ended more than a few lives within the Barrio 18, and determining guilt can involve considering the person's character flaws more than the nature of the alleged offense itself.

To be sure, there are more specific rules within the Barrio 18. For example, there are restrictions on what types of drugs members can consume. Alcohol and marijuana are okay, as long as one is not on duty. Crack and powdered cocaine are off limits, but one former Barrio 18 gang member said the leaders often use these drugs with impunity. There is a ban on rape both within the organization and outside of it, but this too often gets overlooked, depending on the rank of the member who committed the act. Missing or flubbing an assignment, or breaking one of the above-stated rules, is known as a "chequeo," which could result in what is called a "calentada," or a beating. But these do not appear to be applied consistently across the board, and depend on one's standing within the gang.

In the end, the Barrio 18 directs its violence inward as much as outward. A former Barrio 18 member told our researchers that the group had killed more than one leader, as part of purges of suspected snitches. Having the gang's leadership in prison only heightens this paranoia. The leadership relies on the eyes and ears of those out on the streets. But those on the streets have their own set of interests. These may be personal interests regarding family and girlfriends, or professional interests regarding their place in the gang hierarchy. In this environment, the incentives for double-crossing a colleague are high and the act is relatively easy to execute, especially given the ambiguity of rule number one.

Violence against outsiders is also supposedly subject to a strict protocol, but, again, Barrio 18 does not apply this protocol uniformly. The gang uses the regional term "green light" or "luz verde," to refer to those who the hierarchy -- toros and homies -- have determined can be killed. There is a blanket green light for those in rival gangs, such as the MS13 or the Chirizos. And Barrio 18 code requires members to resist security forces with as much force as possible when faced with arrest. But assassination of someone from another criminal group requires permission from the top -- as does killing someone who does not pay their extortion fees, and others who cross the gang in some way.

What's more, circumstances -- as well as superseding codes -- often justify the most heinous of acts of violence committed by the gang. A perceived slight of a gang member's girlfriend or the misinterpretation of a friendly gesture from a community member can result in a violent reaction, justified by citing rule number one: respect the barrio. And even if there was no such slight, there is little chance a fellow gang member will snitch given the wide interpretation of rule one.

Of course, not all violent acts towards outsiders can be easily justified. Killing a teenager at a local school because "he looked at my girlfriend" is different from assassinating the owner of a local store because they did not pay the extortion fee. In the latter case, not following the protocol can be fatal for the gang member. But misunderstandings occur, especially within the morally ambiguous universe that the gangs have created amongst a population that has been conditioned to mete out violence at the slightest provocation.

There is no official dress code, although the Barrio 18 is known to use certain styles. They have also curtailed the most obvious means of identifying themselves: the tattoos. New members simply do not use ink on their bodies and if they do, it is subtle and hidden, and often coded in ways that only they or other members can comprehend. Barrio 18 members are blending in in other ways as well, most notably with short haircuts. Their preferred shoe -- at least at the time this report was being researched -- is the Nike Cortez, and they are known to wear long belts that they leave hanging to the left hand side of their bodies. But there is little substantial to help authorities distinguish them.

There is only one way out of the gang: joining an evangelical church. The gang's relationship with these churches is complicated and has been the subject of more

than one academic study.³⁶ Suffice to say that the gangs see these churches as more legitimate paths to non-gang life than the Catholic Church. One former gang member who spoke to our researchers is in such a program. He says the gang respects the decisions to leave only when the former member shows that they are serious about their religious intentions. This includes abstaining from use of drugs and alcohol, an important tenet in most evangelical churches.

³⁶ See, for example: Robert Brenneman, "Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America," (Oxford, 2012).

MS13

The structure of the MS13 is harder to decipher than that of Barrio 18.³⁷ At first glance, the two groups appear to have a similar hierarchical system. But MS13 tends to work in smaller, more contained cells. It appears to be more disciplined and tightly controlled at a social, military, and political level. What's more, the group has shown a penchant for expanding into new territory, both economically and geographically, which makes them increasingly more like a sophisticated criminal group and less like a traditional street gang.

MS13 - Organizational Structure

At the top of the MS13 structure is a *toro* or what they might call a “palabrero.” As with the Barrio 18, this leader is typically incarcerated. The “corporate ladder” does not cease to exist when a gang member is jailed. In fact, incarceration can accelerate ascendance in both gang structures. Imprisoned members are often referred to often as “viejos,” or “old men.” Some are deportees. But unlike in El Salvador, where deportees play a key role in the hierarchy of the MS13, this is not the case in Honduras.

