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# Responding to Gang Violence in El Salvador: What Homeboy Industries Can Teach Us About Reinsertion and Prevention

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Responding to Gang Violence in El Salvador: What Homeboy Industries can teach us  
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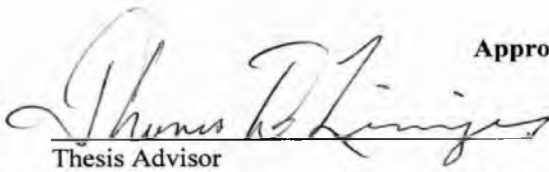
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Spring 2013

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## Preface

This project and general interest grew out of my experience studying abroad in El Salvador. To that extent I need to initially acknowledge those that made that experience possible as well as those that opened my eyes and shaped my experience. I would like to acknowledge my advisor and friend Dr. Tom Leininger for his great amount of insight and steady guidance. Also, thanks to my reader Dr. Nicki Gonzalez for her advice and enthusiasm. I would like to acknowledge the Regis Honors Program for their thoughtful planning particularly Dr. Bowie, Dr. Howe and Connie Gates. I thank Professor Martin Garner and Dayton Memorial Library for granting me access to countless resources and assisting me with formatting. This journey has put me in conversation with so many individuals that are working to combat the social ramifications of gang violence. I would like to thank all those that are working for justice in this field, especially Father Greg Boyle. This thesis is dedicated to Yovani Sañas Portillo.

## Introduction

We are bouncing along in a rickety, tricked out school bus that has been sent down here to El Salvador since the thick clouds of black, heavy exhaust it produces no longer passes EPA regulations in the states. We pass the central market of San Salvador and then the surrounding neighborhoods. I feel like I have been looking out of this bus window all of my life, surveying and seeing much, but still separated from it all. The central market is one of the most disorganized scenes I have ever seen, with corrugated tin, cardboard, bamboo and other woods and plastics forming little shacks that serve as shops with all the goods and produce displayed wherever there is room. Strawberry and *Jocote* fruits are transported by sweaty young men in full wheelbarrows and large toothless women slap the raw meat sitting in the sun with rags to momentarily disrupt the flies from covering it. This is all part of the informal economy of El Salvador. Informal economy refers to the flow of goods and currency without formal taxes or trade restrictions put on them. If you buy something here it is best to haggle the price down first, since it is always initially high, and you should not expect a receipt of your purchase. What seems like an unregulated system though is actually highly regulated by the gang world of El Salvador through the paying of *renta* or extortion money in the form of protection fees. As the bus snaked through the cement jungle around the market, I witnessed many shirtless men covered in tattoos snarling up at the passing bus as it

spewed heavy metals into the air. I would learn later that the bus I was on had to pay *renta* to the gang whose territory we were crossing through.

Gang proliferation and extortion practices to this extent in the United States are primarily confined to metropolitan areas and abandoned neighborhoods as well as newly established immigrant communities, but the situation of extortion propagated by the gangs that I experienced penetrates rural communities as well.<sup>1</sup> The presence of gangs in small communities does not reach the levels of sophistication and criminal organization that San Salvador does, but the effects that the decisions of the youth have on the community are much greater. The crime and violence affects nearly everybody in Salvadoran society, especially the poor but also the middle and upper classes. I lived in a communal house, which was located in a non-gang territory neighborhood of San Salvador called Antiguo Cuscatlán, and it was easy to see that businesses in that area decided to invest heavily in security measures like big concrete walls with razor wire or glass lining the tops. Many businesses, streets, and even houses also had uniformed and armed security guards wielding sawed-off shotguns and pistols for added shock value to would-be robbers. Many of these security guards in the very large and growing private security industry made the transition from military or guerilla soldiers during the war to the security service sector. The situation of violence seen in the streets and portrayed by the news makes people with business capital hesitant about investing here. As a result, the economy suffers.

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<sup>1</sup>Cruz, Jose Miguel, Marlon Carranza, María Santacruz Giralt. *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamerica: Pandillas y capital social*. Vol II. UCA Editores. San Salvador 2007 p81

As I became more aware of the situation around me I also heard the story of a Salvadoran woman named Lydia whose son was killed by the police because he was thought to be a gang member. There was a period of time in El Salvador where it was dangerous to congregate with others in public places like parks (if you were a young male). I began to think that could very well have been me if I had been born into and raised in this society. On the way to and from my praxis site in Tepecoyo (two hours round trip) twice every week I had ample time to contemplate life in all the poor communities I passed through to get to my own rural corner of the country. In *cantones* (districts) La Javia and Zacamil I had the opportunity and privilege to interact with local youth by teaching computer classes and going on home visits. Through my interactions with these men and women, children and teenagers at Tepecoyo and then the periods of digestion on the bus, my perceptions began to change, or in some regards, to be formed for the first time. In Zacamil, we would frequently visit a young man only a few years older than myself named Yovani who is paralyzed from the waist down and doesn't have the use of his hands. A few years ago he was forced to leave school a year before he graduated with a high school diploma equivalent and work a job cutting branches to help support his family with many younger siblings. Shortly after receiving his first paycheck he fell thirty feet out of a tree after the branch he was working on snapped underneath him, landing on his head and causing paralysis. As I taught my students computer basics I wondered if they too would succumb to the pressures and lack of hope that deters many from graduating high school, something often taken for granted in the United States.

I started to consider what some of my real opportunities would be as a young male growing up in present day Salvadoran society. Depending on the neighborhood, maybe I would feel I had to join a gang for my own protection, or maybe I could be able to work hard doing part-time labor jobs to support my family. I became fascinated by why individuals join gangs, considering both external factors that are part of the culture and the choices of individuals. If there were no chance for steady employment, what could I do besides join a gang? If I had enough gumption to start my own business with limited access to resources and credit, there is a good chance it would be squashed by the gangs through extortion.

Since the United States seems to have so many more opportunities I could brave the journey and immigrate north if I had the courage. Of course, if I even made it to the U.S. and wanted to stay with my people in L.A. or another city I could still be plagued by similar pressures from gangs as well as law enforcement. Some people that make it there are even deported back, among them gang members that recruit here and become leaders, or are quickly killed by paramilitary or local gang members because their street smarts doesn't translate. A veritable cloud of pressure seems to be pressing down upon me in this scenario. A scenario that could in fact be broken by some form of useful education, training, or meaningful economic opportunity that would allow me to support first myself and eventually a family. For many, these opportunities aren't reality, and desperate hopelessness begets violence manifested again and again through a war between gangs and against society.

As I was pondering these situations, and wondering what a response from someone like me might be, a foreigner, would look like I was exposed to the examples of two U.S. citizens that have been living and working in El Salvador for many years. Sister Peggy O'Neil, a Sister of Charity lives in Suchitoto and founded the Center for Peace and Art. As someone who lived in Suchitoto through the civil war, a very dangerous region, she has made it her life's mission to continually work to try and heal the trauma left behind through art, music and other expressions that allow residents to deal with their pain. She says that even though peace accords were signed in 1992 and the war technically ended then, the people of the country were asked to move on so fast that they were never able to heal mentally and emotionally from the trauma, and so she uses art and music to try and aid in that process. Sister Peggie is, in my opinion, definitely a modern liberation theologian. Since returning from my trip I read that the Interamerican Court declared the Law of General Amnesty invalid. This means the Salvadoran government could now reopen Romero's murder and massacre sites like Mozote, Copapayo and Sumpul.<sup>2</sup> What this will look like in terms of action against war criminals is yet to be determined by the Salvadoran government, but hopefully any documentation processes that are allowed through this act will contribute to the uncovering of the truth. More than any form of restitution, the state's denial of war atrocities has been one of the largest barriers to healing.

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<sup>2</sup> Labrador, Gabriel. *Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos invalida la Ley de Amnistía*. El Faro <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201302/noticias/10965/> retrieved 03/11/2013

Less than 100 miles away in Guarjila, Chalatenango there is a wild looking ex-Jesuit novice named John Guliano who uses sport and reflection in much of the same spirit as Sister Peg. During the war John had a lot of contact with many of the guerillas as the town was a strategic base and headquarters for the *FMLN*. When the war ended he wanted to work with ex-combatants in the same spirit of Sister Peg, but he found the war was so ingrained in the minds of the guerillas that he decided instead to work with their children who had grown up in the conflict. He facilitates soccer, inline hockey and table tennis tournaments along with reflections about social issues such as alcoholism, machismo and domestic or child abuse that almost all the youth of Guarjila have experienced in some way. He also helps promising individuals get scholarships to study at the university level so they can return and better the community. The night we visited I was impressed by the number of kids that showed up for the impromptu soccer tournament, and for the high standards that John held them too. He is aware of the drug and violence problems among the youth, but is also concerned with the changing health concerns of the community that may seem small in comparison with the societal damage of drug addiction. John has noted that since sugary soda drinks have become a dietary staple in most communities there has been a rise in diabetes and heart disease. In response, John has banned soda from his *Tamarindo* center on the principle that the youth there have to respect themselves and make choices that recognize their self-worth. While cutting out soda is a small thing, and may seem like an inconsequential endeavor when compared to the real problems and poverty that these youth are faced with, the attitude that John is teaching them with his demanding line is as valuable as a marketable skill.



The facilities and equipment, while old, are kept in good condition and not stolen because the youth have respect for and value the center. This is how they can be taught to value and respect their families, their community and their environment.

Sister Peg also happened to be my Liberation Theology professor, and in her class she had us read *Tattoos on the Heart*, which is about the formation of an organization, Homeboy Industries, which has been attempting to address some of these societal issues in an East Los Angeles neighborhood since the 1980s. While the organization serves a broad range of people, the neighborhood is mainly inhabited by immigrants from Latin America and subsequently also by Latin American gangs. My encounter with this text in El Salvador led me to wonder about its relevance for this situation. Analyzing the successes, failures, insights and programs of Homeboy Industries, what can we take away that might potentially be helpful in responding to the gang situation in El Salvador? What things have been unsuccessful? More importantly, what are the underlying philosophies and ideologies of gang intervention and economic reinsertion that Homeboy Industries can contribute to the situation in El Salvador and how do they implicate me personally? While there are connections between the emergence and intensification of gangs in both the United States and El Salvador, a basic sketch of the different historical, cultural as and socio-political context will help understand the situation.

## Chapter 1: Historical Context of the Gang Situation

### Historical Context and Factors

“No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. It is time that you come to your senses and obey your conscience rather than follow sinful commands.” These were the powerful last words of Archbishop Oscar Romero on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1980 from the pulpit of the cathedral in San Salvador. The next day the archbishop was assassinated and the country plunged further into civil war as the *frente Farabundo Martí por la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)* guerilla force launched its first unified offensive. During the next few years the National Guard, headed up by the elite *Atlacatl* battalion carried out the massacres of *El Mozote* and *Sumpul* in the rural regions of *Morazan* and *Chalatenango* respectively.<sup>3</sup> Many of those killed in these and the more than 200 other massacres throughout the war period were noncombatant civilians who were identified as potential subversives or demonized as communists. In December 1980 as well, four American church women were tortured, raped and killed after they arrived in El Salvador to do missionary work. While President Carter had approved economic and military aid

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the Atlacatl officers were trained at the American run School of the Americas, then in Panama. <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/soawhinsec-grads/notorious-grads/238-notorious-graduates-from-el-salvador>. The Massacre of El Mozote: Dec 11<sup>th</sup> 1981, the Massacre of the Rio Sumpul May 14<sup>th</sup> 1980

to El Salvador shortly after the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, all aid was cut off immediately after these killings.<sup>4</sup>

The hiatus did not last for long however, since the *FMLN* won some key strategic victories in Chalatenango, Morazan and Santa Ana against military outposts during December 1980 and January 1981. As the guerrillas' success increased "the murders of the four women faded in importance when faced with the very real possibility of the 'fall' of El Salvador."<sup>5</sup> The United States was still very much involved in the Cold War and was specifically looking toward Cuba and Nicaragua as examples of recent leftist revolutions in Latin America. Direct military intervention as in Vietnam was unfavorable, yet something had to be done to keep a U.S. ally in the region.

The Sandinista revolutionary front (*FSLN*) overthrew the U.S. backed Nicaraguan government headed by Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979 which motivated both US foreign policy as well as the *FMLN*. Both the *FMLN* and the *FSLN* sought land redistribution and overall agrarian reform as well as the forcible surrender of the concentrated power in the hands of the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan oligarchy. In El Salvador it is commonly perceived that fourteen families effectively controlled nearly all economic capital. Another similarity between the two revolutionary causes was that they had originally been divided between adherents to Liberation Theology, Marxist purists, and members of the established Communist parties in their countries. Fidel Castro and the Cuban *Departamento América* served as moderators to unify these factions first into

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<sup>4</sup> Doyle & Duklis p6 *The Long Twilight Struggle: Low-intensity warfare and the Salvadoran Military*

<sup>5</sup> Doyle & Duklis p7

the *FSLN* and then later between the regional Salvadoran factions. While ideals, objectives and strategies were diverse and points of conflict between the Salvadoran factions arose (not to mention the egos attached to their commanders and leaders) Cuban incentive for unification lay in the promise of supplying armaments. Fearing a similar outcome in El Salvador and realizing that the *FMLN* was increasingly under Cuban influence, the US bankrolled the Salvadoran government and military through a strategy called low intensity warfare.<sup>6</sup> The case of El Salvador was not particularly unique when it comes to low intensity warfare as the foreign policy of the United States. During the Cold War and especially after the Vietnam War, low intensity warfare based on various economic or political directives dictated foreign policy in countries where the United States' ability to influence events diminished due to liberation movements and political change.<sup>7</sup>

El Salvador also had economic implications for foreign policy since it was at one time the largest exporter of coffee bound for the United States, as well as a major producer of cane sugar, cheap textiles and clothing.<sup>8</sup> It was its political importance in a region of the world where U.S.-friendly governments were being challenged and overthrown, however, that influenced officials to overlook violations of human rights in El Salvador. Most common infractions during the war include denying the right to organize, freedom of the press, targeting of noncombatants and the use of torture to extract confessions or information. Reports of the massacre at *El Mozote* did make it to

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<sup>6</sup> Doyle & Dulkis p9

<sup>7</sup> Doyle and Duklis *The Long Twilight Struggle: Low Intensity Warfare and the Salvadoran Military* p434

<sup>8</sup> Murray, Kevin *Inside El Salvador* p 78

*The New York Times* and *Washington Post* in 1982. These reporters were vigorously attacked by the Reagan administration for exaggerating their claims and were eventually ostracized by their own institutions.<sup>9</sup>

The war continued throughout the 80s with high numbers of civilian casualties in the countryside attributed mainly to the military searching for guerillas and communists. During these intermediate years of the war many *campesinos* (rural sustenance farmers) fled to refugee camps in Honduras such as *Mesa Grande* to escape the war zone.<sup>10</sup> While they may have been safer there and not subject to torture, murder, falling bombs and massacres, many who did not like being held like prisoners in the camps by Honduran forces returned to El Salvador to fight with the *FMLN*. At this time those who could afford to or had connections started to immigrate more frequently to the United States, Guatemala or Mexico.

