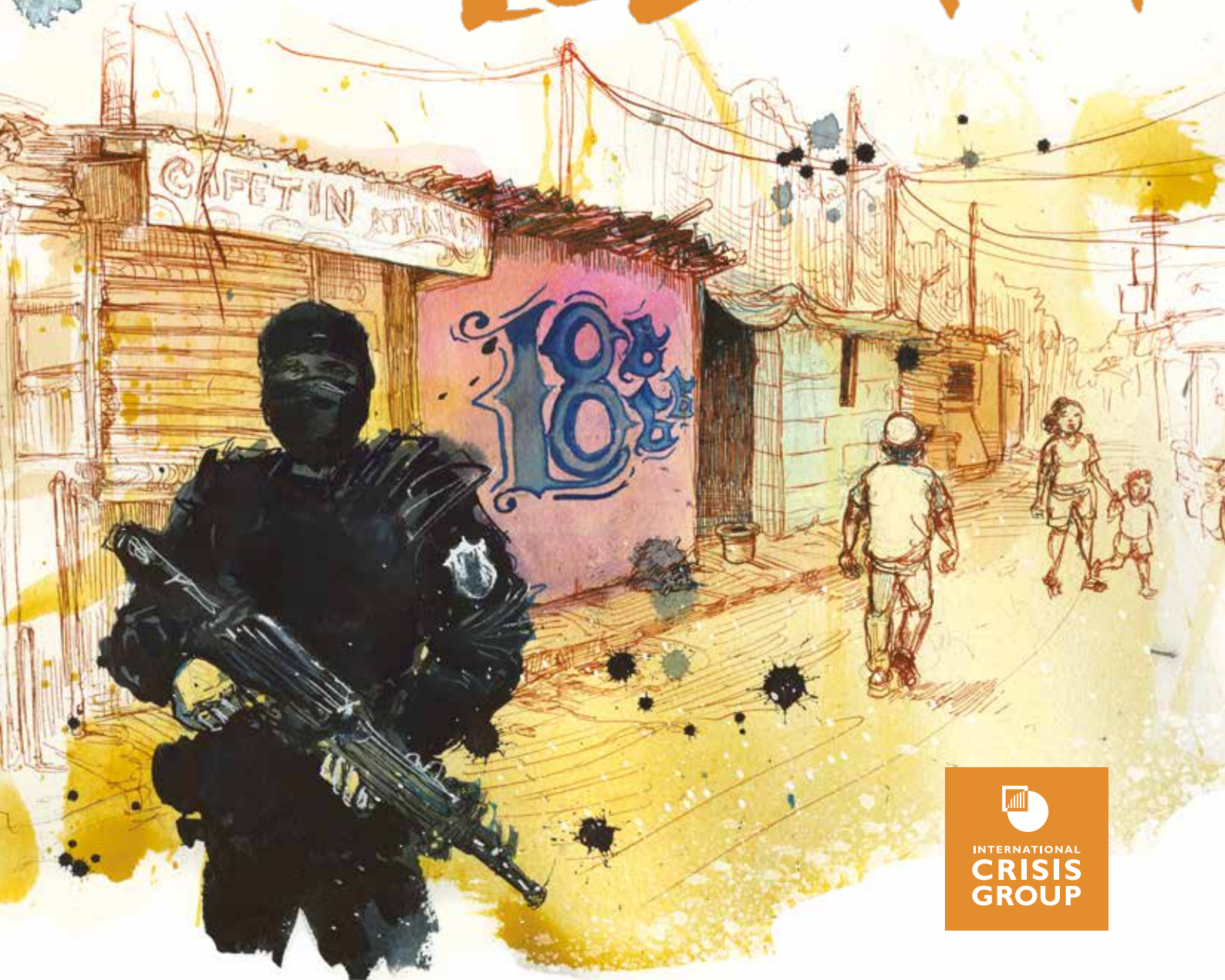


# LIFE UNDER GANG RULE

## EL SALVADOR



**El Salvador is not at war. But it is one of the most violent countries in the world.**

BY INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP · ILLUSTRATIONS BY MOLLY CRABAPPLE

Nearly 20,000 Salvadorans were killed from 2014 to 2017. That's **more violent deaths than in several countries that were at war during those years**, such as Libya, Somalia and Ukraine. The murder rate – an astonishing 103 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 – is still sky-high at 60 per 100,000 in 2017. **The culprit in most of these murders is the *maras***, the country's powerful, pervasive criminal gangs.

