

Turning Points

GANG EVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA

Gangs are widely considered to be an important security threat in post-cold war Central America. They are, however, frequently sensationalized, whether in media reports, academic studies, or policy documents, and the overwhelming majority of available information on Central American gangs is consequently flawed, with official statistics particularly inconsistent throughout the region.

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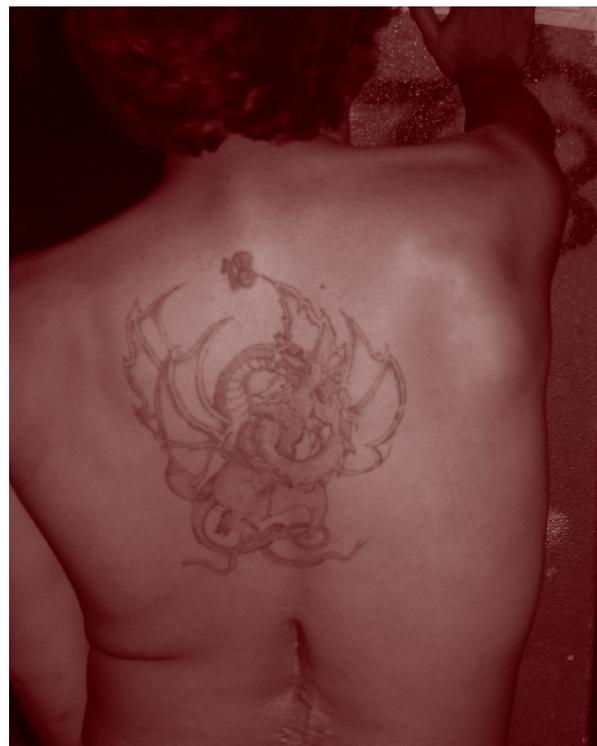
This chapter draws on in-depth primary research to offer a detailed comparative analysis of the post-cold war evolutionary trajectories of the gangs associated with two poor *barrios* (neighbourhoods) in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. It is based on 30 in-depth interviews that the authors conducted with current and former gang members in June–September 2012, as well as on the ongoing, longitudinal ethnographic research that they have undertaken in these two neighbourhoods since the 1990s.

The chapter focuses particularly on shifting patterns of small arms use by gang members, exploring the different types of weapons employed at different points in time, the changing nature of the underground arms market, the rise and fall of armed actors, and the evolving relationship that gangs—known as *pandillas*—have with their local communities. These developed in distinct ways in the two *barrios* due to a range of context-specific factors. Although the initial phases of gang development were similar, their subsequent trajectories diverged significantly.

The key findings of this chapter are:

- The spread and shape of Nicaraguan *pandillas* in the post-cold war period was initially linked to the aftermath of the 1980s Contra war, including in particular the demobilization of conscripted youths. Subsequently, the gangs institutionalized through processes of local territorialization.
- Gangs in different urban neighbourhoods can develop unique evolutionary dynamics that affect their use of firearms and resulting violence levels. These change over time due to both internal and external factors.
- Internally, one or two individuals can make a crucial difference to the way a gang evolves in Nicaragua, as well as how violent it becomes, particularly with regard to the acquisition of specialized knowledge about gun use.
- Externally, the changing availability of weapons and ammunition and the presence of other armed actors fundamentally influence the use of firearms by gang members.
- Gun use by *pandilla* members has not evolved in a linear manner; the use of firearms increased steadily during the 1990s, then declined during the following decade, before picking up again from around 2010.
- Manufactured firearms were more common in the 1990s than in the following decade, when home-made weapons became more widespread, to the extent that they are now the principal type of firearm associated with gangs.

Overall, Nicaraguan gang members show a relatively low level of sophistication in their firearm use, exhibiting more opportunistic than systematic approaches to weapons acquisition. However, the fact that gangs develop unique evolutionary dynamics that affect their use of firearms and resulting violence levels shows that gangs are not just reflections of ‘macro’ structural conditions,



Former gang member showing his tattoo and the scar of a machete wound, Managua, July 2007. © Dennis Rodgers



A home-made shotgun (*chimba*). © José Luis Rocha

but that their dynamics are also the result of a range of ‘micro’ internal and external factors.

Gang member firearms use is not solely dependent on availability, for example. A critical internal factor concerns the transmission of knowledge about gun use. In the two researched *barrios*, firearms know-how was initially transmitted in the late 1980s and early 1990s by youths who had been military conscripts; subsequently, something of a ‘Chinese whispers’ effect caused this knowledge to become increasingly diluted. By the turn of the century, these developments had led to a rising numbers of firearm accidents in both neighbourhoods; meanwhile, guns were also breaking down in increasing numbers due to deficient care. This trend was halted in one of the two *barrios*

when a single individual who had served in the army between 1997 and 2002 renewed gang members’ knowledge stocks, which, in turn, led the gang to become one of the most violent in the area.

Gangs develop unique evolutionary dynamics that affect their use of firearms and levels of violence, in response to both internal and external factors.

The trajectories of the two gangs during the 1990s also highlight the importance of individual leader figures, and in particular how these contributed significantly to institutionalizing particular practices of violence. Leader figures declined over the following decade but, rather than resulting in less violent gangs, this trend made *pandillas* more unpredictable and more prone to manipulation and domination by external actors. Such developments are relevant for anti-gang strategies based on attempts to ‘decapitate’ gangs by arresting (or killing) their leaders, as this approach can result in greater violence and insecurity than the more predictable and generally managed brutality of a clearly led organization.

Effective policy interventions must be informed by close qualitative understandings of gang dynamics.

Similarly, the contrasting evolutions of the gangs in the two *barrios* highlight how processes of gang ‘pacification’—which are effectively about closing up the spaces within which gangs can emerge—can occur in both violent and non-violent ways. This lesson is relevant to the entire Central American region, where brutally repressive anti-gang policies popularly known as *mano dura* have clearly failed, and often actually increased gang violence. The most effective non-violent policy interventions, however, remain context-driven and must be informed by close qualitative understandings of specific gang dynamics. ■