On November 16<sup>th</sup> 1989 six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her young daughter were dragged from their beds on the campus of the Universidad de Centroamerica “José Simeon Cañas” (UCA) in the night and killed by members of the *Atlatl* battalion.<sup>11</sup> The primary target of the attack was the president of the university Ignacio Ellacuria S.J. for his outspoken work in liberation theology. Ellacuria wrote about the poor as the ‘crucified people’ and the ‘Kingdom of God as liberation from structural sin.’<sup>12</sup> The military saw Ellacuria and the Jesuits (also Rutilio Grande S.J. who

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<sup>9</sup> Reporters Raymond Bonner and Alma Guillermoprieto from Danner “The Massacre at El Mozote” p 97

<sup>10</sup> Murray p277

<sup>11</sup> Murray p278

<sup>12</sup> Brackley p178

was murdered before Oscar Romero and affected his conversion) as mouthpieces and ideologists for the *FMLN*. Ellacuria advocated ‘creating a piece of heaven on earth’ and much of his rhetoric attacked structures of wealth and resource disparagement in Salvadoran society. In contrast, the commanders of the *FMLN* who were by majority atheist Marxists in favor of armed struggle would not have directly used his writings as the military charged. It was at this point that the support for the war in El Salvador again came under scrutiny by the US media and Congress. In 1989 the *FMLN* also launched their “Final Offensive” in which they captured key areas of San Salvador but could not seize power. Both sides came to the realization that they could not achieve total armed victory and began peace negotiations in April 1991 which led to the Peace Accords formally ending the war (signed in Mexico City) in January 1992. By the end of the war, US military aid to El Salvador had reached over \$1 billion.<sup>13</sup> The most important outcomes of the Peace Accords were that the *FMLN* was officially recognized as a political party and that the Salvadoran armed forces were decreased by approximately 70%. A general amnesty was signed for the crimes committed on both sides during the war and the PNC or National Civil Police (*Policia Nacional Civil* in Spanish) was created.<sup>14</sup> It was very important that the new police force not be connected in any way to the military because of the many atrocities during the war.

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<sup>13</sup> Doyle and Dulkis p 432

<sup>14</sup> Murray p41-45

## Waves of Migration & Gang Culture

Throughout the 12-year duration of the war (1980-1992) approximately 1/6 of the population of El Salvador fled the country. By 1992 one million Salvadorans lived abroad (mostly in the US).<sup>15</sup> Even after the war's end, immigration of Salvadorans to the United States continued to increase throughout the 1990s. Immigrants usually headed to where they had existing connections with family, but the two largest concentrations of Salvadorans were, and remain, the Los Angeles metropolitan area, which has over one million Salvadorans, and the Washington D.C. and Northern Virginia areas.<sup>16</sup>

These large waves of Salvadoran immigrants to Los Angeles arrived to find an already incredibly diverse landscape of other Latino immigrants, Asian immigrants and African American and Caucasian inhabitants. Salvadorans tended to settle and congregate in the same desperately poor neighborhoods, such as Pico Union, which already had high gang activity. Salvadorans were incorporated into some Mexican and Latino gangs through these neighborhood associations and the penal system. In prison, joining a gang was sometimes necessary for protection from gangs of other ethnicities. While some gangs only accepted or initiated members of certain nationalities such as the Mexican Mafia, one gang, the *Barrio 18* started accepting Salvadorans and other Latino immigrants.<sup>17</sup> In the 1980s, as well, enough Salvadorans inhabited Los Angeles that an exclusively Salvadoran gang was formed called the *Mara Salvatrucha* or *MS-13*. Today *MS-13* is known as one of the most violent and pervasive gangs in both El Salvador and

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<sup>15</sup> Zilberg p26

<sup>16</sup> Zilberg p 26

<sup>17</sup> Zilberg p27

the United States, the original makeup of the gang focused on listening to rock music, drinking and smoking marijuana before evolving into violent criminal activity.<sup>18</sup>

The styles of dress, signs of membership and modes of communication of these gangs were distinctly influenced by Los Angeles area and Chicano gangs. The 13 on the end of *MS-13* was added to acknowledge the alliance between the *Mara Salvatrucha* and the Mexican Mafia (*La M*) after they helped mediate a truce over drug territory in L.A. (the letter M occupies the 13<sup>th</sup> spot in the alphabet). Similarly, styles of clothing (Dickies) as well as haircuts (shaved heads) were popular among members as well as the use of hand signs to communicate between members or to probe gang allegiances among unknown neighborhood intruders. Tattoos depicting logos with the gang's abbreviation were also popular, especially in jail to show loyalty to the gang or signify rank or merit. The teardrop tattoo at the outside corner of the eye and its significance of having killed someone has become recognizable in modern pop culture.

During the war, pressure on undocumented Salvadoran immigrants wasn't particularly strong since they were granted partial refugee status because deporting immigrants back to a country in the midst of civil war is much harder under international law and is not politically popular. Immigrants kept arriving in increasing numbers though even after the 1992 Peace Accords were signed. During the LA riots of April 1992 Latino immigrants were characterized as 'looters' by the media coverage which sparked inter-ethnic tensions and deportations of Salvadorans started to increase.<sup>19</sup> Those that were

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201208/cronicas/9301> retrieved 02/21/2013

<sup>19</sup> Zilberg 30-31



more frequently in confrontation with the law, such as gang members who engaged in criminal activities, were more likely to be deported. In L.A. specifically, deportation was also used by the LAPD as a method for getting rid of certain witnesses. The LAPD has also been accused of widespread corruption in the last 30 years, a parallel with the Salvadoran PNC.<sup>20</sup>

As with all foreign policy and law enforcement practices, especially those having to do with national security, policies and practices came under drastic scrutiny and overhaul after the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The Patriot Act was signed the very next month which gave much more power to the discretion of law enforcement to investigate supposed undocumented immigrants. In 2002, the Department of Homeland Security was created and took the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) under their jurisdiction. In 2003 the INS was split into the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and the US Citizenship and Immigration Service where ICE focuses solely on deportation and border control issues.<sup>21</sup> ICE's specific response to transnational gangs with ties to Latin American countries has been Operation Community Shield. This is essentially a coordination effort between local, regional and federal law enforcement agencies through database sharing to target the prosecution of gang connected criminals and the deportation of offending undocumented immigrants. The policy focusing on undocumented immigration in general is the Secure Communities collaboration enacted in 2008 and continued under the Obama administration. It works through fingerprinting

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<sup>20</sup> Zilberg 40

<sup>21</sup> Zilberg 45

databases that allow ICE to put a hold on anybody who doesn't have the correct documentation. The stated goal of ICE and the president's administration is that Secure Communities be implemented in every jurisdiction in the United States. While ICE claims to have deported 155,000 convicted immigrants since its inception, it has also been criticized for splitting up families and taking mothers from their children for infractions as minor as speeding.<sup>22</sup>

Rhetoric surrounding undocumented immigrants also changed after September 11<sup>th</sup> with the introduction of terminology such as 'domestic terrorists' to describe those that would 'assault' the sovereignty of the nation by coming into the country informally.<sup>23</sup> As the war on terror grew, as well as the complexity of the transnational gang relationship, news analysts began to theorize and report that Al-Qaeda operatives were in contact with gang members with the intention of contracting them to smuggle terrorists into the United States to carry out attacks. No evidence was ever produced by any American or foreign agency to support these conjectures though.

In the globalized world, few social processes happen statically, so while immigrants have been arriving in LA and incorporating into the local gang culture since the 1970s, deportees back to El Salvador are reproducing the gang culture and violence there. Many of the original deported gang members, while born in El Salvador, were socialized and brought up in LA and spoke a more Chicano form of Spanish than the Salvadoran dialect. Many gang members arrived in El Salvador, a country with few

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<sup>22</sup> [http://www.ice.gov/secure\\_communities/](http://www.ice.gov/secure_communities/)

<sup>23</sup> William Bratton LAPD chief 2002-2009 Zilberg p219

opportunities for social mobility outside of the oligarchy and the already rich, with little to nothing except the social capital of the streets they had accrued. Considering *maras* in El Salvador before higher volume of deportations began, they were simply like clubs or groups of poor, young men and youth that simply had nothing to do. Hanging out together on the street was their principle trait and the most frequent criminal activities they engaged in was harassment, vandalism and the occasional petty theft.<sup>24</sup> They were viewed as nuisances to residents and businesses, but not nearly as feared as they are in the current situation. Deported members brought with them a sophistication and inclination for violence that allowed threats and a system of extortion to develop. The members of *maras* were ideal recruits and easily assimilated to the gang culture of LA, which they looked to admiringly and with respect. The disparities in law enforcement practices and capability between El Salvador and LA, allowed Salvadoran gangs to evolve in violent practices and criminal systems.

Now the image of the United States and its citizens in El Salvador is complex because of the known role that the US government and military (unexploded bombs supplied by the U.S. adorn town squares in towns in Chalatenango) played during the civil war but also the impressive amount of US money that comes to El Salvador through a variety of channels. The United States has an increasingly large economic interest in El Salvador after they signed the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA), as well as funds a large chunk of their developmental projects

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<sup>24</sup> Cruz: *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamerica*. WW panel

through the Millennium Goals, International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and even the War on Drugs.<sup>25</sup>

The most important form of currency coming from the north to the Salvadoran people is the remittances sent from family members working in the United States. Discrepancies in inflation and standard of living is so huge between the two countries that a father working in the United States can better support himself and a medium to large family in El Salvador much more easily. With 1/3 of Salvadorans living outside of their native country, these remittances have become indispensable for sustaining the economy. One problem is that many people do not understand or know how to manage the money well and do not use it to better their general situation through the education of their children, but rather buy television sets or *Pollo Campero* (popular fried chicken fast food chain) among other consumer items. These various factors that led to a high circulation of American currency resulted in the official dollarization of El Salvador and the retiring of the Colon in 2001. El Salvador joined Ecuador and Panama who also officially adopted the US dollar in the midst of incredible inflation of their national currencies.

All these factors combined with the portrayal of life in the United States by mainstream media as prosperous caused many Salvadorans to look towards the far north as a land of wealth and opportunities. This is why thousands of immigrants every year brave the perilous journey through Central America, the very violent corridor in the south of Mexico, the desert of Northern Mexico and the risks of being caught by Border Patrol among other hazards. For those who return, even though they may seem foreign and be

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<sup>25</sup> Zilberg 48

regarded with suspicion, their style of clothing and street hardened nature are attractive for young men looking to create space for themselves in society. This made initial recruitment by deportees for gang members fairly easy even in a new environment. Deported gang members also were initially in danger of being targeted by members of rival gangs. In some areas they were also pursued by vigilante groups like the *Sombra Negra* (black shadow) which engages in militia-like social cleansing of gang members.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Zilberg p151. The Sombra Negra was essentially a lynch mob that targeted recently deported young men with the fear they would eventually come to extort money from them.

## Chapter 2: Societal Responses

### Law Enforcement Responses

After the Peace Accords of 1992 a national ‘civil’ police force (PNC) was formed to replace the National Guard (*La Guardia Nacional*) that had played such a big role during the armed struggle. It was very important that this new police force not be associated with the military or the war so that people could learn to trust in the authorities once again. The training and even the uniforms of the PNC were modeled after European police forces and received some training from French and Belgian specialists. In terms of policy, though, the former president from the ARENA party, Francisco Flores, actually did the same thing as the *maras* forming in his country and tried to mirror the policies put into effect in L.A. and New York City. The LAPD police chief from 2002-2009 was William Bratton who had previously stemmed drug related violence in some areas of New York City with a zero tolerance “Broken Window” policy which literally meant that cops were required to investigate all reports such as broken windows and enforce no loitering laws. This resulted in the deportation of many gang members back to El Salvador. In the case of Salvadoran law enforcement though, you cannot deport people from their native country so the only place to put them is into prisons. This policy in El Salvador is known as *Plan Mano Dura* or ‘Hard Hand’ (a better translation is Iron Fist)

which was introduced in 2003 by Flores and accompanied by *Plan Escoba* (Plan Broom or Clean Sweep) in Guatemala and *Libertad Azul* (Blue Liberty) in Honduras.<sup>27</sup>

The relationship between El Salvador and the U.S. continues through law enforcement and military operation, which it is clear through such institutions as the massive walled complex that is the U.S. embassy in El Salvador. When the Bush administration made the case for a 'coalition of the willing' to invade Iraq in 2003, El Salvador was the only Latin American country to join based largely on the amount of support their military continually received from the US.<sup>28</sup> El Salvador also became home to one of the United States' International Law Enforcement Academies (ILEA) for the entire Central and South American region in 2005.<sup>29</sup> This institution has actually been statistically correlated to a decrease in the kidnapping rate since the main mission of the academy is focused on investigative crime scene techniques. Still, its presence binds American and Salvadoran law enforcement personnel and leadership closer. In terms of military training, the School of the Americas (SOA) currently named the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security (WHINSEC) first founded in Panama and now at Ft Benning, Georgia since 1984 has trained various Salvadoran civil war era and modern military leaders. These include Roberto D'Aubisson purportedly the mind behind the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the formation of the death squads and Col.

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<sup>27</sup> Cruz 2004 p17

<sup>28</sup> Zilberg p200-203

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.fletc.gov/training/programs/international-capacity-building/international-law-enforcement-academies/?vm=r&s=1>

Domingo Monterrosa, the commanding officer that carried out the massacre at *El Mozote*.<sup>30</sup>

The policies of *Mano Dura* were confirmed by the next president and ARENA party member Antonio Saca who initiated Super *Mano Dura* in 2004.<sup>31</sup> Operation Community Shield, the coordinated law enforcement strike targeting Latino gang members carried out originally in 7 cities across the United States by ICE, was initiated in March 2005 and has resulted in the arrests of over 27,600 gang members and associates.<sup>32</sup> While gangs had been embattled in ‘turf wars’ essentially with local law enforcement, and been labeled as threats and formally demonized through the STEP (Street Terrorism Enforcement Protection Act) of 1986 for 20 years, these three years marked the targeting of the *MS-13* and *Barrio 18* gangs on a coordinated transnational level. These policies in El Salvador allowed police to identify and arrest gang members based on their dress, or more commonly their gang affiliated tattoos. Other common practices that have human rights implications include holding both convicted and charged prisoners in the same cells sometimes for years, trying minors as adults and arresting individuals without informing them of the charges against them.<sup>33</sup>

These policies by and large have been a major factor in transforming the local, loosely affiliated gangs into more sophisticated organizations that have taken on more of the appearances of organized crime. Hierarchical structure became increasingly

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/soawhinsec-grads/notorious-grads/238-notorious-graduates-from-el-salvador>

<sup>31</sup> Zilberg p178

<sup>32</sup> ICE official website <http://www.ice.gov/community-shield/>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201207/noticias/9145/>



important, with each clique following a *palabrero* (one with the word) who could rapidly be replaced by a second in command if the leader was arrested or killed. Inside the prisons are usually found the *ranfleros* which command a *programa* of several cliques and report to the national leaders of the gangs (See Figure #1 for gang hierarchy).

**Figure #1: Hierarchy of MS-13**



Farah, Douglas, Pamela Phillips Lum. *Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil*. International Assessment and Strategy Center. Page 7.

Wendy Bellanger even characterizes prisons as a graduate school for the gangs and in recent years the headquarters of the gangs since the prisons are segregated by gang.<sup>34</sup> Also, it is relatively easy for gang members to communicate with the outside even from within the prisons due to guard corruption and lack of sophisticated security. These policies have also made the gangs more clandestine in their operations. Gang

<sup>34</sup> Bellanger p126

activity and membership were previously flaunted and used as intimidation factors by gangs in the 1990s, but it is now common for community members to not even know who the gang members are. While tattoos cover the bodies of incarcerated and older gang members, younger members are told not to get tattoos because of the fierce repression from police and this actually allows them to infiltrate their ranks and aid programs. Perhaps the most important transformation is the increase in violence and homicides in the years following *Mano Dura*. Since a large number of gang members are in jail and need the support of their homies on the outside, extortion operations to raise money for the gangs have increased in pressure and brutality. The rape and mutilation of ‘Rosa N’ in December 2002 by gang members initiated a media barrage in El Salvador, as well as support for *Mano Dura* policies.<sup>35</sup> Initially the gangs started asserting themselves against law enforcement tactics and society through crimes such as rape and mutilation meant to incite fear. The police retaliated, carrying out mass youth round ups and raids.

