

From Barrio Street Gangs to Transnational Criminal Organizations: A Qualitative Analysis of *Eighteenth Street* and *Mara Salvatrucha*

I. Research Topic. Recently, the F.B.I. and other local government agencies have become particularly watchful of international criminal organizations, which drew their origins from domestic street gangs. Two, in particular, have expanded their status toward that of transnational criminal organizations. They are the Eighteenth Street gang (*Calle Dieciocho*) and the Mara Salvatrucha gang. Both are originally from Los Angeles, California, an area most commonly known as the Pico-Union area. But today, “cliques” (subsets of member gangs) can now be found anywhere between the U.S., Mexico, and Central America (Vigil, 1998, p.92). This expansion has resulted, predominantly because of immigrant deportation, but also due to the gangs’ recruitment policies and drug smuggling activities. The sudden growth of these local street gangs into global networks continues to undermine authorities as to their power and most importantly, the infrastructure within the gangs. The consequences which may result from this power growth lie anywhere between an increase of narcotics trafficking, to the creation of another global terrorist threat. In order to decipher future consequences of these gangs, further analysis must be made as to how they once began.

II. Background. In the sixties, the Eighteenth Street gang was founded in Los Angeles, California. The initial reason for creating Eighteenth Street stemmed out of the racism Latinos held for each other. Before Eighteenth Street came to be, the central gang in the area, the Clanton Street gang, only allowed the membership of Mexican-Americans. Many illegal immigrants who wanted to join were unable to because Clanton wanted only second generation Mexicans. Consequently, when the Eighteenth Street began, it was composed of both illegal immigrants as well as Mexican-Americans. Members recruited into this gang have been known to be within their pre-adolescent years. Further, the gang utilizes fear tactics in combination with camaraderie to keep their members from leaving the gang.

Two decades later, during the eighties, Eighteenth Street had become a well respected gang which had grown in membership. At the same time, Salvadorans were seeking refuge in the United States because of a civil war which had begun in their country. Arriving into poor neighborhoods, many of these Central American immigrants became attracted to the power that other Latino gang members held. Ironically, after having had the same experience years earlier, Eighteenth Street was not willing to embrace this new culture. As a result, the Mara Salvatrucha gang came into existence. Many of the new Salvadoran immigrants were members of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (a militant group composed of community members which were once trained fighters) while in the Salvadoran civil war (Valdez, 2005, ¶2). Moreover, today, some suggest that guerilla tactics, implemented by current Salvatrucha members, took their origin from previous militant training. For instance, the killing of rival gang members through the use of machetes serve as

ways to intimidate the public, as well as create a reputation for themselves as criminal organizations, rather than street hoodlums. Having the rivalry innate from the beginning, both gangs have shown a phenomenal potential for expansion.

Massive deportation of gang members has become a primary reason why Eighteenth Street and Mara Salvatrucha have been able flourish as local gangs and expand into international criminal organizations. According to an article in *U.S. Newswire*, there are approximately “800,000 members...currently operating in the U.S” and “70,000...in Central America” (Stratman, 2005, ¶3). During the nineties, the U.S. government was responsible for the massive deportation of immigrants into Latin America, a policy known as “Operation Gatekeeper,” as a response to an influx of immigrants from the south. Among those deported were gang members and criminals with long histories of violence. As a solution, deportation failed because it became a simple matter of relocation as opposed to rehabilitation, which would have deterred the perpetuation of deviance by these individuals. Furthermore, expansion of U.S. gang members into Latin America provided an excellent opportunity to recruit new members from local, poor, and marginalized Latin American youth. This opportunity also offered a wider access to resources, such as arms and drugs, which ultimately paved the way to lucrative business ventures.

In addition to deportation, the smuggling of illegal goods across international borders, as well as the unique use of technology for recruitment, have become the current core resource through which gangs have survived and expanded globally. The Eighteenth Street and Mara Salvatrucha gangs have been regarded as experts when it comes to crossing international borders. According to an article by Stephen Johnson, there have been remarks of Al-Qaeda having met with gang members in order to converse about smuggling arms into the U.S. (Johnson, 2005, ¶11). Having such a valuable asset at their reach, such as smuggling, it is no wonder the drug market is one of the main sources through which gangs exist. It is not only a part of their culture, but it is also a way for gangs to make money. For gangs, this lucrative business translates into weapons and authority within neighborhoods. But more importantly, money allows for recruitment by way of traveling. Traveling outside of their “turf” has allowed for rapid exponential growth. Lastly, expansion has become much easier through the use of the Internet. Changing along with the times, these gangs have embraced new forms of communication. Through the World Wide Web, gangs interact with each other from the privacy of their own homes (Papachristos, 2005, ¶18). Using their own forms of cryptograms, members do not have to worry about government interception.