**T**he *maras*, including the infamous MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha, are active in 94 per cent of El Salvador's 262 municipalities. In many of these "red zones", gangs are not just a standing danger to public safety but also a de facto authority that exerts tremendous control over residents' daily lives.

In neighbourhoods throughout the capital, San Salvador, residents heading to work or school pass through an informal checkpoint where a *bandera* – the term the gangs use for their young lookouts and errand runners – asks everyone for a dollar. At many of the roadblocks, the *bandera* is barely eight years old. But most people fork over the money. Anyone who doesn't pay up might come to regret it later.

Extortion at places of business is the bigger problem. At least once a week, older gang members, or *mareros*, come by every shop and vendor's stall in the neighbourhood market to collect the *renta*, or protection money, from merchants who can't afford their own security guards. Again, most shopkeepers pay. To defy the gangs is to court death.



## The night is for the maras, which do most of their killing then.

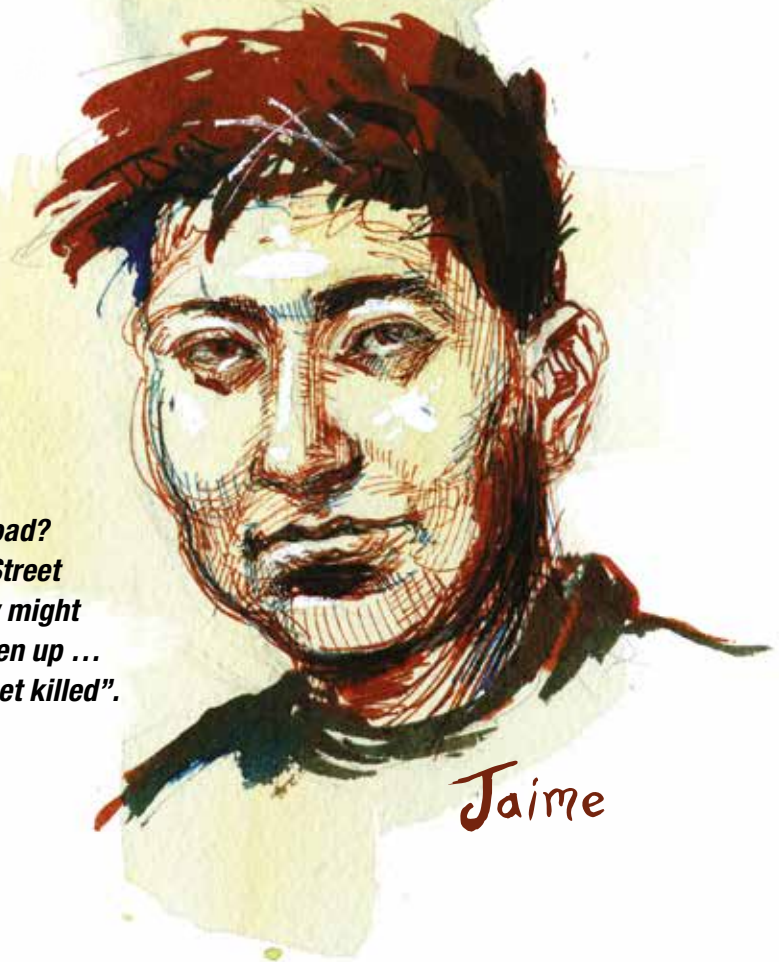
The largest *maras* in El Salvador are MS-13 and the two factions of Barrio 18 (the 18th Street gang), the Revolutionaries and the Southerners. Together, these three organisations count around 65,000 members, according to police records. But many more people – some 500,000 all told – depend on the gangs for their livelihood.

**The hatred between rival gangs runs deep.** MS-13 members will not utter the number “18”. If asked their age, for instance, they reply, “I’m 17 + 1”. The borders of the competing gangs’ turf are invisible but well known and seldom crossed. A youth who lives in MS-13 territory but whose grandmother lives in Barrio 18-R territory will meet her only on “neutral ground” or at a place where no one knows their names and faces.