While all this is happening concurrently, there are some government programs and initiatives put in motion that focus on prevention and rehabilitation that grew out of a response to protests from UNICEF and a national network of NGOs. On the part of the government, two of the upgrades to *Super Mano Dura* under Antonio Saca in 2004 were programs called *Mano Amiga* (Friendly Hand) and *Mano Extendida* (Extended Hand).<sup>36</sup> These policies, though, when compared with the repressive measures are severely underfunded and limited in their reach. While the success of *Mano Amiga*, which is based

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<sup>35</sup>P210 Zilberg

<sup>36</sup> P134 Cruz 2007

in schools, is hard to demonstrate because of its preventative nature, the rehabilitation efforts of *Mano Extendida* has only affected 35-45 *pandilleros calmados* (calmed down or retired gang members) through its farm based program which aims to teach hardwork habits, teamwork and agricultural skills.<sup>37</sup> To put these numbers into perspective, *El Faro* reported in 2012 that the Ministry of Justice and Public Security estimated that there were no less than 62,000 initiated gang members in the country and 200,000 people directly associated with gangs.<sup>38</sup> The program seems to be a good initiative, with rival gang members working together learning a sustainable trade that they can either use to directly feed themselves and their families or that will help them find work. Still, the possibilities of relapse are still present once they leave the farm and go back to their old neighborhoods.

According to Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who founded Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, numbers cannot be the measuring stick of success for rehabilitation programs like the farm project since so much personalized effort has to be put into each person struggling to leave his old habits and associations and help find them jobs. This may be true, but the same government captured, arrested or imprisoned 30,000 gang members during the same period from 2003-05.<sup>39</sup> The budgets for prevention programs in the greatest risk areas was \$1 million and for rehabilitation and reinsertion just \$300,000.<sup>40</sup> To put this into perspective, during the 12-year civil war the United States sent over one

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<sup>37</sup> Zilberg and Cruz

<sup>38</sup> Valencia, Roberto. *El Faro*. <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201206/cronicas/8614>

<sup>39</sup> P179 Zilberg

<sup>40</sup> P66 Maras y Pandillas IV

billion dollars in military aid.<sup>41</sup> The irony here is that if this money was invested in development or given to the people through social services and structures the economy could be in much better shape and perhaps the gang situation not so grave. Zilberg claims that the purpose of the government rehabilitation programs was a political response of the right-wing ARENA party to the international and human rights criticisms of the original *Mano Dura*. The policy was also initiated right before elections as a counter to the left-wing *FMLN*'s economic appeal to the majority of poor Salvadorans. Fear, however, can be a stronger motivator than hope for a better life, and so the right-wings credentials on repression triumphed over the economic prospects of the left.

#### Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) Responses

The number of NGOs in El Salvador boomed during and immediately after the war. The IUDOP (university institute on public opinion) institute at the University of Central America in San Salvador reports that in the years 1952-79 there were 22 NGOs operating in El Salvador, and during the span of the war from 1980-91 that number expanded to 74. During this boom many of the institutions were plagued by a lack of organization, duplication of efforts and poor coordination and planning. Duplication of efforts are where institutions work in the same area, with similar objectives but have different structures and utilize different methods that don't complement each other stemming from a lack of coordination. This low level of coordination between NGOs, especially between those that have international components such as administrators and funding, and national or regional organizations is still a factor today. In 2005 there were

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<sup>41</sup> Doyle and Dulkis p 432

134 programs and institutions (mostly NGOs) that worked with youth violence in some way. These include a number of churches, both Catholic and Evangelical, radio networks, universities, schools, municipal government programs and local youth networks that work or sponsor programs for at risk youth such as those that drop out of school at an early age and gang members.<sup>42</sup>

When *Plan Mano Dura* was implemented it severely affected the work of the NGOs by targeting and violating the rights of the youth. Many youth that the organizations were working with and had invested resources in to help transition out of the gangs were harassed, arrested or killed by the PNC. Other organizations were also persecuted for their associations and work with gang members which eventually caused an outcry from international organizations like UNICEF, as well as national organizations like *Red para la Infancia y Adolescencia* (network for infancy and adolescents). The Ministry of Governance responded formulating the previously mentioned *Mano Extendida* and *Mano Amiga* plans that many of the NGOs feel “was just a strategy to curb and placate the flood of criticism against the government... and that the *Plan Mano Amiga* and *Plan Mano Extendida* did accomplish what they had previewed.”<sup>43</sup>

Types of institutions and NGOs can be divided up by what stage of a gang member’s life the programs aim to address. Primary prevention is the most general of the categories and is characterized by preventing violence through protecting children. This

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<sup>42</sup> Aguilar, Jeannette, Lissette Miranda. *Entre la articulación y la competencia: las respuestas de la sociedad civil organizada a las pandillas en El Salvador*. p73-77

<sup>43</sup> Aguilar p127 Translation mine: “fue una estrategia para frenar y aplacar la lluvia de críticas dirigidas hacia el Gobierno...los Planes Mano Amiga y Extendida no se han logrado concretar como estaba previsto.”

is the most idealized and preferable type of prevention because it stops violence before it even happens. Next is secondary prevention that is made up of more specific programs targeting habitual violent offenders and at-risk youth, such as victims of family violence, school dropouts, and youth with drug and alcohol addictions. Institutions dealing with this type of prevention are few since this developmental period for gang members varies so much and different factors play different roles in causing youth to join *pandillas*. Tertiary prevention is essentially rehabilitation of fully active and former gang members with the aim of changing their lives. Of the 17 NGOs identified by the IUDOP that work specifically with gang members as operationally and financially independent of the State five work in primary prevention and six work in tertiary prevention. There are three that work in both primary and tertiary and only one offers secondary prevention.<sup>44</sup>

Two specific organizations, *Movimiento de Jóvenes Encuentristas* (MOJE, which in English means ‘youth encounter movement’) and *Polígono Industrial Don Bosco* (PIBD, meaning Don Bosco Industrial Park) offer opportunities for youth and gang members to participate in micro-business ventures and learn trades and skills. Some of these skills are those associated with the professions of tailor, barber, clay worker and artist, electrician, mechanic and carpenter. While the participants did receive some compensation for their work, the funds and planning for these ventures were actually managed by supervising adults. Other programs however, like *Proyecto Nehemias* gave youth complete control over their initiatives. MOJE and PIBD have created more of an apprentice system with already existing businesses while *Proyecto Nehemias* aims to

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<sup>44</sup> Aguilar p85

create an actual startup business approach for the youth. Both are valuable initiatives, but not all vocational skills are in demand, and it is more valuable to be able to start up a business in response to demand and the economy.

An interesting and unique organization working for rehabilitation from gang life is *Homies Unidos* which, like the gangs, has transnational aspects. The organization was formed by ex-gang members from both of the major gangs who came together in San Salvador in December 1996 renouncing their violent pasts. Even the name demonstrates their transnational nature with homies, an English slang for homeboy or gang member, and *unidos* which is Spanish for ‘united.’ Mirroring the spread of the gang, *Homies Unidos* also started working in Los Angeles in 1997.<sup>45</sup> The most well-known member and current executive director of the Los Angeles branch, Alex Sanchez, was part of a high profile legal battle to avoid deportation after receiving a felony offense for illegal reentry. He was eventually freed on the basis that deporting him back to El Salvador a second time would put his life in danger.

Since *Homies Unidos* was formed by *pandilleros calmados* they had an intimate knowledge of gang culture, and they retained their styles of dress, ways of talking and regularly maintained relationships with active gang members out of habit or with the hopes that they too might pledge nonviolence. This caused various problems at the organization’s headquarters if two active rival gang members happened to be there. It also puts reformed gang members at a greater risk of relapsing back into the gang lifestyle if they maintain some sort of ties with the gang. The line between gang activities

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<sup>45</sup> <http://homiesunidos.org/about/history/>

and peace activism are sometimes blurred in this program, and both in LA and San Salvador, the programs ran into conflict with the police since their efforts were both focused on gangs. The police regarded *Homies Unidos* with suspicion since many of the members had criminal records and sometimes raided their offices and charged them with being fronts for gang activity.

When *Mano Dura* went into effect in El Salvador in 2003 any intervention work that *Homies Unidos* and many other NGOs undertook became illegal, so they were forced to reorganize. Ties between San Salvador and LA were cut, and the San Salvador branch renamed itself HOMIES (*Hombres y Mujeres Insercion Social de El Salvador* which means Men and Women for Social Insertion of El Salvador). Just as gang activities and interactions with civil society were different and continuously changing in Los Angeles and San Salvador, the organizations had different needs when it came to funding and government interaction. When Alex Sanchez was taken prisoner for instance, the Los Angeles branch mobilized into a group focused on getting Sanchez out of jail and preventing his deportation. \$2.5 million had been spent on his bail alone (this was done without consulting the San Salvador branch.) The new group received funding from a Dutch NGO, *Cortaid*, and moved into an office across from the San Salvador *Policia Nacional Civil* (PNC, National Civil Police) complete with security guard. Now, because of their funding, proximity to the police and new laws they were restricted from any sort of hands-on work and contact with active gang members.<sup>46</sup> The path that *Homies Unidos*

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<sup>46</sup> Zilberg p174-178



has taken exemplifies the transformation from social movement to established organization that many NGOs have undergone.

On my recent trip to El Salvador, I found myself visiting the community of Apopa, talking to a *pandillero calmado* (calmed down or inactive gang affiliate) named Danny who had been incarcerated in a Salvadoran prison. He did not tell us about his previous gang activities or how he came to be incarcerated, but while there he related how he, along with other members founded an organization called OPERA (which stands for *optimismo, paz, esperanza, renovacion, y harmonia*, which translates to optimism, peace, hope, renovation and harmony) in 1995 in the prison of Quetzaltepeque. At first this organization was primarily concerned with bettering the daily life for those within the prisons by organizing against human rights abuses by prison guards. Danny tells the story of how when the prisons would become full, the guards would sometimes purposefully let the usually segregated gang members of rival gangs or non-affiliated prisoners intermingle and incite fights where prisoners would inevitably be beaten to death or killed with fashioned or contraband weapons. I immediately remembered during my semester abroad in El Salvador there was a prison in Honduras that caught fire and burnt down with all the prisoners locked inside. A huge debate was sparked in the Salvadoran media that debated whether the guards did the right thing; whether it was better to have these criminals run free or let them burn to death.

These cycles of violence, reproduced in the prison, as well as on the streets, make it easier for the guards to control a divided rather than unified population. The founders

of OPERA realized this, and coming together they organized protests within the prisons, so that when these intermingling recreational times occurred the separate gangs would sit down on the ground apart from each other to prevent fights and the inner prison killing. After this small but important victory they organized to better the quality of life in the prisons by getting space for a gym and small library as well as equipment and tools for a carpentry workshop and library. OPERA was criminalized with the inception of Mano Dura policies as were many other NGOs, and many of its founders ended up in the maximum security prison of Zacatecoluca.

Danny has been a part of the struggle to get legal status for OPERA.

Remembering what I had read about the transformation that *Homies Unidos* had to undergo to become and function as a state recognized organization and how that had severely compromised its mission while also causing it to cut ties with the LA branch I wondered why it was important to do so. It seemed to me that aligning with the government that would regulate and limit the work he was able to do in the communities would undermine the solidarity Danny had with the community of Apopa and perhaps his success. With the state of siege that exists in Salvadoran society though Danny could easily be arrested again for the work he is doing without the government's approval because of the associations he is making while bringing together active gang members. All the activities and projects he organizes also come out of his pocket and the meager base of the OPERA members who are all fairly poor, incarcerated or previously incarcerated, former and active gang members. With legal status they could tap into the money the Salvadoran government has put aside for youth programs as well as

international funding from European and North American countries that support a slew of NGOs in the country.

In the community of Apopa itself we met with the women's group that Danny was working with which was made up of both young and old women. They started a cosmetics school as well as a small piñata shop which helped them out a little bit economically. The people of Apopa have a difficult and unique plight because it is a resettlement community created to accommodate the displaced victims of earthquakes and hurricanes. Because of this and the low level of community organization this makes Apopa a hotbed for crime and gang activity. The women recounted to us that it is very difficult to find work because the community has been stigmatized to such a degree that it is difficult to find even service related positions. Danny told me that the guys groups liked to be more spontaneous than the women, and maybe this was why their programs were more socially based than economically driven. With the men Danny said he would do poetry, rap, modern dance like hip hop and break dancing and other forms of artistic expression.

### Gang Truce 2012

During my time in El Salvador, a very interesting and new type of response took shape. Since the country is small even by Central American standards, and almost all businesses are concentrated in San Salvador, the national news also serves as the local news. This means that every homicide reported in the country gets reported in the two main newspapers *La Prensa Grafica* and *El Diario de Hoy*. This statistic has become very

important in the country with the second highest annual homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants in the world right behind neighboring Honduras.<sup>47</sup> Along with any major happening in the world, the front page of each paper would either say how many homicides were committed the previous day, or how many suspected gang members had been arrested in special operations during the night. Graphic pictures also accompanied these headlines. While the papers do make citizens aware of the actual danger and crime going on in their country, the periodicals also contribute to a sense of insecurity and fear with the frequent bombardment of these types of stories.

The media plays a very crucial role in the way the police and the gangs are portrayed in society, and can fuel a fascination with gang culture. This can be seen in the United States as well, with documentaries and programs such as “Gangland” and “Gang Wars” on the History, Discovery and National Geographic channels. Movies from Hollywood and music videos have made the familiarity and fascination with gang culture by youth more likely. I mention this here to acknowledge the potential that media plays in the gang world, as well as the government responses and mainstream society’s view of gangs and their members. In my case, Salvadoran media played a large part in my initial interest in Salvadoran gangs (it is also one of the only resources we have apart from interviews to talk about the Salvadoran gang truce) since it has happened so recently and there hasn’t been very much academic analysis of the event. It is also being closely monitored by other Central American countries to see if it will have the hoped for and

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.laprensa.hn/Secciones-Principales/Honduras/Tegucigalpa/Honduras-encabeza-cifras-de-homicidios-en-el-mundo#.UHlr7JhG-uW>

desired effects on society and be a viable option to decrease gang-related violence or simply collapse.<sup>48</sup>

In February 2012, the *ex-diputado* (ex-senator) and ex-guerrilla Raul Mijango, with the authorization of the Minister of Security David Munguía Payes, sought out the purported *cabecillas* (heads) of the two major gangs to try and broker a truce. Mijango had come into contact with gangs before, but as a target of extortion when he owned a small business. Although prisons are usually segregated based on gang allegiance to try to maintain order and decrease murders, the maximum security prison of Zacatecoluca is where the most powerful members of both gangs can be found. Mijango knew that he would need more credibility both for the participation of the gang members and the pacification of the general public if and when his operations went public. He turned to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, proposing the idea to San Salvador Archbishop José Escobar Alas and other bishops who rebuffed him until he found one bishop, Fabio Colindres, who agreed to help him. Mijango was hesitant to approach Monseñor Colindres because he is the bishop *castrense* which means his mandate is specifically as chaplain for the military and police forces. Working with gang members was a little out of his range of expertise, but he was the only prelate to accept. The underlying theory behind this sort of truce is that most of the violence stems from gangs fighting each other over territory or reputation and all the collateral damage that it causes. The idea behind the truce is to bring together the representatives of the gangs in secure environments so

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<sup>48</sup> [http://www.prensalibre.com/internacional/ONU-Tregua-Salvador-ejemplo-Centroamerica\\_0\\_781722006.html](http://www.prensalibre.com/internacional/ONU-Tregua-Salvador-ejemplo-Centroamerica_0_781722006.html)

that they can come to a ceasefire agreement. The rationale for those organizing the truce is that homicide rates will go down because of the absence of collateral damage and the gangs will become less violent organizations by nature. The gangs are motivated by what the mediators are offering, namely better accommodations for gang leaders in jail, but also because business will be better with a truce. By business I mean mainly extortion and drug trafficking along with other profitable criminal activities such as kidnapping and human trafficking.