Seeing how the formula for expansion is conceivable, it is essential to recognize how these gangs are interconnected. It is known that cliques of gangs are only a small part of the organization because they have been found to keep contact with each other. Many times when members are incarcerated, they relay messages with members from other countries. Also, there have been mentions of meeting between cliques. Generally, much of their ties can be seen through the tattoos. For example, members of Mara Salvatrucha differentiate among

themselves through insignias such as “sur” or “sureno,” which means south or southerner. Among their tattoos, there are also those which only have significance to members. All the way down to the color and type of clothing that they wear, much of their daily routine revolves around their gang. These gangs are labeled as transnational gangs because it is obvious that they share a common culture.

Today, each gang can claim multiple autonomous cells throughout the world, most of which, are concentrated in the United States, Mexico, and Central America. This growth has been facilitated through movement within the expanding social fabric of many countries. As an example, according to the United States Census Bureau, in 2000 Latinos/Hispanics made up 12.5% of the total population in America. A year later, in 2001, the Latino population went up by 4.7%, thus making it the largest minority in the United States to date. This steady increase is not surprising since the Latino community is such a diverse group. Accordingly, today’s criminal organizations reflect the diversity of the Latino community. As a single entity, all the Latino sub-groups, have an underlying theme of marginalization. They face similar obstacles, which range from language and socioeconomic barriers to more formalized barriers such as deportation. For instance, strict U.S. immigration and criminal laws alienate Latino communities from fully incorporating into American society. It is this lack of incorporation that makes the Latino community an ideal source for international criminal organizations. Living among poverty and violence facilitates their need for unconventional means of living. The majority of crimes committed by these gangs are robbery, murder, the smuggling of aliens, and the sale of arms and drugs. Appropriately, these crimes also serve as their main sources of income. In other words, it is because of the lack of institutions in the U.S. and Latin America, particularly in Central America, that makes gangs so attractive to people, and hence allows these organizations to increase in size.

Moreover, the Eighteenth Street and Mara Salvatrucha gangs have masterfully bridged the gap between institutional deficiencies and the struggle toward what Messner and Rosenfeld called the “American Dream” (Goode, 2005, p.65). Given that the “dream” of becoming rich and famous is so highly coveted by the masses, those that cannot feasibly attain it quickly find ways to circumvent the conventionally held methods for realization. In other words, it is the idea of Robert Merton’s social strain theory that serves as the basis for the struggle between the haves and the have-nots. This in turn leads many to find alternative, and sometimes unlawful, methods of reaching certain goals. Additionally, Gangs have also provided an equally successful support group and economic basis for marginalized communities to comfortably dwell upon. For example, gangs may target immigrants in the U.S. or the poor in Latin America because both show signs of vulnerability.

A possible outcome that the government fears is that, one day, either gang will solidify the link between all their disseminated cliques and become one single, cohesive, operating band. Although each cell might be seen as an individual, together, they could pose a major threat to society. The Salvadoran government and to some extent, the government in Honduras, has implemented

tactics such as *Super Mano Dura*, “super firm hand” in English (Monzingo, 2005, ¶8). Although the policy’s methodology is questionable, it has proven to intimidate a few members. But many members have replied to the strict enforcement with increased violence. For example, in Honduras during December of last year, gang members shot at a bus full of people, which ultimately ended up killing 28 people (including some children) as a response to *Super Mano Dura* (Monzingo, 2005, ¶6). There have also been vigilante groups who man the streets on their own terms such as *Sombra Negra*, which translates into “black shadow,” in the province of El Salvador (Valdez, 2005, ¶13). Many members have expressed fear toward this group, but since *Sombra Negra* is composed of unauthorized citizens, taking action into their own hands could prove to be extremely detrimental.

Accordingly, I ask, what does it mean to have a street gang grow to become an organization composed of globally dispersed, yet autonomous, bands? Also, what consequences do these gangs have on future domestic and foreign policy and how will it affect the already strained Latino populations in the U.S. and in Central America? Consequently, my research aims to investigate factors which enable new organizations, such as international gangs, to thrive. Specifically, my study will investigate the theory of internationalization within the gangs themselves as well as the rest of the world. I will also look toward possible effects these gangs may have on U.S. and Latin America. In relation to the general perspectives on Latinos and what this can translate into.

III. Research Objective. My research aims to identify how the current dynamics between deviant groups, such as Eighteenth Street and Mara Salvatrucha, and their relationship with the rest of society can affect future legislation and the general perception of the Latino/Hispanic community at the local and global level. Associating Latino gangs with violence and drugs can cause major resistance among residents of certain countries. Being that law construction and enforcement is based upon the general public’s view, the way certain groups are portrayed and stereotyped can have massive implications on how laws are drafted. For example, on a micro level, there is the possible implementation of increased border patrol, reduced opportunities for minorities within border limits, and massive deportation. Outside of the legal framework, there can be resistance from small vigilante groups that work on their own terms in order to find a solution, such as the so-called “Minute Men,” which are presently patrolling the borders in order to prevent infiltration of migrants from Latin America. On a macro level, knowing that America is an international superpower, American laws carry a significant amount of weight in the worldwide arena. Implementations of anti-Latino/Hispanic gang laws can prove to be detrimental to the health and well being of the countries from which these groups originate.