These palabreritos are in communication with their members on the street, as well as relatives and leaders of gangs in other countries. One recent example of this frequent contact between imprisoned leaders was seen in El Salvador. Recently, as media attention regarding alleged MS13 attacks on blonde-haired women in Honduras reached a fever pitch, MS13 leaders emitted a joint communique in which they denied being responsible for any such attacks or threats issued in El Salvador or Honduras.³⁸ They cited “yellow” journalism in Honduras for such rumors that seek to “justify their irrational actions” by security forces against the gangs in El Salvador.

The relationship between the MS13 leadership in El Salvador and their Honduran counterparts has led some to speculate that the two are working hand-in-hand to create a more transnational criminal organization. As discussed below in more detail, the MS13 in Honduras appears to be moving steadily into the wholesale drug business while those in El Salvador may be seeking to enter the international market. Both of these moves would be significant leaps forward for an organization that formerly focused on purchasing small quantities of drugs from independent wholesalers.

³⁷ To develop the Barrio 18 and the MS13 sections, InSight Crime’s team of researchers spoke to more than two dozen non-governmental and governmental sources, as well as current and former members of the gangs, all of whom requested anonymity.

³⁸ The communiqué was sent to InSight Crime from mediators of a recent gang truce in El Salvador.

Like the Barrio 18, the MS13 has divided its operations into cells that are run at the neighborhood or “colonia” level. They have a “jefe” or chief, who the others will refer to by his nickname. The jefe has a colonia under his purview. In a few rare cases, some may have several colonias under their command. There are some colonias that are more important than others, especially as they relate to the MS13’s ability to bring in revenue, and their ability to resist rivals and inflict violence on them.

Each jefe has a sergeant, or a second-in-command. That sergeant has a small number of loyal soldiers at his disposal for the various jobs that the gang requires, including security of the territory under its control. Security is paramount, considering the various threats to the MS13’s principal source of revenue: local drug dealing. A soldier may also be designated as the “ranflero” or manager of the drug business. But most of them are focused on security.

To achieve this security, the soldiers depend on what they call “locos.” These locos are the equivalent of paisas in the Barrio 18 structure. They are not quite members, but are on the verge of being ushered into the system via the ceremonial beating. These locos keep a close eye on what MS13 calls “mulas,” or mules. These mules work as drug dealers for the gangs, but they are not and may never become members. They move the drugs in small quantities in backpacks to sales points. These sales points change frequently, making it harder for rivals and security forces alike to locate them.

If the MS13 hears of a possible raid by the security forces, it is usually because the locos are tipped off by the ubiquitous banderas. Like Barrio 18, MS13 has a large number of youths that are pulled into their operations at various levels and with varying responsibilities depending on their age, experience level, and perceived allegiance to the group, among other factors. At the most basic level, the bandera is responsible for notifying the locos whenever anyone who is not from the neighborhood -- such as a rival gang member or a government authority -- enters the colonia. The most high-ranking banderas may move weapons or money from one place to another within the gang’s area of influence.

Banderas and locos often communicate via cellular phones or in some cases walkie-talkies. The banderas and locos may also use a rudimentary system of whistles to notify each other of the presence of security forces or yell out nicknames such as “perros” (police), “iguanas” (military police) or “platanos verdes” (military). Communication in and out of prison is also via cellphones. However, as the government recently placed cellphone reception blockers around some prisons, some authorities have said that the gangs are now using satellite phones from their cells. The jefes also use low-level gang members, relatives, or gang members to send “huilas,” or kites, into the prisons. The kites are written in code, making it difficult for even the most seasoned investigators to decipher them.

MS13 - Modus Operandi and Criminal Economy

The MS13 has a different revenue base than the Barrio 18, a fact that greatly impacts the way it is organized. The two main sources of revenue for the group are extortion from the public transport sector and selling drugs at the local level. Unlike the Barrio 18, the MS13 does not prey on its immediate neighbors, which has permitted it to construct a more positive image and accumulate political and social capital in its areas of influence. The MS13 is also less defiant when confronted by authorities, which has allowed it to escape prosecution in some cases, as well as to possibly penetrate police ranks more easily.