As mentioned above, the majority of local cliques and street gangs exercise a certain level of identity, but are loosely affiliated with one of the two major transnational gangs, *MS-13* and *Barrio 18*. In terms of how transnational these organizations actually are, connections between LA and San Salvador and the routes between the two are mostly fostered through immigration and deportation without any system of hierarchical structure located in either of the two cities. Zilberg claims in *Space of Detention* that the relationship between gangs in the United States and Central America is generally one of connections of identity and gang culture. ICE, though, reports on various cases of sex trafficking, illegal reentry and murders being carried out on orders from outside of the United States.<sup>49</sup> The premise of the truce at least is that the leaders or representatives of the two confederations of gangs are invested with enough authority within the structure of the gangs that they are able to control their foot soldiers and those gang members that direct gang activity on the outside. According to an interview with Mijango in September of 2012 the representation and leadership of the *Barrio 18* was especially in question

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.ice.gov/news/releases/1107/110728alexandria.htm>

since it has been undergoing internal division since 2006.<sup>50</sup> Power struggles ruptured the *Barrio 18* into two main divisions, the *Sureños* (southerners) and the *Revolucionarios* (revolutionaries) and a third group made up of marginalized ex-leaders.<sup>51</sup> Before both gangs could be brought together for talks, their own inner divisions had to be ironed out by the mediators with government and church authorization to present a more organized and controlled front. It is in the best interest of the gangs to present a unified front to each other so that they can form mutual respect, as well as gain the trust and confidence of the public. The issue that it does bring up is the possibility and likeliness that there will be future divisions within the gangs, between the two major gangs over the terms of the truce or even between the gang members within prison enjoying the benefits and those on the outside. Because this truce is artificially brought about with the help of government and church entities, it is plausible that the government will step in to maintain the order and structure of the gangs in the future.

When I first heard of a truce from the news sources and talking with Salvadorans everything seemed very convoluted and in reality nobody really knew what was going on. One of my teachers, Gene Palumbo, a correspondent who frequently contributes to the *New York Times* said to us once that *El Faro*, the online journal, was the only Salvadoran news source worth following because it was the only independent one. The two major printed periodicals *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Grafica*, are owned by members of the Salvadoran oligarchy and media moguls such as ex-ARENA party member and

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/cronicas/9612/>

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-new-truth-about-the-gang-truce>

president from 2004-09 Antonio Saca. On March 14, 2012, *El Faro* reported on the transfer of 30 gang leaders from the high security prison of Zacatecoluca to lower security prisons like the one in Cojutepeque. In the other periodicals, Security Minister David Munguía Payes denied that the government would ever negotiate with criminals and that the transfer of *cabecillas* had to do with prison overcrowding.<sup>52</sup>

*El Faro*, however also reports that even before the truce was put fully into place, the leaders seized upon the opportunity that the municipal and senatorial elections on March 11<sup>th</sup> offered by organizing a ‘boycott’ of public transportation by threatening to shut down the bus system. Leadership of the two gangs in Zacatecoluca presented the situation to Mijango a week before the elections, who then relayed the information all the way to President Mauricio Funes. All over El Salvador, public bus systems are the main means of transportation for the majority of the population. Forcibly halting these bus systems during the elections would mean multiple violent deaths from battles with the police as well as the possibility of activating the military. It would also render the elections invalid if large numbers of Salvadorans did not make it to the polls. The tactics worked and all 30 of the *pandilleros* were transported on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of March, ahead of schedule and before elections on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March.

Whether this was a bluff facilitated by opportunity on the part of the gangs or not, it served to speed the transfer process after the truce was signed. It also demonstrates some frightening signals as to how the gangs plan to negotiate with the government. They

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/cronicas/9612/>



quickly forgot their bloody feud with each other when it came to organizing this bus boycott, as well as diminishing the number of homicides. Now that over 6 months have passed since the truce was officially proclaimed, sufficient statistics have been put forth to demonstrate that while the truce remains stable the homicide rate has dropped to 5.5 per day as opposed to 13.6 per day from January 1<sup>st</sup>-March 9<sup>th</sup> 2012. The first eight months of 2012 also registered 1000 less deaths than the same period in 2010.<sup>53</sup> While these numbers are impressive, some journalists and community leaders claim that the gangs are changing their tactics so that people simply ‘disappear’ now, as they did during the civil war with the death squads. There is also controversy over the source of the statistics between the PNC reports and the Supreme Court’s Institute of Legal Medicine data. The Institute’s data, says that while homicides are down, disappearances are still at the 2011 rate. Security Minister Munguía Payes claims that this is because the Institute does not take names off their list when people are reported found while the police do.<sup>54</sup>

While the homicide statistics in general are impressive and rectifying for a government that risked disaster with this deal, whether they represent an increase in safety or quality of life for those that actually live in communities controlled by gangs isn’t necessarily the case. While gang members may have stopped killing each other as much, they are still gang members, and in many communities they continue to collect *renta* by force. With less pressure from police and opposing gangs some have taken advantage of the truce to install new cliques in departments like *Cuscatlán*. Other

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/cronicas/9612/>

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201206/noticias/8842/>

communities like *La Campana* (where an early gang documentary *La Vida Loca* was made) do show signs of withdrawal of the gangs such as much of the graffiti being covered over in the past 6 months.<sup>55</sup> Apart from the mutilations and murders of five schoolboys from *Santa Tecla* that refused and resisted the forced recruitment of *MS-13* members in July 2012, recruitment around schools in some communities has dropped off since it is easier for the gangs to keep soldiers in their ranks, alive and out of jail, with the terms of the truce. There has even been one report in August of ‘soldiers’ or the lowest rank in the gang structure, in *Soyapango* killing two leaders of their gang who were strategizing to undermine and go against the terms of the truce in their territory.<sup>56</sup> While this demonstrates the supposed commitment of even the gang members of the lowest rank, it also shows the potential that conflict could rip the gangs apart and destroy the truce. It is also somewhat ironic and counterintuitive that gang members would kill some of their own to keep the peace with their historic enemies, demonstrating insights about the way gangs function and deal with problems or conflict in the first place, which is practically always with the use of lethal violence first. If the truce is to be sustainable and a step towards the reinsertion of gang members into society as functioning individuals then these violent tendencies have to be remedied in some way.

Now that there are tangible and generally popular statistics on the homicide rate since March 2012, demonstrating the legitimacy and results of the truce, the government has been more vocal about its central role. On June 22, 2012, the gang representatives

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/bitacora/9707/>

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-mara-salvatrucha-killings-truce-gangs>

presented a list of demands to the mediators, as well as to representatives from the Organization of American States (OAS in English and OEA in Spanish). (The OEA has championed the truce in El Salvador as a model that should be implemented in Guatemala, Honduras, Belize and Nicaragua as well.) Emboldened by the initial success of the truce and the media's shifting views of it, the representatives of the two gangs called for:

- Repeal of the '*Ley de la Proscripción de Pandillas*' which made gang membership a crime in itself.
- For the police to retreat from territories under their control and only to investigate reported crimes.
- Retirement of the armed forces to their bases. (as per 1992 Peace Accords)
- Penal code reform.
- Amnesty for terminally ill and elderly gang members in prison.
- Elimination of vigilante groups like *La Sombra Negra* (The Black Shadow) and torture interrogation techniques.
- Reinsertion plans with opportunities for employment and education.<sup>57</sup>

Less than a month after these demands were received, Security Minister Munguía Payes announced at a press conference that the recently inaugurated *Unidad Antipandilla* (Anti gang response force) would scale back large operations. Munguía Payes claimed that the measures were not a result of the recent list of demands and maintained that the

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201207/noticias/9145/>

government does not negotiate with criminals and gang members.<sup>58</sup> He may be technically right, since the negotiations pass through the mediators, but the fulfillment of concessions comes from the government and Munguía Payes' office. The Security Minister proffered instead that the measures were due to rampant overcrowding in El Salvador's prison system and that more focus would be put on those already accused of serious crimes. The claim does make sense, since in the OAS report published October 1, 2012, El Salvador ranks 1<sup>st</sup> in the Americas for percentage of prison overcrowding with 299% over capacity (see Table #1.)<sup>59</sup> The PNC previously arrested an average of 250 people a day and has a prisoner capacity of 8,110. Current prisoner population is reported at 26,000 this year.<sup>60</sup> Still, the timing of the measures and their implications for the gangs cannot be overlooked. The rest of these demands though will not be as easily met and will involve much higher levels of coordination among the various facets of government and civil society.

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-to-cut-mass-arrests-after-gang-demands>

<sup>59</sup> OAS 2012 report Table #1

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-to-cut-mass-arrests-after-gang-demands>

**Table #1: OAS report: Official Capacity of Prisons and Prison Occupancy**

	Latest available year	Total Official Capacity of Prisons	Prison Population	Prison Occupancy (%)
Antigua and Barbuda	2007	150	229	153%
Argentina	2010	58,211	59,227	102%
Bahamas	2010	1,510	2,374	157%
Barbados	2010	1,250	910	73%
Belize	2012	2,000	1,342	67%
Bolivia	2010	3,738	8,700	233%
Brazil	2010	304,000	495,251	163%
Canada	2008	38,812	38,541	99%
Chile	2010	35,212	53,673	152%
Colombia	2010	67,965	84,444	124%
Costa Rica	2010	8,523	13,625	160%
Dominica	2012	300	242	81%
Dominican Republic	2010	11,455	20,969	183%
Ecuador	2010	9,403	11,800	125%
El Salvador	2010	8,110	24,283	299%
Grenada	2009	200	386	193%
Guatemala	2010	6,610	10,512	159%
Guyana	2010	1,580	2,122	134%
Haiti	2009	2,448	5,331	218%
Honduras	2011	8,625	12,336	143%
Jamaica	2009	4,247	5,163	122%
Mexico	2010	181,876	222,794	122%
Nicaragua	2010	4,399	6,789	154%
Panama	2010	7,145	12,151	170%
Paraguay	2010	4,951	6,263	126%
Peru	2010	24,894	45,012	181%
Saint Kitts and Nevis	2011	164	344	210%
Saint Lucia	2011	450	568	126%
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	2010	200	413	207%
Suriname	2002	1,233	1,600	130%
Trinidad and Tobago	2010	4,386	3,672	84%
United States	2010	2,148,500	2,265,800	106%
Uruguay	2010	6,413	8,785	137%
Venezuela	2010	20,395	37,660	185%
<b>AMERICAS (34 countries)(**1)(**2)</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2,979,595</b>	<b>3,465,311</b>	<b>116%</b>

The most important demand, in my opinion, is the creation of opportunities for employment or economic reinsertion as it is being called, along with better education for future generations so that they avoid the same path. This should be a main objective of the mediators and everybody involved because it is a direct response to the problem and cause of extortion. In November of 2012, the truce mediators Colindres and Mijango proposed the creation of ‘peace zones’ and presented a document listing terms (see

Figure #2) that would reduce crime like extortion, robbery and kidnappings.<sup>61</sup> The original Spanish is “*Municipios Santuarios*” literally meaning “Sanctuary Municipality” stipulating the free movement of citizens, even gang members in formerly rival territory, and safety ensured by the willful surrender of firearms.

**Figure #2: Proposition for Peace Zones in El Salvador by the mediators Fabio Colindres and Raul Mijango.**

**PRONUNCIAMIENTO A LA NACIÓN:**

Los Facilitadores de la Tregua entre Pandillas y del proceso de pacificación de la sociedad salvadoreña: Monseñor Fabio Colindres y el Ciudadano Raúl Mijango, al pueblo salvadoreño y demás pueblos del mundo exponemos y proponemos:

1. Que, estamos convencidos que los resultados del proceso inédito e histórico iniciado el nueve de marzo recién pasado, ha provocado una sensible disminución en la tasa de homicidios y una baja menos sensible en el cometimiento de otros hechos delictivos, situación que ha configurado un escenario de esperanza para la sufrida sociedad salvadoreña, pues por fin, se ha encontrado una forma eficaz para reducir la violencia, convertida desde hace muchos años en el principal problema del país.
2. Conscientes, que si bien los resultados alcanzados en los ocho meses y medio que lleva este proceso son altamente positivos, éstos aun resultan insuficientes para una sociedad que sigue sumida en la angustia y desesperación por el precio en vidas que se sigue pagando, además del constante acoso de grupos o personas que extorsionan a diario y del clima de inseguridad que aun se respira tanto en hogares como en las vías públicas.
3. Con el objetivo de atender el clamor ciudadano y de buscar soluciones concretas a los problemas que nos agobian, los Facilitadores hemos diseñado un mecanismo de territorialización, con el propósito de lograr su consolidación. El mecanismo propuesto, consiste en ir declarando sucesiva y progresivamente a los municipios del país como **Zonas Especiales de Paz**, mediante la aplicación salvadoreña del concepto de **MUNICIPIOS SANTUARIOS**. Este concepto ya tuvo una aplicación exitosa en varias ciudades de los Estados Unidos de América en lo relacionado al tema de Inmigrantes; en el caso salvadoreño, pretendemos aplicarlo como antídoto contra la violencia.
4. Los Facilitadores, somos partidarios del principio que: El éxito que todos esperamos del proceso, sólo surgirá del involucramiento de todos los actores sociales sumándose como parte de la solución: razón por la cual, hacemos un vehemente llamado a apoyar la aplicación y concreción de este concepto, y muy en particular, hacemos el llamado a asumir como propia esta propuesta a la Comisión Técnica de Seguimiento del proceso, al Gobierno de la República, Asamblea Legislativa, Ministerio Público, a la Cartera Encargada de Justicia y Seguridad Pública, Partidos Políticos, Gobiernos Locales, Empresarios, Iglesias y Líderes Religiosos, Líderes Sociales, integrantes de las diferentes pandillas, ONG'S, Cooperación Externa y demás personas e instituciones interesadas en contribuir a la solución del más grave problema que agobia al país.
5. Los componentes que incluyen la aplicación salvadoreña del concepto: **MUNICIPIO SANTUARIO** que proponemos es la siguiente:
 

**A. Zona Especial de Paz, que integra:**

  1. Acuerdo local de no agresión entre miembros de pandillas residentes en el municipio.
  2. Compromiso pandillero de reducción y erradicación de prácticas delictivas como: homicidios, extorsiones, hurtos, robos y secuestros
  3. Municipio donde transitan libremente todos los ciudadanos, incluyendo miembros de pandillas.
  4. Municipio donde las pandillas entregan voluntariamente las armas que poseen.
  5. Municipio donde los miembros que representan a las pandillas se integran a los colectivos comunitarios que trabajan en pro del desarrollo local.
  6. Municipio donde la delegación de PNC esta integrada en su mayor parte por miembros de la Policía Comunitaria.
  7. Municipio donde se persigue el delito y no a las personas y que por lo tanto no se realizan operativos masivos ni con modalidad nocturna.
  8. Municipio donde las autoridades municipales desarrollan obras de desarrollo local en las zonas donde radican miembros de pandillas.
  9. Municipio donde las autoridades locales, empresa privada y cooperación externa impulsan iniciativas emprendedoras para habilitar oportunidades de inserción laboral a jóvenes del lugar, incluyendo miembros de pandillas que han dejado las prácticas delictivas.
  10. Municipio donde el Ministerio de Salud prioriza la implementación de campañas de salud mental.
  11. Municipio donde el Ministerio de Educación impulsa programas de nivelación cultural en primaria y bachillerato de forma acelerada.
  12. Municipio donde se instala un observatorio criminológico integrado por ciudadanos residentes en el lugar.