IV. Core Research Questions. My research has been designed to explore three main facets of the transnational gangs, Eighteenth Street and Mara Salvatrucha. The first of which, is respectively, a main concern for many researches and government officials today. It looks to identify the catalysts which have facilitated

the global expansion of these two gangs, and what this expansion means to the gang itself. Gangs are not a new phenomenon; many have existed in the past. But, these two gangs in particular, have been innovative in the sense that they have used any and all resources available to them in order to implement growth. In addition, there have been many questions regarding the infrastructure through which the gangs are based upon. Organizations of this magnitude require unique and skillful order due to the fact that they operate on a global scale. Organization is vital to their survival. Furthermore, I intend to investigate how the growth of these gangs translates with regards to the Latino community. For many, these gangs represent a stereotype in which the general Latino population is cast. Such views can be detrimental to the future of the Latino community. Also, with sufficient growth and power, these gangs begin to appeal to the marginalized needs of many Latinos. This increases the possibility that Latinos might turn to gangs as a means of support. Accordingly, all three aspects of transnational gangs are vital in the sense that they allow for perpetuate the existence of these organizations. More importantly, all three have solidified a secure basis through which gangs continue to exist.

1. What marketing structures do gangs implement in order to successfully expand themselves, maintain mobility, and keep in contact with each other (internet advertisement, recruitment, profit)?
2. Do these gangs employ a form of federalism? How is power distributed among local and central units? How do these gangs continue to expand despite constant pressure from U.S. officials?
3. How have the images of gangs affected America's and the world's view of Latinos/Hispanics? How do international gangs influence local youths in Mexico, Latin America and the U.S.?

V. Research Methods and Approach. To conduct the research project, I will review literature, conduct interviews, and analyze governmental documents in order to gather vital information with regards to gang expansion. All three sources will serve to provide essential background on the core research questions, shed light toward current relevance of the topic, and provide several points of view through which I can fully analyze the origins, organization, and the holistic effects of street gangs expanding into transnational criminal organizations.

a. *Literature Review.* Extensive literature reviews, from both electronic and printed sources, as well as books, newspaper articles, and magazines. I plan to find information specific to my research areas in order to give a frame of reference for effective evaluation of the topic. Among the literature, I intend to look for statistics, observations, and theories on gangs in relation to the general population and law implantation.

b. *Interviews.* I will conduct interviews with local and federal governmental officials and academics. The interviews will be regarding an expert's perspective on gangs and the adversarial effects on legislation. Along with this, I will seek possible precursors which lead groups toward deviant behavior and the possible effect which can take place from projecting a negative perception, of the minority group as a whole, onto the general public.

c. *Government Hearings and Reports.* I will examine governmental reactions toward gangs by way of reports, transcripts of hearings, and legislative publications, such as those from the F.B.I., C.I.A. and local police agencies. In addition, I will examine reports published by governments of other countries (Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). Looking into governmental archives may lend a different perspective on reasons for policy implementation and the uncovering of novel information with regards to gangs.

VI. Personal Motivation. As a student majoring in criminology, certain classes I have enrolled in have invested a specific interest in me toward deviance and the public's response/relationship with governing entities. I believe the current state of crime in America can be changed dramatically through a more extensive use of rehabilitation and a growth of governmental institutions in order to divert people's attention from alternative methods of survival. My research is an attempt to publicly identify the detrimental aspects of gang life and how its permeability through its primary source, a tightly-knit entity, allows it to become a generalized dilemma.

VII. Timeline. Research for this topic will be comprised of four major phases. The intended duration of the project is one year. Throughout the year, stated events and scheduling will be met accordingly.

Phase I. Summer 2005

- Begin literature reviews with regards to the gangs' backgrounds and core research questions.
- Meet with Dr. Sereseres (mentor) to review the research topic and discuss the relevant information which I researched thus far.
- Develop a spreadsheet with crucial interview questions.
- Begin researching perspective community leaders (Local government officials, journalists, and professors) and schedule appointments.
- Look for conferences which might be given throughout the year.

Phase II. Fall 2005

- Continue researching literature and government publications in regards to core research questions.
- Meet with Dr. Sereseres to review my progress and any possible analysis of current research up to this point.
- Finalize a spreadsheet of interview questions.
- Conduct interviews with perspective community leaders.
- Begin formulating my analysis in the form of a thesis and begin a PowerPoint of information I have collected thus far.

Phase III. Winter 2006

- Continue researching literature and government publications in regards to core research questions.
- Meet with Dr. Sereseres to review my progress and any possible analysis of current research up to this point.
- Attend conference(s) and converse with speakers regarding their thoughts on transnational gangs.
- Continue to conduct interviews with perspective community leaders.
- Continue formulating my analysis in the form of a thesis and continue working on the PowerPoint of information I have collected thus far.

Phase IV. Summer 2006

- Conduct final interviews.
- Attend additional conferences respective to transnational gangs.
- Make final analysis of research regarding the core research questions and identify any other vital information/questions which might have come up during the longevity of the project.
- Meet with Dr. Sereseres to review my final analysis and PowerPoint presentation. Ask him any final questions which I might have.
- Finalize my thesis and make final adjustment to my PowerPoint presentation according to information I have throughout the year.

VIII. References.

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