MS13 - Extortion

The MS13 has been extorting the public transport sector for more than a decade. It has established methods of communication, prices (which include Christmas and Easter bonuses during some years), and drop-off points. As noted earlier, members of the public transport sector suspect that police and possibly officials may be involved in these schemes, although they did not offer any proof of this collusion. These police are not considered part of the gang. They supposedly just collect a quota depending on their rank and location.³⁹ This corruption extends into the prisons, where gang leaders allegedly pay prison officials and guards to ensure easy movement of money, goods and infrastructure (e.g., cellphones) in and out of the prisons.

The MS13's focus on macro-level extortion is critical in various respects, as it means that the gang does not heavily pressure pulperias, street vendors, hardware store owners, mechanics and other informal street economy laborers.⁴⁰ This also makes it harder for others to extort by pretending to form part of the gang, since the community understands and knows that MS13 is the dominant gang and does not normally engage in such activities. This helps MS13 gain political and social capital in these areas. Rivals -- whether other gangs or the security forces -- look increasingly like invaders next to the MS13 "muchachos," who appear to be taking care of the neighborhood and protecting the locals.

This juxtaposition has been important to the MS13 as other, lesser-known gangs also enter the extortion market. These other gangs -- such as the Chirizos, the Combo Que No Se Deja and the Benjamins -- operate on the simplistic notion that they can terrorize the population into submission. The Chirizos, for instance, are known for brutally torturing and killing those who defy them and leaving their

³⁹ InSight Crime has found that along some international drug trafficking routes police pay their way into a position. It is not clear if the same happens with regards to police posts in urban areas where there are major bus routes or terminals.

⁴⁰ Statistics from the FNA bear this out: 7 percent of criminal complaints of extortion are related to the MS13, versus 20 percent related to the Barrio 18.

bodies wrapped in blue burlap in public spaces. The Benjamins, for their part, have spent the last several months waging a bloody campaign against at least one taxi cooperative in Tegucigalpa.

In Honduras, this reliance on violence can be enough to establish predominance within a given territory, as we have seen with the Barrio 18. However, the MS13 has also been able to gain community support by avoiding such use of violence, and thus establishing themselves as the “protectors” of the area.

This appears to be happening in the Los Mercados neighborhood in Comayaguela, where the MS13 and the Chirizos are engaged in a struggle for control of territory. Part of the recent MS13 campaign included issuing a virtual ban against women who had colored their hair blonde and wore black leggings. While the media focused on the hysteria provoked by the ban, the Chirizos apparently used women with this appearance to collect extortion money. For those who dreaded the arrival of the blond, black-stock-clad “Chiriza” debt collector at their storefront, the message was clear: the MS13 was doing what it could to stop this activity.

The MS13 often takes this protection scheme to a deeper level. In some areas that our researchers visited, the gang has become the go-to arbiter for domestic and neighbor-to-neighbor conflicts, according to police and community association leaders in these areas. Domestic abuse -- whether a parent beating their child, or spousal abuse -- is not tolerated, they said. In the municipality of Tela, for instance, the MS13 will reportedly give a husband a warning after the first instance of abuse, a beating after the second instance, and banish him from the community after the third.

The focus on macro-level extortion also allows MS13 to work in the transportation business. Much like a bank, MS13 will take percentages and eventually the whole of any transportation business that does not pay what it is owed. This policy has allowed the group to become part or full owners of numerous bus and taxi cooperatives around the country. Once they gain ownership, MS13 can keep a close eye on all the cooperatives’ income streams, and then adjust their extortion rates accordingly. There are also ancillary benefits, such as employment or “ghost jobs” for relatives and friends in these cooperatives.

The experiences of owning and managing transport companies have forced the gang to create more sophisticated financial units within its ranks. Although they have not, as yet, divided their structure into financial and military divisions, some authorities suggested that the MS13 has sent people to university to study finance and law. Extortion and the gang’s increasing financial holdings have also led the MS13 to become more entrepreneurial in nature. Members have taken to calling themselves “La Empresa” or “The Business,” something that may be closer and closer to reality considering how the gang is trying to move up the drug trafficking ranks.

MS13 - From Petty Drug Peddling to Wholesalers and Beyond

The MS13 has long focused on local drug peddling, which has distinguished it from its Barrio 18 rivals for several years now. As noted above, the MS13 has created an efficient means of dispensing drugs in the communities where it operates. This involves establishing discreet meeting points, running security rings, and maintaining limited exposure should they be robbed or assaulted by a rival, or ambushed by the security forces. It is impossible to calculate how much revenue this activity brings in for the MS13. Nevertheless, it has become important enough to become a primary -- if not *the* primary -- source of violence in many of these neighborhoods, local residents and security forces interviewed for this report told our researchers.