**B. Municipio donde se suscribe un pacto por la vida y la paz, en el que participan Autoridades Locales, Líderes Sociales, Empresarios, Iglesias, PNC y Miembros de Pandillas.**
6. Finalmente, los Facilitadores con mucha fe y esperanza quedamos a la espera y ansiosos de las respuestas positivas y públicas al llamado que en esta ocasión hacemos a la nación.

San Salvador, El Salvador 22 de noviembre 2012

**Source:** <http://www.lapagina.com.sv/nacionales/74210/2012/11/23/Municipios-santuarios-definiran-segunda-fase-de-tregua-entre-pandillas> **January 27th, 2013**

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/next-phase-salvador-gang-truce-peace-zones> accessed January 27th

Local treaties would have to be formulated in each participating municipality between police, elected officials, business leaders and gang representatives. In return for giving up their arms and ceasing the previously mentioned crimes, the proposal says that police reform will include the integration of local community members into the police force (implications for corruption), as well as a formation of a neighborhood watch, cease nocturnal police raids and only investigation and prosecution based on crimes and evidence, not associations or stereotypes. The treaty also stipulates that the national Ministries of Education and Health conduct campaigns promoting completion of primary and secondary education and good mental health. Each individual municipal treaty should also incorporate a plan with local business, manufacture and agriculture leaders to reinsert gang members that have given up violent and criminal activities into some form of meaningful work. The first municipality to implement the measures and to be proclaimed a ‘peace zone,’ was Illopango on January 22, 2013, followed shortly by Santa Tecla (suburb of San Salvador) on January 27<sup>th</sup> and Quetzaltepeque on January 31<sup>st</sup>. There are 18 municipalities projected by the Salvadoran government that will become peace zones in what is being labeled as the ‘second wave’ of the gang truce.<sup>62</sup>

#### Salvadoran Business Models that Incorporate Gang Members

One model that has been formally employing a small number of ex-gang members since 2009, and could be incorporated into the scheme of the truce and municipal peace zones, is an athletic clothing manufacturer called League Central America. Ex-gang

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-peace-zone-launched-in-second-phase-of-gang-truce> February 1st, 2013. Right now it is uncertain what financial funding and support the national government is contributing to peace zone municipalities.

members from both major gangs make up 15% of the 200 employees that work at League. According to the general manager, Rodrigo Bolaños, he would like to raise that percentage to ¼ of his employees. I make note to write *ex-gang member*, because as Bolaños strongly notes in the interview, there is no room for “*pandilleros activos ni calmados*” (active or retired gang members) and he certainly does not offer a job to any gang member that simply presents himself at the warehouse. His model works on this scale because he adheres to his own strict set of hiring rules when it comes to gangs. He says “I do not work with gangs, I think they are very dangerous. Who I work with is the man or woman who leaves with the help of a church and doesn’t want to go back.”<sup>63</sup> Two of the first requirements are a reference from a pastor vouching for the spiritual conversion of the individual and no visible tattoos. This stipulation already eliminates a large number of the estimated 62,000 gang members in El Salvador who have many tattoos and limited or no access to tattoo removal procedures. Then the prospect must pass a series of teamwork tests and activities with former gang members of rival gangs. After this the individual can then be hired on under probation until he or she proves themselves as a capable worker.

Another business (see Table #2 for other national and multinational businesses and in what ways they are involved) taking measures to incorporate and reinsert former gang members into its work force is the Spanish tuna company Grupo that opened a plant in the Salvadoran port city of La Union in 2003. Unique to the situation in La Union in

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<sup>63</sup> “Yo no trabajo con pandillas; es más, la pandilla yo la siento bien peligrosa. Lo que yo trabajo es con el muchacho o la muchacha que se sale, que pasa a través de una iglesia, y ya no quiere regresar”, Personal Translation <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201206/cronicas/8614/>



2002 was that when plans for the plant were being drawn up, the CEO of the company (Manuel Calvo) was approached by 46 gang members that had already voluntarily left their gangs but could not find work or housing because of their record and reputations. Realizing an atmosphere of security was important for the success of the plant, Calvo made a point to hire the former gang members. Today about 90 of the 2000 workers at the Salvadoran plant are reformed gang members and similar to League Central America they expect that gang members leave their gangs voluntarily and have been socially readapted to society with the recommendation of a church pastor. Former gang members have done very well at Grupo Calvo because they respect authority and the structure of the company and are willing to take undesirable jobs such as working in the fish meal factory. They also work very hard and efficiently though, and many have been promoted to sailors in the fishing fleet. Grupo Calvo also supplies its workers with good incentives, like free meals, good wages, literacy programs to aid internal promotion, and a medical clinic.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Security in Central America's Northern Triangle: Violence Reduction and the Role of the Private Sector in El Salvador. Americas Society Policy Brief. p 6-7 2012

**Table #2: Select Private-Sector Violence Prevention Efforts**

Organization	Education (Primary, Technical, Vocational)	Micro-Enterprise and Economic Empowerment	Recreation and Rehabilitation	Basic Health	Public Spaces	Crime Prevention	Prevention	Observation	Other
The AES Corporation	●								
AmCham El Salvador								●	
FERN DE	●	●		●	●	●	●		
FUSADES							●		
FUNDESA		●		●	●		●	●	●
Glaeswing International	●			●			●		
Grupo Agrícola	●	●					●		
Grupo Cacao	●			●			●		
Grupo Hibiscus			●				●		
HSBC	●	●	●			●	●		
Instituto Estudio Jurídico							●		
League Collegiate Women	●		●				●		
Manpower Group									●
Microsoft	●								
Rio Grande Foods	●		●				●		
SABMiller		●					●		
The Bank of Nova Scotia	●	●	●	●		●	●		
Tecolotón Investments								●	

**Source: Security in Central America’s Northern Triangle: Violence Reduction and the Role of the Private Sector in El Salvador. Americas Society Policy Brief. 2012**

Latin American food distributor Rio Grande Foods has had a plant in El Salvador since 1992, and began a reinsertion and rehabilitation program in 2010. While the company only employs about 15 former gang members, they focus heavily on job training and rehabilitation. They work with both League Central America to place

workers there and with the Ministry of Public Health who supplies psychologists to help with workshops and rehabilitation. Former gang members are sorted into different vocational tracts based on their interests after leaving their gangs and psychological testing. While these programs cost Rio Grande Foods about \$160,000 they also receive some kind of funding from various municipal governments, Salvadoran national ministries, the Antidrug Foundation of El Salvador (FUNDASALVA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development.<sup>65</sup> The company's founder Josue Alvarado envisions the model also being brought to Honduras and Guatemala in the next five years.

Bolaños makes it clear that he realizes the social phenomenon of the gangs is something that El Salvador helped create, and he is willing to do his part if his stipulations are met. The truce can be an opportunity for business expansion and investment if the security atmosphere is improved by falling homicide rates, as well as a decrease in extortion. Mentioned above are the examples of only three businesses that are willing to overlook past criminal records and associations for gang members who also willingly and genuinely reject their gang associations.

The representatives and leaders of the gangs that signed off on that truce envision a different reinsertion. Víctor García Cerón, also known as “Duke” by his homies, a leading member of *Barrio 18* is quoted in the same article as “asking for conditions to reinsert ourselves” like League, but goes on to say “We want that to be pandilleros is no

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<sup>65</sup> Security in Central America's Northern Triangle: Violence Reduction and the Role of the Private Sector in El Salvador. Americas Society Policy Brief. p 9 2012

longer synonymous with delinquency, violence, crime but that we are a minority with our own culture, clothing, way of talking...but that all of this not be associated with being criminals.”(Personal Translation)<sup>66</sup>

It makes sense that those leaders/representatives of the gangs would not want to give up these “soft embodiments” of gang culture since they have typically invested their whole lives in their gang and feel the responsibility and legacy of the gang on their shoulders. They also exercise a tremendous amount of power in the current gang structure, which could easily be changed if gang member’s new bosses in formal employment supply them with safer ways of earning money and shift the leader’s previous economic control. According to Edward Flores on recovering gang members in Los Angeles, “soft embodiments” are relatively easy to reshape, while “hard embodiments” meaning mannerisms and cravings for drugs and violence are very hard to reform.<sup>67</sup> If the gang members are not willing to give up these soft embodiments of their gang culture, will they be able to give up the hard embodiments?

The gang representatives, who have come under so much scrutiny since the truce was enacted, are the gang representatives or leaders of their respective cliques for two main reasons. One, they have survived while many of the other gang members in their generation (jumped in during the same time) have been killed and hence have seniority. Another reason might be that they have killed more members of the rival gang and

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<sup>66</sup> “A largo plazo buscamos que ser pandillero no sea sinónimo de delincuencia, de violencia, de criminal, sino que se convierta en una minoría, con su cultura, su vestimenta, sus tatuajes, su hablado... pero que todo esto no esté vinculado al crimen.” <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201206/cronicas/8614/>

<sup>67</sup> Flores p8

expanded their clique's criminal activities and territory. That being considered, many of these leaders will not be getting out of jail soon even if the war on gangs were called off and gang members everywhere were no long stigmatized, because they are serving sentences for planning or carrying out some of the most horrific murders and mutilations of civilians in Salvadoran history. Indeed, amnesty will probably never be a concession for these men no matter how many truces they sign or boycotts they threaten. While it is easy to simply rely on representatives, economic reinsertion, cannot be so broadly implemented. Like with League Central America, the negotiation has to be on a personal level and for that to happen the harmful vestiges and embodiment of gang lifestyle and culture such as violence must be left behind and the solidarity found within the gang must be replaced just as it replaced that of the family.

The Salvadoran government calls the gang truce a first step to economic reinsertion, the creation of peace zones the second, and the Organization of American States holds it up as a model to be followed in other Central American countries, like Guatemala and Honduras. While moving away from a strictly enforcement-based response to gangs and increasing coordination among government departments are beneficial for society and establishing a dialogue and truce with gang members may shed light on the sources of the problems, it also has social implications like legitimizing gangs themselves. To move forward, toward a decrease in extortion, murders, drug trafficking, kidnapping and organized crime, viable economic options have to be available to youth and those trying to leave the gangs. Trust and the hope of the nation should not be placed in a few men, whether they are current gang member

representatives, or the mediators or the Security Minister, but rather in the strengthening of judicial institutions and economic opportunities. It may be shown that the ‘peace zones’ function as intended and transform the municipalities one at a time, but with the amount of corruption in all levels of government the money from the Defense Ministry could end up being mismanaged. The ‘second wave’ of the truce is essentially an attempt to reproduce the initial gang truce on a local level, which is a good next step if extortion can be replaced by training and jobs. Businesses like League, Rio Grande Foods and Grupo Calvo need to be invited to the table, along with the NGOs that may have fewer resources than the government, but have been working in the field for years and have the experience. It is unfortunate that many of the NGOs, like the gangs, are wary of government because of the strained relationships and even persecution they sustained during the repressive years of *Mano Dura*.

### Chapter 3: Homeboy Industries

#### Homeboy Industries' Formation:

So what could a comprehensive next step toward reinsertion into economic activity as well as social reintegration look like? If we look at what is being done at businesses like League Central America we can clearly see that there are some economic options and opportunities although they are somewhat limited in a country where 50% of the population does not have formal or steady employment.<sup>68</sup> League Central America is taking a large first step toward a model of reinsertion; the missing link however, is in between decreasing the violence and entering the working world. This next step, which varies among individuals and may be the toughest to achieve, is leaving the gang altogether and acquiring some sort of skill, training or education that would make employment possible. There is, in Los Angeles' Boyle Heights neighborhood (see Figure #3), a program and nonprofit that has had modest success over the past 20 years in doing just that.<sup>69</sup> This program, Homeboy Industries, which works with many gang members and troubled youth alike, I believe can offer many helpful insights into specifically Latino gang reformation as well as economic reinsertion.

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<sup>68</sup> Cruz

<sup>69</sup> Boyle Heights was historically a notoriously violent neighborhood with one of the nation's highest homicide rates per square area.

**Figure #3: Map of Los Angeles**



Source: [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/04/us/04boyle.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/04/us/04boyle.html?_r=0)

Homeboy Industries, and its contributions, cannot be discussed without first mentioning its founder, Jesuit priest Greg Boyle. As a young priest, Boyle was made pastor of a poor parish in East Los Angeles, Dolores Mission. Boyle claims that when he started as the pastor in 1986 there were eight active gangs in the immediate neighborhood (seven Latino and one black).<sup>70</sup> As a pastor of a church, a sphere of society that might seem insulated from gang presence even in Los Angeles, Boyle found that as gang violence increased in the neighborhood he was saying more funerals for young people than he was for the elderly. While Homeboy Industries, as it has been known for most of its existence, is a non-denominational organization, it very much grew and was sustained by the Catholic parish and its resources at the disposal of Boyle. In 1988, violence and

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<sup>70</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart* p 2



gang activity began to rise as a result of the high number of children loitering in the housing projects, a byproduct of the incapacities and shortcomings of the public school system to keep students engaged and in school. In response, Dolores Mission extended its existing elementary school into a middle school to bring in teens from rival neighborhoods.<sup>71</sup> Fights were frequent, but the courage to bring enemies together to break down barriers laid the foundational model and key features that Homeboy Industries would use as well.

Perhaps the most fruitful insight that Boyle offers us from the eventual founding of Homeboy Industries can be found in the introduction of his book *Tattoos on the Heart*. Gang truces, on a smaller local level than the one in El Salvador and cease fires were part of Boyle's initial attempt at peace;

*"I learned early on that all sides would speak so positively about the peace process when first approached... but once you brought them together, they couldn't resist posturing in high gear in front of one another... Though I don't regret having orchestrated these truces and treaties, I'd never do it again. The unintended consequence of it all was that it legitimized the gangs and fed them oxygen. I eventually came to see that this kind of work keeps gangs alive."*<sup>72</sup>

This insight and experience offers a direct critique to the government-fostered truce in El Salvador because it recognizes the gangs and fulfills the need for respect and recognition from some entity in society. Typically this need is manifested through 'posturing' and fights between gangs over territory, as well as tagging buildings with graffiti. Boyle recognizes this as a very basic and general need of the individuals that make up gangs. His philosophy is to supply this need of recognition and affirmation to the individual as

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<sup>71</sup> Boyle, p2

<sup>72</sup> Boyle p5

an alternative to the respect one can acquire within a gang substructure. A paying job gives the individual respect and self-worth in a different sphere on society, one that may not include his homies, but does include his family and the community created by Homeboy Industries.

The people of Dolores Mission and Boyle began to stand *with* gang members and view them as members of the community, and listen to them. Women of the parish first formed the *Comité Pro Paz* (Committee for Peace) which did *caminatas* (marches) through the neighborhood, their singing sometimes quelling the violence.<sup>73</sup> Realizing that what many youth really needed were jobs, this committee contacted the foremen of the various factories that surrounded the Pico-Aliso neighborhood. Initially no factories returned the calls, so employment had to be artificially created in some way. The parish group, *Jobs for a Future*, was then formed which employed gang members in such jobs as maintenance, cleanup crews, landscaping, graffiti cleanup and minor construction projects. Through parish connections some gang members were also placed in local businesses with internship or volunteer status and then received pay checks through *Jobs for a Future*. While not financially sustainable or able to grow much since the money came from the parish, it did lay the model and ground work for Homeboy Industries. This intermediary between the gang member and employer makes hiring, expectations and letting employees go somewhat easier on all parties involved. This speaks directly to the need for an advocate that businesses like League Central America require. Businesses are more likely to take a chance on an individual who has been incarcerated and has a

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<sup>73</sup> Boyle p4

criminal record if someone vouches for them. Over the past years Homeboy Industries has made a good reputation for itself and many businesses now contact Homeboy when hiring. The job market does not always meet the demands of the number of jobless homies and some simply don't have any skills, so sometimes jobs must simply be created to suit the needs of the individual.

This barely functioning model through Dolores Mission and *Jobs for a Future* was given life when Hollywood agent Ray Stark donated the start up money necessary to stop sole dependence on the parish for funding and eventually become a sustainable, stand alone enterprise. An old bakery and tortilla machine were purchased with the donation, and Homeboy Bakery was born in 1992, the first business associated with Homeboy Industries.<sup>74</sup> Since then, various other in-house businesses have developed under the umbrella of Homeboy. According to a recent list from the Homeboy Industries website these businesses include Homeboy:

- Farmers Market
- Diner
- Bakery
- Merchandise
- Grocery
- Silkscreen and Embroidery<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Boyle p7

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/what-we-do/>

While the majority of full-fledged gang members are male, women also find themselves immersed in gangs through their significant others and siblings. While women are permitted in other programs now, it was easier initially for training and behavioral reasons to keep the sexes separate, and so Homegirl Café and Catering was also one of the earlier programs. These businesses are important because they provide easy placement for gang members seeking employment and needing skills or job training and because they bring enemies together. Boyle's point is that "it always becomes impossible to demonize someone you know."<sup>76</sup> These businesses within the organization also serve as small sources of income to support any expansion efforts of the organization and the free services offered by Homeboy. Under *Mano Extendida* (2004) in El Salvador a similar initiative with financial sustainability in mind was tried out, and its relative successes and failures should be taken into account when considering what business ventures might succeed there. In El Salvador whole prisons are segregated by gang affiliation because of the intense violence and hatred between the two main gangs. In some ways this serves to further legitimize the gangs and the hatred for each other even more. Homeboy Industries shows that former enemies can learn to see the humanity in each other, and League Central America shows that this is a practice that can work in the Salvadoran context. That is if those tenants of the gang code can be shed by the individual.

Homeboy Industries' business model was pretty unsustainable upon founding in 1992 and depended mostly on the Dolores Mission parish. Their first bakery location

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<sup>76</sup> Boyle p142

burned down in a fire, and the organization has been through various financial difficulties as well, before establishing connections and a broad donation base. This allowed Homeboy to become an independent nonprofit in 2001 and open a new \$8.5 million headquarters located in downtown Los Angeles in 2007. Since 2009, Homeboy Industries has been the largest gang intervention program in the United States, with an annual operating budget of \$9.8 million in 2010.<sup>77</sup> That same year about 500 ex-gang members were employed in one of the Homeboy sub-businesses and 12,000 people received some sort of assistance. In 2008 Homeboy Industries received a contract with the City of Los Angeles as a part of gang prevention and intervention strategies proposed by the mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa.<sup>78</sup>

### Social Programs of Homeboy Industries

Providing jobs and opportunities for outside employment are the cornerstone of Homeboys Industries as is demonstrated by some of their slogans like “Nothing stops a bullet like a job” and “Jobs not Jails.”<sup>79</sup> Truthfully enough, many of those that come to Homeboy are not ready for employment or come for one of the many services, classes and programs that are offered. One of the most important programs is tattoo removal. Both in El Salvador and LA, having tattoos on the face, hands or neck which are difficult to cover up instantly identifies the individual as someone with a gang past, and is stigmatized accordingly by the public. This usually precludes even reformed gang members from most jobs. With the help of 30 volunteer doctors and 3 laser machines,

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<sup>77</sup> Business profits totaled \$2.5 million, the rest is attributed to donations.

<sup>78</sup> Flores p5

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/shop-homeboy/> retrieved 10/31/12

Homeboy carries out an average of 745 treatments a month.<sup>80</sup> While serving the general purpose of making someone more suitable for a job, the removal of a tattoo also represents a big step in the separation of individual from the gang in that person's psyche. Boyle does Catholic services at a number of different detention facilities on a rotating basis, and afterwards he will hand out his card saying "Call me when you get out. I'll hook you up with a job and- take your tattoos off- line ya up with a counselor."<sup>81</sup> He knows there is a critical period right after homies get out of jail and before they get involved with their gangs again that most gang members search for an opportunity to escape the cycle of violence and incarceration with motivation to change.

One former gang member I had the privilege of interviewing personally after contacting Father Boyle was a young man named Danny who related to me how he first entered jail when he was fifteen years old and had been in and out since then. When his daughter was born, though, he decided to change the direction of his life. Hearing about the free tattoo removal services, he went to Homeboy Industries and found out about all the other programs, services and opportunities that Homeboy Industries could offer him. These various programs, classes and services offered by Homeboy are part of the holistic approach that the organization takes to bridge the gap between incarceration and sustained insertion into society, both economically and socially. When someone arrives at Homeboy they are first given a case manager to help direct them to the services offered within Homeboy Industries and act as an intermediary that fosters accountability between

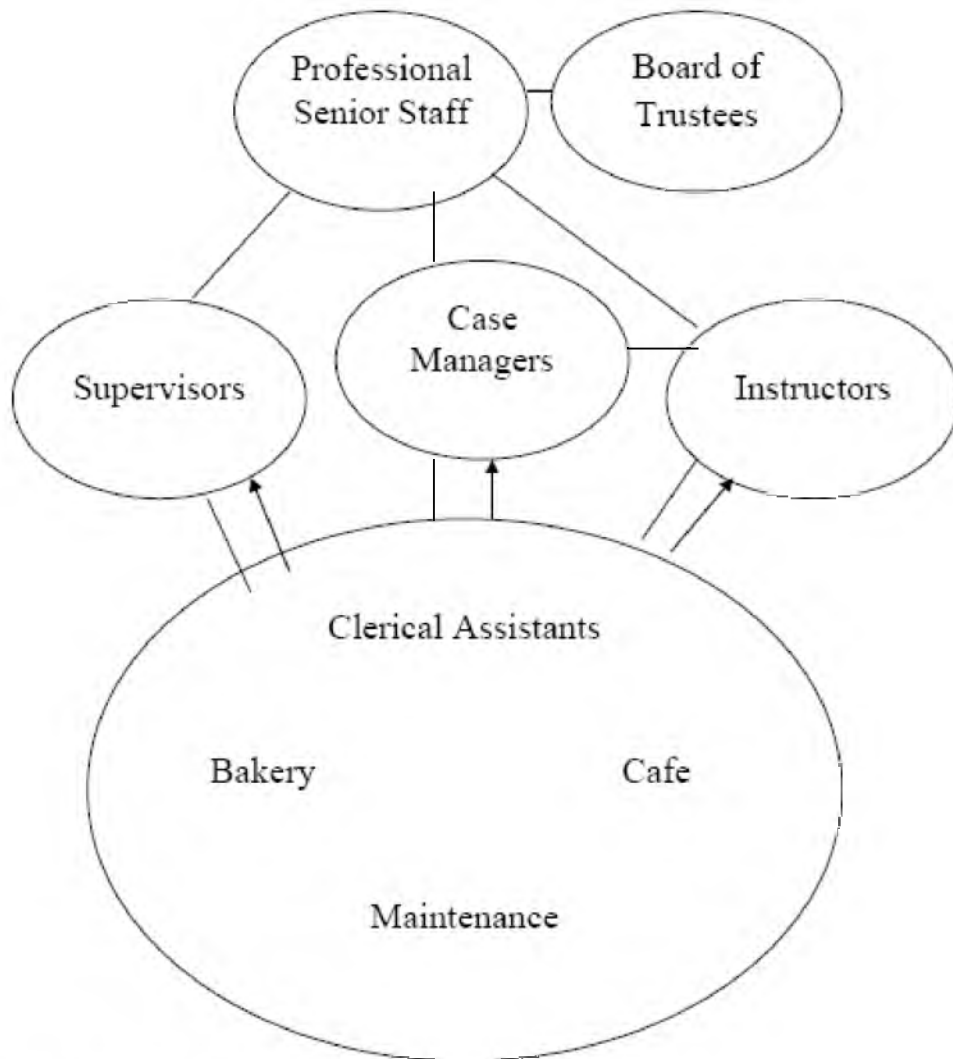
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<sup>80</sup><http://www.homebovindustries.org/what-we-do/tattoo-removal> retrieved 10/31/12

<sup>81</sup> Boyle p187

employers and workers. (See Figure #4 for organizational flowchart of Homeboy Industries)

**Figure #4: Organizational Flowchart of Homeboy Industries**



**Sources: Flores**

Many of the people coming to Homeboy Industries have spent a good amount of their adult and adolescent life in prison, and as such many have never completed their

high school education. More so in LA than in El Salvador (where literacy is lower and higher education rare) just having a high school diploma or GED opens up opportunities. As a first step Homeboy Industries provides classes focused on obtaining GED certification. Individuals can take classes while they also work in one of the Homeboy businesses and for those under age 19 Homeboy Industries partners with a charter high school to help obtain a high school diploma. More than 50 classes are offered every week not only with these objectives but also on parenting, anger management, financial planning and healthy relationships.<sup>82</sup> Some cases are more serious, and so case managers can recommend psychiatric analyses, substance abuse counseling, as well as court ordered domestic violence classes. Since demand for these services is high among trainees, extra volunteer psychotherapists are enlisted through a program called Homeboy Heals.<sup>83</sup> Another very important service is the legal referral office. Lawyers provide free consultations on criminal, family, immigration and employment law. While these services help remove barriers to employment, they also helped Danny go to court and regain partial custody of his young baby daughter.

If tattoo removal is the entrance gateway into Homeboy Industries, employment services starts the exit process. Employment counselors work closely with trainees to try and prepare them for professional life in their field and match existing jobs with the interests of the individual. Counselors also try to get businesses and companies to hire from Homeboy while looking for new and unexplored job markets. One of the most

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<sup>82</sup> <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/what-we-do/curriculum-education> retrieved 11/01/2012

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/what-we-do/mental-health> retrieved 11/01/2012



successful forays is into the expanding solar energy industry. With the new trend of ‘going green’ many businesses and wealthy individuals are having solar panels installed to augment their energy intake and consumption from traditional methods like coal burning power plants. Since the technology and demand is relatively new, this is one industry that actually is in high demand of trained individuals. Homeboy Industries provides tutoring to help trainees pass the certification test, and will help pay the tuition of those that wish to enroll in a photovoltaic training program at the East Los Angeles Skills Center.<sup>84</sup> Now while it would make no sense as of yet to start a similar program for the gang members of El Salvador, the idea that job markets should be statistically researched and targeted for reinsertion does make sense like with the labor demands Grupo Calvo’s fish packing plant met.

In the case of solar panel installation and maintenance the societal benefits are twofold. Steady and skill intensive employment is provided for those that have worked to turn their life around and it has a positive effect on the environment through the use of a renewable resource over fossil fuel based energy. There is a growing debate as to whether solar and wind powered energy is actually feasible and a good investment for the state of the current technology. For example, putting up solar panels does not mean that the apparatus it is supposed to power will run free of other power sources. Photovoltaic cells only produce maximum power when sunlight is directly on them, and they have poor mechanisms or costly batteries to store energy in an effective long term way. The

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<sup>84</sup> <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/what-we-do/solar-panel-installation-training-certification-program>  
retrieved 11/01/2012

purchasing and installation costs take many years to obtain the financial returns from not using energy from the grid. One of the only cost benefits that currently exists is for remote apparatus such as sensors or radio antennae where installing power lines or expensive batteries would also be costly. So if there really isn't dramatic financial incentive then some of the main reasons that businesses or individuals invest in solar panels is because they actually believe in a society where a clean environment is a core value or they want to put out this image of being environmentally conscious. A similar approach to gang member employment should be taken.

#### Kinship: The Philosophy of Homeboy Industries

As sure as the solar industry (or combined green energy industries for that matter) is not taking down the oil or coal industry in the United States, Boyle knew that he wasn't significantly effecting the overall gang situation or drug trade of Los Angeles. This is continually evidenced by the steady stream of funerals that Boyle continues to perform for individuals whom he tried to help. Despite Homeboy Industries' position as a national model for gang intervention, "in this type of work you can't be in it for the results," says Boyle. "I'm not opposed to success; I just think we should accept it only if it is a by-product of fidelity. If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with those who give us good ones."<sup>85</sup> This means that unlike League Central America, any individual that comes to Homeboy Industries seeking a specific service or employment, no matter how much involvement they still maintain with their gang, will be given an opportunity. "There is no question that everybody working at Homeboy would have been

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<sup>85</sup> Boyle p178

fired anyplace else”<sup>86</sup> and the idea and general policy is that the employee must give up and quit, or stop showing up for work, before they are fired. On the occasion where discipline or another problem forced Boyle to let someone go, he would bring them into his office and tell them why they were being let go and he says they would nearly always agree with his reasoning.<sup>87</sup>

Even for a non-profit organization, these could be considered somewhat risky business practices for an organization hoping to achieve financial sustainability. Luckily Homeboy Industries has a strong donation base to draw from, something that similar programs in El Salvador may not yet have. Boyle’s philosophy of kinship permeates the majority of the model, although I doubt the administrative branch of such a large nonprofit operates accordingly. Kinship involves a reinterpretation of the ministry of Jesus as Boyle puts it “Jesus didn’t make the right stand, but rather stood with the right people.” Jesus simply stood with and associated with those that were on the margins such as the crippled, prostitutes, tax collectors, and I’m sure in Boyle’s mind, gang members. While Homeboy Industries is not officially affiliated with a religion, it is definitely informed philosophically by Catholic and Jesuit spirituality. Boyle significantly revises the Jesuit slogan “men and women for others” by claiming that we should “discover that we are called really to be one *with* others.”<sup>88</sup>

*“Most of the time we think that everything is categorized by service, and it is a good start, but service is a hallway that leads to the grand ballroom and that grand ballroom is kinship. Thus, there is no us and them because we all form part of this community of*

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<sup>86</sup> Boyle p178

<sup>87</sup> Boyle p180

<sup>88</sup> Boyle, *The Challenge of Serving a Diverse Church: Being Christ to Others* (382)

*kinship so that makes it about us...It's about standing in the lowly place in order to return people to themselves, feeling a sense of kinship and moving out of the place of service, obliterating the sense that there is even separation that divides us, and removing the obstacles that exclude, and widening this circle so that nobody is outside.”<sup>89</sup>*

Hope for a gang member is best characterized not as a sustained driving hope for an improved life such as is associated with the so-called American Dream, but as a response to a profound sense of despair that dominates their lives. Boyle defines this condition of gang members as living in a world with a “lethal absence of hope.”<sup>90</sup>

Choosing to live this dangerous life full of risk factors is in direct response to the lack of hope, a lack of options and the perception of a future that plagues youth in LA, El Salvador, and around the world. Boyle puts an even bleaker face on this absence of hope, “Gangbanging is how they commit suicide. And any shooter is never going on a mission intending to kill—but rather, hoping to die.”<sup>91</sup> While I wonder if this is always a conscious act, the lifestyle of a gang member anywhere does require a certain disregard for one’s safety and well being.