Whether the gang is protecting itself or moving into new territory, MS13-related violence is frequently associated with the local drug trade. Authorities told our researchers that a recent massacre of five people in Tegucigalpa was related to control of a drug distribution point.⁴¹ The suspects, who were captured shortly after they allegedly attacked with high-powered weapons, staked out a dairy dispensary with walkie-talkies and radio monitors; when the authorities moved their checkpoint away from the area, the suspects pounced, authorities said.

However, lately MS13 appears to be taking its drug trafficking activities to a whole new level. This has prompted authorities to say that the gang has set its sights on becoming a more sophisticated criminal operation. In at least two places our researchers visited recently, the gang has taken more control of the wholesale drug market, authorities said. In Tela, for example, the gang has a monopoly on drug sales. This could entail significant revenues for the MS13, given the amount of tourism in Tela. Police intelligence also told our researchers that the MS13 owns a hotel in the area. Other authorities say the gang also owns restaurants and bars. Neither claim could be independently verified.

The gang has also established control over the wholesale drug market in more urban areas. The most notable example in this regard is San Miguel, Tegucigalpa. This area was long controlled by a local drug trafficker, Teresa de Jesus Cruz Garcia, a.k.a. "Mama Tere." After she died in 2007, some of her family members allegedly continued her trade. But after her nephew was arrested for drug trafficking and money laundering in 2013,⁴² the power vacuum opened an opportunity for MS13, who allegedly killed him in prison and drove one of his main associates out of the

⁴¹ La Prensa, "Acibillan a cinco hermanos y un amigo en Tegucigalpa," 12 May 2015. Available at: <http://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/839308-410/acibillan-a-cinco-hermanos-y-un-amigo-en-tegucigalpa>

⁴² El Heraldo, "A prision supuesto capo del narcomenudeo," 14 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.elheraldo.hn/content/view/full/171392>

area.⁴³ Police intelligence told our researchers that MS13 now shares wholesale distribution with what is left of the Mama Tere crew in the area.

The MS13's move towards controlling the wholesale market is significant for various reasons. Wholesale control would mean a rise in revenue for the organization, which could help explain its possible entry into the tourism economy in Tela. The revenue would also give the gang greater ability to penetrate higher echelons of the security forces. As noted earlier, members of the public transport sector suspect that police and possibly officials may be involved in these schemes, although they cannot offer any proof of this collusion.

The MS13 also appear to have connections within the police that help it in various ways, three high level police told our researchers. One of these high level police pointed to the case of First Class Officer Alonzo Vasquez Carrillo who was arrested in February for the murder of a prominent businessman, Mario Verdial.⁴⁴ Vasquez Carrillo, police investigators said, worked with the gang by providing it with information about security forces' operations and assisting in enforcement, as was evident in the murder of Verdial.

We believe that the MS13's modus operandi makes it easier for the gang to establish relations with security forces. The MS13's rules forbid it from entering in direct confrontation with security forces if they are coming to arrest members. In addition, the group's avoidance of extortion in its areas of influence means that it has fewer confrontations with local residents and security forces. What's more, its main criminal activity, drug peddling, is less predatory for local residents and security forces alike.

More control of the wholesale market would also give MS13 greater capacity to wield influence in political circles. This may also already be happening. Police intelligence told our researchers that the MS13 has had significant influence over the mayors of at least two other cities. The gang does not yet appear to be financing campaigns or controlling government contracts, but this would be a logical next step should it gain control of more revenue and political influence.

More control over the wholesale drug market would also mean that MS13 is making more contact with large, international transport organizations. As noted earlier, these contacts may stretch back years and may include doing favors for the international drug transport groups. However, wholesale distribution would be a significant step forward for the gangs in terms of their sophistication, and would illustrate to drug transport groups -- be they Honduran, Guatemalan, Mexican or

⁴³ Proceso Digital, "Sobrino de 'Mama Tere' es asesinado en interior de la Penitenciaría Nacional," 13 October 2014. Available at: <http://www.proceso.hn/component/k2/item/89457-sobrino-de-%E2%80%9Cmama-tere%E2%80%9D-es-asesinado-en-interior-de-la-penitenciar%C3%ADa-nacional.html>

⁴⁴ El Herald, "Agente de Policía Nacional implicado en el asesinato de Mario Verdial," 19 February 2015. Available at: <http://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/796864-219/agente-de-polic%C3%ADa-nacional-implicado-en-el-asesinato-de-mario-verdial>

Colombian -- that the MS13 may have enough political and military muscle to begin storing and possibly moving large quantities of drugs across the country.