Homeboy Industries intends to create an environment where some hope can be fostered and a future imagined. For an organization that has so many developed programs, sub-businesses and has branched out to respond to many of the various needs surrounding gang exit, recovery and eventual reinsertion Boyle makes a bold statement and powerful claim for the power of ideology.

*“ We have never toppled sinful social structures with a strategy. We have only ever done it with solidarity. We did not think our way out of slavery. We did not get it abolished*

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<sup>89</sup> Boyle, *The Challenge of Serving a Diverse Church: Being Christ to Others* (382&388)

<sup>90</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart* p89

<sup>91</sup> Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart* p126

*because we had a think tank. It was because the people chose to stand in a lowly place with the slave so that slavery could not stand; it is because we chose to stand there. That is how it works. I am confident that that is how it will work.*"<sup>92</sup>

The claims in this quote are debatable from a historical point of view in terms of slavery, as well as its use in relation to the Salvadoran gang truce. How and in what ways can governments, if they are the main players in this truce and curbing gang violence, as well as businesses and churches stand with gang members? Bolaños as a businessman has learned to stand with ex gang members because he realizes that as Salvadoran, he is part of the problem, and part of the solution as well. He does not see criminal or delinquent but an employee whose past he can overcome through the lens of kinship.

Boyle developed his practice of kinship through his years of being a pastor at Dolores Mission. Dolores Mission is a mainly immigrant parish and has a large number of Spanish speaking attendees, but still, Boyle's first language is English and the term kinship does not easily translate into Spanish past its literal relational meaning (*parentesco*). To better apply Boyle's concept in a Salvadoran context, kinship may be thought of better as *solidaridad* (solidarity) or *compromiso*. Solidarity in the Spanish language and the Salvadoran context invokes a strong sense of connection and agreement on a stance against hardship and injustice. On one hand the term solidarity fulfills Boyle's notion of kinship in that it leads us into communion and connection with others while also leading us "not to make the right stand, but to stand in the right place." What it lacks though is the equalization factor that kinship offers. Solidarity is the important first step because it recognizes and acts on the knowledge of the injustice being committed,

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<sup>92</sup> Boyle, *The Challenge of Serving a Diverse Church: Being Christ for Others* p386

but where it falls short in this context is that it still leaves room for hierarchy and inequality in the relationship. Much the same way as with service efforts the roles and mindsets of downtrodden and the expectation that they be grateful to the helper can be formed within relationships.

In the Salvadoran context *compromiso*, which doesn't have a good English translation, is the partner of *solidaridad* that demonstrates an understanding of trust, equality and respect between individuals. *Compromiso* is a word with various uses, and one invoked much more frequently in daily conversation than the meaning laden *solidaridad*. It is a simple way of saying excuse me or announcing one's presence as they enter a house. It is a fluid concept that can serve as a flag word dropped to let someone know they are now trusted and considered a friend after getting to know them. To have *compromiso* between two people is like an unspoken covenant of understanding that can exist between members of different social ranks but also leaves no room for power maneuvering.

### Liberation Theology in Context

The term 'liberation theology' was coined in about 1968 by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian, although he had been developing and writing on what it would later include since 1964.<sup>93</sup> Liberation theology has since then developed outside the Catholic Church as a way marginalized groups can conceptualize and talk about their relationship with God. There are specific theologies of liberation associated with African American,

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<sup>93</sup> Nicholoff, James. *Gustavo Gutierrez, Essential Writings* 'Introduction' p5

African, Asian and feminist movements. From Gutierrez to the Salvadoran Jesuits Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (actually of Spanish nationality who arrived in El Salvador as young seminarians) it was formed from the theological framework of the Catholic Church and the plight of the Latin American poor. Gutierrez champions God's, and hence the faithful and the Church's, 'preferential option for the poor.' The English translation 'option' denotes something that can be taken or left but is meant to mean a "free decision to side with the oppressed and powerless in their fight for justice and to stand against all persons and structures that oppose their liberation."<sup>94</sup> In 1968, the Latin American bishops met in Medellín, Colombia and produced a number of important documents such as "Poverty of the Church" and "Peace" that recognized the need for a response to the 'inhuman misery' and 'institutionalized violence' plaguing many Latin American countries.

Responses among the clergy in El Salvador to the products of the Medellín Council were varied as they were in many other countries. Many priests embraced the decrees of Medellín and organized in the poor communities, while others like then Rev. Oscar Romero associated the council with Marxist social ideas. Romero was then secretary of the Salvadoran Bishop's Conference and editor of the Archdiocesan newspaper *Orientación*, which openly attacked many priests for being communist. By the time the next Council of Bishops at Puebla, Mexico took place, Romero attended as Archbishop of San Salvador and with a completely different understanding and mindset

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<sup>94</sup> Nicholoff p 13

about the role of the priest in the community and the struggle of the Salvadoran poor.<sup>95</sup>

His conversion from lofty and scholarly clergyman to the voice of the Salvadoran people happened after he had become Archbishop, based on his reliable conservative credentials. As Boyle would say, he came to stand with the right people and through the powers of his post made the Salvadoran and world powers realize his stance. To the poor in El Salvador, Romero's memory and legacy still are sources of hope and inspiration.

Those priests who embraced Medellín began educating their *campesino* parishes to read the Bible, organize into agricultural collectives and form Christian Base Communities. The meetings of these base communities (*comunidades de base*) generally consisted in reading a passage from the Bible and discussing how the passage applied to their current situation in life. A great sense of solidarity existed between the members of the community groups, one that still exists between members of that generation and base communities in El Salvador today. The traditional image of God was of a being that did everything for a reason and had made them poor because it was His will. This idea that if they were faithful and accepted their lot in life they would make it to heaven was being transformed. Through their reflection on the Bible and organization they realized that God did not necessarily want them to be poor or oppressed, and in many instances the Biblical God was on their side. This was a profound and empowering shift in the conceptual worldview of the *campesino* and had implications for many that joined the guerilla forces. These base communities, which still exist today, fulfilled the essential need of solidarity among equals during the crucial years leading up to the civil

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<sup>95</sup> Lopez Vigil, Maria Oscar Romero: *Memories in Mosaic*



war. Gangs also fulfill this need for solidarity, socialization and camaraderie that becomes so pronounced through the difficult situations that many gang members come from, but even more so through the acts of violence committed together. An eerie comparison can be made to the bonds and fraternity forged between soldiers who have been through combat together.

In El Salvador, gang members are characteristically poor and in many situations oppressed, so liberation theology speaks directly to the “lethal absence of hope” that motivates so many gang members. Even though El Salvador has a Catholic culture, the experiences that gang members go through make most religious language inaccessible to them. What makes liberation theology more accessible to the situation of the gang member is that its vocabulary is focused on struggle rather than piety. League Central America, Rio Grande and nearly all the Salvadoran businesses that have employment opportunities for former gang members require a letter of recommendation from a pastor or religious spokesperson to attest to the spiritual conversion of the individual. Homeboy Industries fulfills this sponsorship role for those it tries to place with employers without a religious conversion or spirituality aspect. I agree with this approach because while discovery of religious conviction can be a strong catalyst for extracting oneself from the gang, it is not necessarily a prerequisite as Salvadoran businesses consider it to be. Even within the proceedings of the gang truce, the need for spiritual and moral approval by the Catholic Church was reproduced when Bishop Fabio Colindres, someone who had never worked with gang members before, was brought in as a mediator to effectively sanctify and validate the process.

While the religious approval may be a necessary step in the Salvadoran context now because an intermediary organization of the same caliber as Homeboy Industries, which doesn't require a religious conversion at all, the gains of the gang truce and presence of NGOs that specialize in gang recovery could lead to this requirement being fulfilled or shared by a different entity. This would benefit pastors and congregations as well because it would strengthen the conviction of those that honestly convert and accept a set of beliefs for its own sake and not as a way out of the gangs. While I mentioned above that liberation theology speaks to the situation of the *pandillero*, critics of the truce that argue that the upper echelons of gang leadership that brokered the truce are becoming political actors that use liberation theology terminology in some of their recent press releases (something they can more easily do with the concessions received for signing the truce).<sup>96</sup> An example is the response the gangs made to the United States Department of the Treasury designating the gang as a transnational criminal organization, the first street gang to be designated as such. The following excerpt is from the release made, and while the designation may have questionable merit, or have been made for political reasons, the response of the gangs demonstrates their adapting nature.

*We accept that the decision to support the truce and peace process or not is the sovereign decision of the Government of the United States, although from our point of view, it is obligated to do so, since it has co--responsibility as the gang phenomenon was imported from the United States to the region and is fed monthly by the enormous quantity of deportations. If the [United States] supports the process, that help would be welcomed and appreciated by all Salvadorans; and, if not, we ask that it at least not obstruct it,*

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<sup>96</sup> Farah, Douglas, Pamela Phillips Lum. *Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil*. International Assessment and Strategy Center. February 2013

*because we as Salvadorans have the right to make our best effort to restore peace, as self--determination of the people is also a human right.*<sup>97</sup>

The controversy within El Salvador and the Latin American academic community is whether these changes and the intentionality behind them should be trusted.

### Media and Popular Culture

A benefit of the Salvadoran gang truce has been that it has provided some gang members (mainly those that participating in the truce) with a voice which sheds at least some light on the situation. Those gang members of *MS-13* involved in negotiating the truce have made it clear, in an interview with *El Faro*, that they consider their gang (however that is defined, in terms of territorial neighborhood, their clique, or the group of people who identify with *MS-13*) their family and in no way see the truce as precluding the gang's existence.<sup>98</sup> This, and the fact that many members most frequently go by the names given to them in the gangs, shows how deep the gang runs in El Salvador and how important that need for solidarity is. The gang truce and the media attention it generated have served this purpose in some ways in El Salvador, as documentaries like *Gangland* have in the United States. One problem that I have noted with documentaries on gang members is that while many interviewers and editors may intend to give the gang members their voice, respect is so important for a gang member that once they get in front of a camera it is hard to distinguish between vast exaggeration and accurate depiction of events. The interviewer's questions must be very intentionally written and

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<sup>97</sup> Farah, Douglas, Pamela Phillips Lum. *Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil*. International Assessment and Strategy Center. February 2013 p28

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201210/entrevistas/9844/> retrieved 11/27/2012

directed with this in mind. Gang culture is so rooted in a street version of respect, where graffiti is a popular hobby, that simply getting the gang's name out there consolidates it more in the minds of the members.

Boyle recognizes the importance of names, which is why in his book he never mentions the names of specific gangs, because it can serve to boost the fame and fascination with the gang. He attempts to call new individuals who come to him by their given names, not by their gang monikers. This may be an even harder task since many gang members have spent their teenage years creating this identity around and associated with this name. The community of Homeboy Industries in many cases serves as a transition from the solidarity and community of the gang, to that of Homeboy while they are prepared or trained to eventually leave and go out into the world. While I respect Boyle's commitment to not lend any credence to the system of the gangs, I have not adapted this practice for organizational cohesion and with hopes that it would aid the reader's ability to follow and track the writing.

#### Outside Analysis of Homeboy Industries

While Boyle is a wealth of knowledge, stories and wisdom on gang recovery, and has established for his organization the detailed and experience based parameters for what does and doesn't work in Los Angeles, much of his writings and recorded speeches are generally focused on human interaction, inspirational messages and narratives. There is nothing bad about this, since it is in human interaction through solidarity and kinship that is the most important thing for Boyle. For systematic, data backed and sociological

explanations of what goes on at Homeboy we must look elsewhere. Various factors could be highlighted, and one of them has to do with gender roles in culture. Flores claims that gang masculinity comes with high costs such as incarceration, violence and drug addiction that are generally not desirable for the majority of gang members. Gang masculinity is associated with Latino machismo, characterized by the man's absence from the home. Those that can, may simply 'mature out' and trade gang masculinity for what Flores calls a 'reformed barrio masculinity' characterized by importance centered around the family and the role of being a breadwinner, as well as abstaining from violent behavior and drugs. Boyle confirms in several accounts that gang members who had rebuffed him in the past sought him out once their first child was born and worked hard to turn their life around. There are many obstacles to this process, though, including inaccessibility to the job market as well as drug addictions, violence complexes, and need for therapy.<sup>99</sup> Hence the slogan 'jobs not jails.' This makes it especially difficult for core gang members to 'mature out' without a program like Homeboy Industries and therapeutic help.

While the patriarchal bargain to reformed barrio masculinity comes with a lot of benefits, members that enjoyed a high level of respect and power within the gang have particularly hard times adjusting because whatever jobs they can obtain they certainly have very little responsibility in the beginning. Respect in the community and among the family must be built up slowly, and a humbling process must be undergone first. Flores, when comparing Homeboy Industries with other programs in the Los Angeles area notes

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<sup>99</sup> Flores p154

that it follows a model of segmented association. This means that gang members are still exposed to life on the streets until they move out of the neighborhood. While Boyle admits that there are relapses with employees, this setup puts the will to change in the individual's hands as opposed to other programs that attempt to shield them from the outside world. Once again, Boyle doesn't necessarily work with those that would yield the best results. These programs usually have a religious component, which aids to organize recovery and can also provide a sphere of respect to replace that of the gang. Catholic traditions that most Latino immigrants bring with them are usually rejected for a stronger sense of conversion and renewal found in the 'born again' type movements associated with Evangelical Christianity. In evangelical churches, preaching or sharing one's story from the podium can enhance a sense of moral pride, but also a sense of jealousy and exclusion for those that aren't as eloquent.

## Chapter 4: Crystallizing the Conversation between Homeboy and the Salvadoran Gang Situation

### Implications for Salvadoran Governance

Government policies, whether in El Salvador or the United States, are necessarily focused on the bigger picture of lowering murders, drug circulation, and crime in society that is measured by statistical evidence. Large societal problems necessitate a reaction to scale that in El Salvador has taken the form of militaristic operations. More recently, the faith and hope of the government, media, and people have been put into this gang truce which has been characterized by José Miguel Cruz as a ‘silver bullet’ strategy that aims to swiftly end the violence but as of yet does not address the root causes of the situation. Democratically elected governments (like that of the Funes administration, the first from the left leaning *FMLN* party) have a duty to their citizens to maintain justice and promote peace. Rodrigo Bolaños of League Central America has realized at least is that these gang members are Salvadoran citizens as well that deserve a way out (economic reinsertion) of the self destructive system they find themselves in, instead of consolidating that structure (a byproduct of the penal system and overcrowding). The way democratic governments and political parties operate and function in Latin America make it difficult for them to start a ‘slow work’ as Boyle characterizes his individual intensive approach, toward a comprehensive gang policy. While in El Salvador a president cannot be reelected to more than one term in a row, the policies of the ruling administration and party typically have

foresight that only reaches until the next election and ensuring the continuing control of the party.