There is some evidence to suggest that this may be happening already. The details are still sketchy, but a separate investigation by InSight Crime into El Salvador's gangs⁴⁵ suggests that at least part of the MS13 leadership in that country may be trying to enter the international wholesale market, and is using Honduras as a meeting place and operational headquarters. The reasons for the MS13 to run such an operation from El Salvador are complex. Suffice to say that El Salvador is the MS13's spiritual headquarters, the place where the gang draws part of its name, as well as many of its rituals and rules.

The decision to move into the international drug transport market is not necessarily one that is supported by the entire gang's leadership in El Salvador. InSight Crime believes there is a split amongst some of the country's most notable MS13 leaders. At least one of these leaders has been establishing international contacts and fortifying his network over the past several years, according to police intelligence and other sources close to the gang in El Salvador. That network includes satellite operators in Honduras where the MS13 has access to high-powered weaponry and to the international operators moving large amounts of drugs.

It's not known how far this effort has taken this MS13 leader and his Honduran counterparts. There are certainly other MS13 gang leaders who have made contact with international drug transport groups, and may be moving small quantities of drugs internationally. However, the DTOs have not yet made any concerted effort to use the gang network as the principle means by which drugs are transported. Gangs, for the most part, are considered highly untrustworthy and extremely vulnerable business partners.

The possible move into the international transport business also coincides with a massive power vacuum in Honduras. Some of the country's foremost international transporters have been captured and extradited in steady succession over the last two years. A major Mexican international broker, Cesar Gastelum, who operated from San Pedro Sula for years, was also captured recently in Mexico.⁴⁶ This vacuum has opened the way for the MS13 to explore business possibilities with Colombian and Mexican traffickers, Honduran authorities told our researchers. The extent of these discussions and connections is not clear and, at the time of writing this report, there has yet to be a case in which an MS13 member has been captured moving illegal drugs across multiple borders using the gang's network.

⁴⁵ InSight Crime co-director Steven Dudley is a co-principal in a National Institute of Justice-funded study on the MS13 in El Salvador, Washington DC and Los Angeles. The project is being run from the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University.

⁴⁶ UPI, "Cesar Gastelum Serrano, a top drug trafficker, arrested in Cancun," 12 April 2015. Available at: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/04/12/Cesar-Gastelum-Serrano-a-top-drug-trafficker-arrested-in-Cancun/4901428871387/

MS13 - Other Revenue Streams

The MS13 may have other revenue streams. According to Honduran authorities, the group engages in “sicariato,” or murder for hire, as well as some theft and resale of cars. Sicariato often puts them in close proximity with other criminal groups, the authorities say. There may also be cases in which the gang carries out assassinations in exchange for illegal drugs, authorities told our researchers.

However, there are few examples that would indicate that this scenario has become a reality. The MS13 appears to be more mostly focused on its own operations, which include directing violence towards rivals, not towards third parties as part of a contract-killing scheme. Additionally, any revenue derived from these activities appears to be marginal when compared to extortion and drug dealing.

MS13 - Infrastructure

MS13’s growing sophistication and hermetic nature makes it hard to pinpoint how the gang is expanding into new criminal activities. However, should MS13’s revenue continue to grow, it will need more infrastructure to meet its needs. This includes safe houses, cars, and businesses. Similar to Barrio 18, they also appear to have “casas locas.”⁴⁷ As noted earlier in this report, MS13 has steadily invested in or co-opted bus and taxi cooperatives. MS13 may have also begun purchasing hotels and restaurants, although confirmation of this is pending.

MS13 - Codes, Rules and Discipline

By all appearances, MS13 has stricter codes of discipline and internal rules regarding behavior. Marijuana and alcohol consumption appears to be permitted, while use of crack and cocaine is forbidden. Women are not allowed into the gang and are generally excluded from most illegal activities aside from passing messages, cellular phones, small quantities of illegal drugs and other items into and out of prisons. MS13 does not openly confront authorities. If they are captured by the police or other security force officials, they will submit.

MS13 seems to be working hard to shore up community support. Its members are cited for their respect of other community leaders, with whom they regularly engage in dialogue over community projects, police and military activity in the area, transgressions committed by gang members, and other community issues. This relationship is facilitated by the fact that the MS13’s leadership is more static than that of the Barrio 18. They know their neighbors, local political leaders and clergymen better. They are more open to dialogue and, in some instances,

⁴⁷ La Tribuna, “Cae marero en ‘casa loca’ cuando se disponia a matar a una victim,” 20 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.latribuna.hn/2015/04/20/cae-marero-en-casa-loca-cuando-se-disponia-a-matar-a-una-victima/>

forgiveness, community members who live in MS13-controlled areas told our researchers.⁴⁸

This relatively benign reputation notwithstanding, the MS13 is not above cruel and excessive punishments. The most serious offense is cavorting with the enemy. This comes in two forms: being a member or a family member of a rival gang; or informing on the MS13 to authorities or rivals. There is little room for negotiation in these matters, according to community members who live in MS13 territory, and punishment is often swift and brutal.

In one episode described to our researchers,⁴⁹ the MS13 discovered that a street vendor in the neighborhood of Chamelecon in San Pedro Sula was once a member of the Barrio 18. The MS13 had very recently conquered this colonia of Chamelecon, pushing out the Barrio 18, and were intent on killing all remaining rival gang members in the area. The street vendor in question had previously been a member of Barrio 18, but for reasons that are not clear, the gang had beaten him and left him for dead in a ravine when he was a teenager, leaving him physically and mentally disabled. He posed no threat, community leaders told the MS13 leaders, but the gang killed him anyway.

Our researchers were told of another case in the same area, in which the MS13 discovered that a family had relatives in the Barrio 18. That family lived along a highly disputed border, where an MS13 member had recently been killed. Other members of the family lived in a nearby house, and the MS13 sent word that both families should be eliminated. Community members, however, intervened and obtained the gang's permission to extract both families from the neighborhood. Such episodes speak to the tense situation in these neighborhoods, which appear to be the cause of significant internal displacement within the country.

⁴⁸ Interview with three community members of the Chamelecon neighborhood in San Pedro Sula, 1 June 2015.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Other Gangs

Aside from the MS13 and the Barrio 18, other gangs in Honduras can be broken down into three major categories: derivatives, militias and “barras bravas.”

Derivatives

Derivatives have various origins but are usually born of other criminal groups. Most derivatives have their origins in either the MS13 or the Barrio 18. They may also be small groups of relatives and neighbors who have drawn a significant following in their areas of influence. Finally, they may have once worked as security details for larger, wholesale drug dealers or other criminal operations. What these derivative groups have in common is that they all have a similar *modus operandi* and criminal portfolio.

Some gangs in Honduras owe their beginnings to the country’s two main factions: the Barrio 18 and the MS13. For example, in San Pedro Sula’s Rivera Hernandez district, the Vatos Locos and the Ponce were once part of the MS13. Other gang derivatives, such as the Parqueños and the Olanchanos, draw on their place of origin -- such as a neighborhood or a city -- as the main hub of their identity. All of these gangs rely largely on extortion for revenue and have drifted in and out of alliances with each other, along with MS13 and Barrio 18.

Significantly, many of these gang derivatives operate in Rivera Hernandez. The area is one of Honduras’ most volatile districts and consistently one of its most violent. The presence of between five and seven gangs in this area is something of an anomaly in Honduras, and may account for the area’s high levels of homicides.

Derivative groups may also emerge from other criminal organizations aside from MS13 or Barrio 18. When Hector Portillo, alias “El Gato Negro,” was killed in 2010, his criminal organization split into various factions. The most formidable of these is called the Chirizos. From the Chirizos emerged two other gang factions: El Combo Que No Se Deja and the Benjamins. Despite their origins in the world of drug trafficking, the three gangs appear to survive mostly from extortion. They are also extremely violent.

Militias

In some cases, frustration with the government has given way to civilians combating street gangs themselves. These “militias” originally emerge as a counterforce to street gangs, and present themselves as vigilantes, but have ultimately become predatory in nature.

One of the most prominent examples is an organization called Los Pumas in La Ceiba. Initially, Los Pumas rallied support from communities that were exhausted by the gangs’ extortion and violence. The group entered various areas and forcibly

eliminated or displaced gangs. However, instead of removing the problem, Los Pumas simply supplanted the gang and began to govern with their own brand of criminality and terror.