It has been confirmed by both past government officials and gang members that negotiations with the incarcerated leaders of *MS-13* have been attempted by both the administrations of *Mano Dura* (Flores 1999-2004 and Saca 2005-2009) and even as far back as Calderón Sol's administration (1994-1999).<sup>100</sup> Various government officials, chiefs of the PNC and Security Ministers met with *MS-13* specifically and all failed because as politicians they were never able to establish trust, according to Borromeo Henriquez ("El Diablo") one of the spokesmen for *MS-13*. The current truce could have been possible because of the mediators' perceived separation from the administration even though the real bargaining power on their part is derived from Security Minister Munguía Payes and even President Funes. This also is the first truce structured so the primary agreement is between the two gangs, and not one of the gangs and the government. Perhaps the leaders of the gangs genuinely feel it is time to steer Salvadoran society out of violence, and their respective clique out from under the heat of the PNC and anti-gang unit. Regardless, if the truce is not sufficiently isolated from the current administration including the Security Minister, it could be fractured upon election of the next administration. Antonio Saca, the previous ARENA party president is rumored to run again in 2014 under a different party, and the issues that impeded negotiations during his first term could infect the truce as well if he returns to his brand of *Manodurismo*. Security Minister Munguía Payes could also run for president. It is certain that the

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<sup>100</sup> <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201210/entrevistas/9842/> retrieved November 8<sup>th</sup>.



*FMLN*, currently in power, will project the truce and its role in it in a positive light in the next election to try and maintain power. The uncertainty of electoral politics could put the truce in danger if it is not sufficiently separated from the administration. On the other hand, with their new found legitimization in society another election day boycott for concessions or an endorsement through violence could play into the hands of the gangs. With the ‘peace zones’ being set up this could be an even larger possibility since gangs will essentially play a part in governing those specific areas.

The Salvadoran media of the *Manodura* era was used to demonize gang members, yet now they have started the process to humanize those gang members who had previously killed many people and terrorized neighborhoods by portraying them as reasonable men seeking a solution to a national problem. They have been allowed to explain their motives and rational making them seem normal and relatable. Greg Boyle says ‘it always becomes impossible to demonize someone you know’ and to some extent the media has been letting the public get to know transnational gang leaders like Viejo Lin a little better.<sup>101</sup> The process has also served to solidify the gangs in the minds of their members by being recognized and listened to by some societal entity.

One interview by the local San Salvador news station 12 of a member of *MS-13* in a Salvadoran jail who was involved in the truce is well done and provides valuable insights. Dionisio Aristides Umanzor (“El Sirra”) comments that his path to his clique was not the result of domestic violence and a disintegrating family (common beliefs in Salvadoran society for why teenagers join gangs, which is why the interviewer frames

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<sup>101</sup> Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart* p142

those questions first). None of his siblings entered the gangs, and both his parents worked very hard and had high moral standards, but Umanzor ended up being pushed into a clique of his San Salvador suburb of Santa Tecla by occasionally stealing ‘a watch here a bicycle then a car.’<sup>102</sup> When he did try to get work he was recognized as a trouble maker, denied work, and pushed even farther into the criminal world. Cruz verifies in his extensive study with the IUDOP (University Institute on Public Opinion at the University of Central America in El Salvador) that the communities with most gang activity in El Salvador are not necessarily the poorest ones, but ones marked with a certain level of basic development, education and relative economic homogeneity. This was measured through surveys done by the IUDOP that questioned residents in a diverse range of communities about the presence of gangs in their communities.<sup>103</sup>

Umanzor goes on to explain his motivation a little more, and then says “We (gang members of his generation) were born a generation too late after the peace accords had already been signed... If the guerillas had still been around when I was growing up I would have joined right away.” This raises implications of the failings of the peace accords and their implementation and the still unresolved state of Salvadoran society and economy. It makes sense that solidarity and the socially-subversive aspects of the guerilla movement would appeal to the modern gang member. Many of the early gang members in Los Angeles had been involved somehow in the war, but once they incorporated into the gang, past differences in El Salvador were erased and national or ethnic categories

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<sup>102</sup>[https://legacy.regis.edu/OWA/redir.aspx?C=0d2f7b267a6e4031803f5ac310e3c17e&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.guanacos.tv%2fmara-salvatrucha-entrevista-a-el-sirra-ms13-noticiero-hechos-tv12-part-1-video\\_a39a57278.html](https://legacy.regis.edu/OWA/redir.aspx?C=0d2f7b267a6e4031803f5ac310e3c17e&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.guanacos.tv%2fmara-salvatrucha-entrevista-a-el-sirra-ms13-noticiero-hechos-tv12-part-1-video_a39a57278.html) retrieved November 26<sup>th</sup> 2012

<sup>103</sup> Cruz. *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamerica Vol II* p98

enforced. The gangs, like the guerilla movement, provide the inspiration of hope, solidarity and the feeling of being part of a larger whole. That is why so many Salvadoran refugees in Honduras returned during the war, to a dangerous and violent country to fight in the *FMLN*.

It seems that while gangs are somewhat structured, their previous detachment from formal society has allowed them to function as a social movement with more fluid and flexible evolution in society. Now that they must live and operate inside a set of rules defined more directly by the government, the two separate gangs must function more like an organization if they wish to enjoy the new peace and benefits of the truce. When the Salvadoran government of 1991 realized that it could not win the war with the guerillas of the *FMLN*, they then offered them concessions so that they could save face by saying they hadn't lost and formalized them into a political party. Similar comparisons can be made with the creation of reservations for Native Americans in the United States as systems of appeasement, convincing tribes not to fight back. If the gangs can be made to play by the rules of the state, and become pegged to it, they could theoretically be better controlled, just like the *FMLN* has become much more moderate to win elections.

Institutionalization and formalism may not be to the Salvadoran government's advantage as the gangs become more politically sophisticated. I have already discussed some of the power they could use around election time, as well as the constant threat of truce disintegration and increased violence they could again unleash on the country. Another opportunity for the gangs that could actually be gained by the truce process is an

increase in their involvement in drug trafficking. El Salvador is geographically located between the world's largest cocaine producer, Colombia, and the largest cocaine consumption market, the U.S., which makes it a strategic region for smugglers. In the past, smuggling cartels have employed gang members as security for shipments, paying them in small amount of cocaine. Because of the truce, and the pressure on extortion that has lowered the gang's income, more gang members have turned to low level cocaine dealing and shipping larger quantities for Salvadoran cartels like *Perrones* and the *Taxis* cartel. Some even claim that the sophistication gained by the gangs through the truce and Treasury Department distinction has impressed *Los Zetas* cartel of Mexico to allow *MS-13* to train with them as they spread south.<sup>104</sup>

Now that the gangs have been fought throughout the years of *Mano Dura* and even had the army deployed against them, the government offers an olive branch and some notable concessions, all through the mediators, of course, because the government itself 'does not negotiate with gangs' according to Security Minister Mungía Payes. This is why while I don't think *MS-13* or *Barrio 18* will likely field a candidate in the next election. I do, however, think that as the *FMLN* before them, a segment of them is being bought off and placated. Until the large economic disparity and the array of social problems from illiteracy to health access and employment options is overcome, then the communists and indigenous population of 1932, the *FMLN*, *MS-13* and *Barrio 18* will arise again in another manifestation. The *FMLN* guerillas may be perceived as idealists,

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<sup>104</sup> Farah, Douglas, Pamela Phillips Lum. *Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil*. International Assessment and Strategy Center. February 2013

and the gangs as selfish, but they were born in reaction to the same social problems, and if the gangs are transformed they make room for different aggregates of teen gangs, drug cartels or perhaps another group to become the Salvadoran government's public enemy number one.

### Synthesis and Mission:

Throughout this essay I have talked about the examples of many different people, ranging from El Salvador to the United States with various others mixed in. All these people have in some way contributed to how I have come to conceptualize the gang situation in El Salvador and the response to the violence and suffering that has been produced by it. The thesis process for me has been a way to seamlessly weave my Salvadoran life and experience, my new problems, insights and motivations into the tapestry of my Regis experience. In the introduction I write that I hoped this process would contribute something to a comprehensive response to the gang situation in El Salvador. There are some policies and ideas I will summarize that could be implemented with success in El Salvador, but the more important reflection is less concrete and more personal. I focused on different people, the initiatives they started, the work they were doing because it has allowed me to further reflect on what my study abroad experience has done to change my path and how I am also going to respond to the problems I see, of which the gang phenomenon concerns and interests me.

Greg Boyle, Danny, Sister Peg, Oscar Romero, John Guliano and others didn't build the organizations they head, the legacies they left, the inspiration they imbibe

because of excessive planning and strategizing, although this can make your commitment more effective. It goes back to Boyle's quote in chapter three about standing with those you wish to help. Standing with the people day in and day out like Sister Peggie and John Guliano, through civil war and reconstruction until your nationality doesn't matter anymore because you have become a fixture in your community really shows the *compromiso* of those individuals.

During my time in El Salvador, I moved from being content and excited about my adaptation into another culture and started to feel guilty for the role my country, the United States played and continues to play in the suffering and pain of this people. It kept reoccurring to me that while the intent of the US Congress, taxpayers and military were unaware or perhaps good intentioned, by supporting and funding the Salvadoran military in the 1980s they were effectively propagating genocide at worst and an unjust war at best. I would get sometimes the eerie feeling that maybe simply by being in and living in El Salvador I was making life worse for somebody there or transporting part of American culture that should be left out. What if the call for economic reinsertion of gang members creates the next 'race to the bottom' for the clothing and manufacture industries that use sweatshop models because ex-gang members are forced to work for lower wages and worse conditions because of their criminal records? As discussed earlier, Grupo Calvo certainly benefitted from the gang member's disposition. While it is hard to tell whether the call for economic reinsertion emerging in the aftermath of the truce will cause greater exploitation, it may be a silver lining for the long term situation of the ex-gang member that his potential employer (like League Central America or Rio Grande Foods) has to

make a large investment of time, money and solidarity in him that he is now partially insulated from exploitation.

When a young Sister Peggie O'Neil was touring Central America to try and decide where she would stay and serve some time on mission, she was approached by the Jesuit Jon Sobrino, originally from Barcelona but who had been living in El Salvador since becoming a novice. He told her "you should choose to come here to even out all the horrible things your country has done here." This was before Sobrino's Jesuit brothers were killed by Salvadoran army officers in 1989. 30 years later, Sister Peg and Jon Sobrino are still there, both expatriates of countries that colonized El Salvador in one way or another working for the greater good of the Salvadoran people. In terms of consecrated religious members, Sister Peg isn't an outlier from the United States. Various other Americans have immigrated to El Salvador during and in the aftermath of the civil war, such as Father Dean Brackley S.J, Father Paul Schindler, the four church women killed in 1980 and many others. While Sister Peg talks about this concept of national trauma that El Salvador still has left over from the war because so many of the affected were unable to grieve and heal, I wonder if there is also a force of national guilt at work in many of those expatriates that have worked and lived there so long which fuels there continuing *solidaridad* and *compromiso*.

I mention this because it was a common sentiment for my classmates and myself in my study abroad class to harbor, as the affects of US foreign and military policy as well as economic imperialism were revealed to us in the Salvadoran situation. This force

could almost be considered a reverse nationalism, like the humbling and shameful kind that could have characterized post-WWII Germany after the extent of the Holocaust was revealed. The carryover of that sentiment was why I searched and studied the US implications in the Salvadoran gang situation and until the end of this thesis process has remained the catalyst and lens for my research. In terms of the Salvadoran gang truce and creation of the peace zones I have felt very much like a foreign correspondent, putting the raw events into an academic paper with the hope that I can make sense out of them.

It has been very interesting and a way for me to keep connected by following the process that began in March of 2012 when I was in El Salvador and that is still incomplete. Because of this I know that a year, or even a few months from now many of the claims and speculations that I make in this thesis could be completely wrong or with a little more history in-between, cast in a completely different perspective. In 2014 elections for President will be held in El Salvador, and the truce and its gains and compromises will be put to another test through the transition of power. In one sense this has given me a lot more creative and speculative ability and increased the project's relevance and appeal to me personally throughout the process. Researching the gang situation in El Salvador, especially the truce, has led me to be acquainted with many of the players involved so far. From the government officials, business leaders with corporate responsibility divisions, truce mediators and the gang representatives and leaders that brokered the truce I have continually tried to pin down and wrap my head around the situation like some sort of complex but scripted Lord of the Rings trilogy or



Star Wars saga which may be one way to write a paper on the subject, but cannot be the best way to actively engage the situation.

The hopeful part for me, though, is that the next social movement might instead be inspired by kinship and solidarity instead. Is kinship as radical as Boyle makes it out to be? Studying Homeboy Industries, while it is an impressive endeavor for many reasons, may not have lent much logistically to a Salvadoran gang policy because of the still present cultural, economic and even political differences between the two countries, yet it has illuminated many aspects of human nature and the personal process of growth and re-creation. Homeboy Industries may have some mechanical structural elements, but in league with Boyle's commitment to kinship, every person must be treated and helped as an individual, reinsertion is on a personal level, as some Salvadoran businesses are starting to do with Boyle's 'slow work' mentality. A large amount of job opportunities are needed, but it's going to take so much more to reincorporate ex-gang members into society. Being a gang member is certainly not for life as many of the gang leaders and representatives have said, and neither should that stereotype follow someone for the remainder of their days on earth. If I were to venture anything from the Homeboy model, it would be that the government can best do its job to establish security for its citizens (all of them) when they also coordinate and work with non-profits and NGOs instead of proposing something like a peace zone a year before elections that is meant to take care of the entrenched gang situation rapidly and strategically.

My experience abroad and this thesis process have given me insight into how kinship functions on a personal interactional level, on how individuals react to society, and how governments react to social phenomenon. If one can be like Fr Greg or Sister Peg and give their life to a cause, or simply be a willing contributor like Rodrigo Bolaños then kinship is the way to approach and replace the solidarity that the gang imitates. It is my conclusion that part of the government's plan for the gang truce is to institutionalize the most powerful part of the gang so it can be controlled more easily. If social and economic needs are not met though, the phenomenon of the gang will be reincarnated in another form, just as they consider themselves a reincarnation of the FMLN.

I tend to believe Boyle that some problems are not strategic, but endure because of a lack of difficult commitment. Thanks to the civil war, El Salvador has various NGOs that have been standing with women, youth, gangs, *campesinos*, refugees and displaced for many years, participating and forming counter-social movements like OPERA, *Homies Unidos* and MOJE among many others. An appropriate fruit of the truce and the shift it has caused in public opinion would be that the PNC will be less concerned with gang infiltration of these institutions and the government will be more open to coordinate and help fund them. Homeboy Industries was able to expand in leaps and bounds because of properly managed donations, and I'm sure the vocational sections of Rio Grande Foods and PIDB would too if they were given some no strings attached funding. At the beginning of the truce in March 2012, the measurement for success and effectiveness was and still is the homicide rate. Initially I was impressed that the average daily homicide rate could change from thirteen to five practically overnight. That really seemed like

something historical, something to really work off of. Still, five people were murdered and left in the street that day. The assassination of Rutilio Grande, Oscar Romero, the Jesuits and their housekeeper and daughter, the rape of the four American church women still happened every day and that was a statistical improvement. For the government the decrease in blood that could be plotted on a graph would land them more foreign aid, affect who gained or retained power for the next five years starting in 2014. That a statistic (a confrontational one at that) is the most important thing driving policy and action is what makes me think this problem is unsolvable. The many people that stand in the right place though, Salvadorans like Danny, Mayans like Rosa, Spanish like Jon Sobrino and Americans like John Guliano, Dean Brackley and Sister Peggie O'Neil encourage me to aspire to stand there too.

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