It bears mentioning that in nearly all these violent neighborhoods, both the street gangs and their rivals attempt to convince the community where they hold sway that they are protecting them from other criminal groups, and often from the security forces. It can be an appealing pitch, not least because of the security forces' reputation for criminality and corruption.

Barras Bravas

Soccer clubs engender passionate, strong fan bases, and these fan bases often form what are known as "barras bravas." Loosely translated, the term means "fierce following." Ostensibly they simply support their soccer clubs with passion and fervor, organizing sections to cheer for the team in stadiums; singing the team's anthems, and partying before and after the games. Given the demographic that participates in these barras -- young, urban males -- it is not surprising that there have been outbreaks of violence between barras seeking to "defend the honor" of their soccer club.

Their relationship with street gangs like MS13 and Barrio 18 is complex and evolving. While in San Pedro Sula the two main gang factions outlawed the barras, in Tegucigalpa there appears to be some connection between them. According to authorities, at least two barras have made an alliance with the gangs: the Ultrafiel (Club Deportivo Olimpia) has teamed with Barrio 18; and Los Revo (Club Motagua) has sided with MS13.⁵⁰

It's not clear how this began, or what end it serves, other than providing the barras with other ways to commit violence. Notably, soccer club fans come from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds; the barras may provide the gangs a clear entry point into a larger drug-consuming market than they can find in the more marginal neighborhoods.

⁵⁰ InSight Crime interview, Honduran intelligence official who wished to remain anonymous, Tegucigalpa, 5 June 2015.

Conclusions

Honduras' gangs, once insignificant and unprofessional, have grown into what is arguably the top security challenge facing this country. While it is impossible to determine with precision how much violence the gangs are responsible for, it is clear that much of the rise in homicides in Honduras is related to gang activity. The gangs' fight for territory -- and the prestige and revenue that come with it -- is at the heart of these battles. And there are neighborhoods of Honduras, especially in urban areas, which are under a virtual siege.

The two foremost gangs, MS13 and Barrio 18, are at the center of these security concerns. The two have a lot of similarities. After arriving in the late 1990s with the masses of criminal deportees from the United States, these gangs have swallowed, coopted or displaced many local streets gangs. They rely on extortion and peddling drugs for money. They recruit youths that they use for lookouts, messengers and other odd, often dangerous, jobs.

However, they are different in important ways. Barrio 18 relies much more on micro-extortion -- targeting the street vendor, corner store, or the local mechanic -- than MS13. This puts them at odds with the community. MS13 is more focused on controlling the local drug trade, which has given it more revenue and kept it in good stead with the communities in which it operates. As noted in the section on Tela, the MS13 also appears to be more adept at interceding in neighborly disputes and other local matters. In addition, the group's modus operandi does not place it in such an adversarial role to the security forces as some of its rivals, which, in some cases, may facilitate its connections with these same security forces or at least allow it to operate more freely.

Both gangs continue to evolve. Barrio 18 is attempting to gain more control of the drug peddling business, which appears to be behind much of the violence between these criminal groups. That violence is part of the gang's core. Barrio 18, more than its MS13 counterparts, is forged by violence, leveled as much at its own members and the communities in which it operates as at its rivals. This is in part the result of its more horizontal gang structure, one that rewards loyalty to the "barrio" over all else. By illustrating this loyalty -- or using it to discredit your rival -- ascendance is all but assured.

Meanwhile, MS13 is going through its own transformation. The gang appears to be attempting to gain control of the wholesale part of the drug business. The shift would make MS13 somewhat of an anomaly in the sense that most gangs only control distribution, not wholesale transactions. It is not clear yet if this is a region-wide directive, but it appears that other parts of MS13 in places like El Salvador are also making inroads on new drug markets. Given the current power vacuum in Honduras after the capture and extradition of many of the country's top drug traffickers, there is a possibility that MS13 is poised to take advantage.

Investigative Team

The research team for this report was led by InSight Crime Co-director Steven Dudley and Assistant Director Elyssa Pachico. The lead researchers were Juan José Martínez, an anthropologist from El Salvador; Germán Andino, a freelance journalist from Honduras; and Mario Cerna, a long-time journalist from Honduras who works for the Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa (ASJ). The report was written by Steven Dudley, Elyssa Pachico, and Juan José Martínez. InSight Crime would like to give special thanks to the ASJ for its support in researching and writing this report.