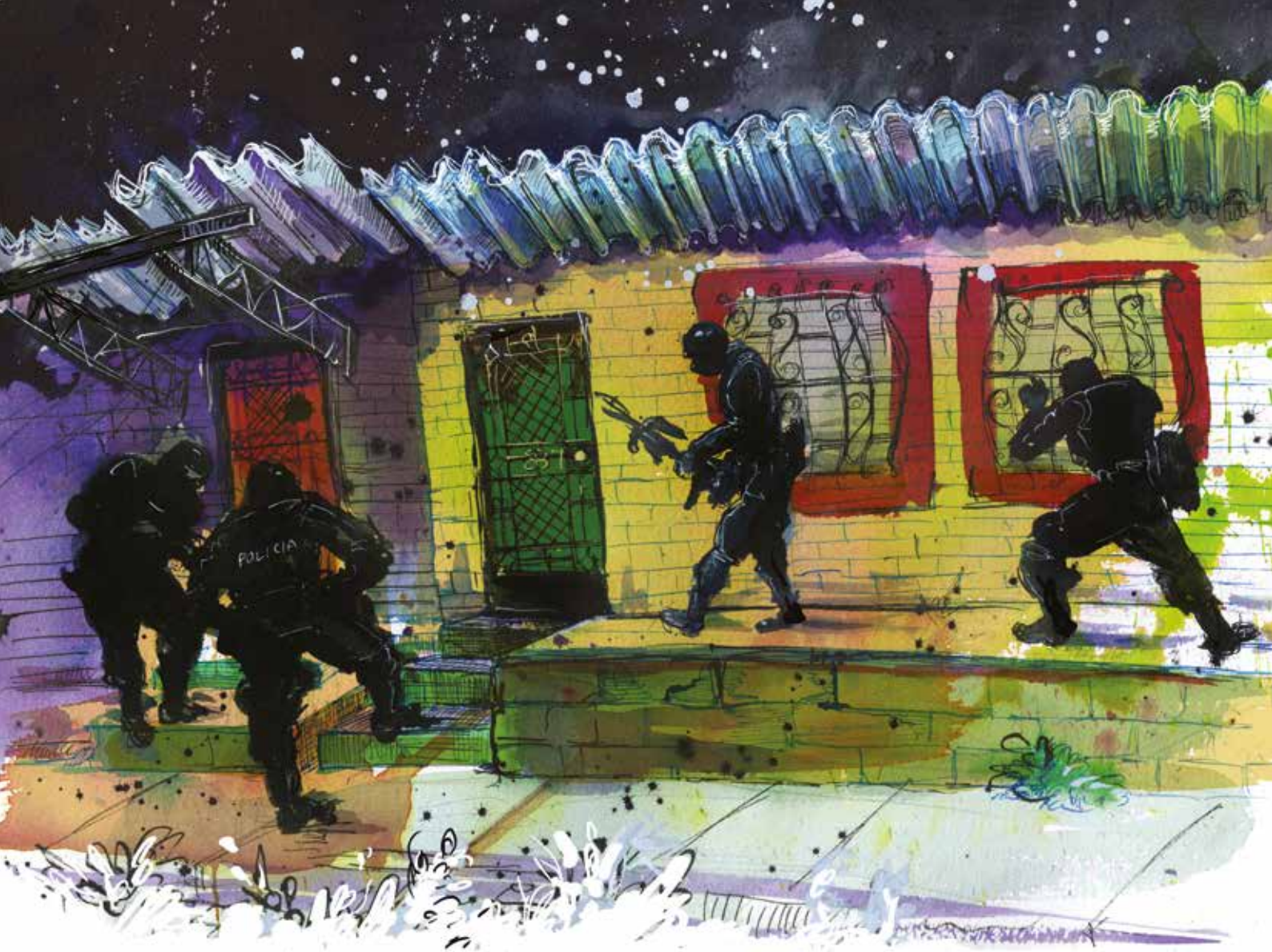
***“Do you see that place across the road?  
I could never get in there since it's the 18th Street  
gang's territory. If they see me in there, they might  
think I'm a spy. For sure I'd get beaten up ...  
and I could easily get killed”.***



Gang-related murder is a topic of everyday conversation among families at home, children at school and patrons in bars. Every Salvadoran knows someone who was shot dead by gang members or someone who pulled the trigger.

Many Salvadorans stay away from public places and even avoid walking down the street. The affluent generally stay inside gated compounds. After sunset, many streets in San Salvador are deserted. The night is for the *maras*, which do most of their killing then. And it's for the army and police,

who wait until after dark to conduct their house-by-house searches for criminal suspects. Police officers always wear a *gorro navarone*, or face-covering balaclava, scared that gang members will come after them and their families.



The climate of fear is such that thousands of families have abandoned their homes and headed north toward the U.S. border.

Reina\*, 30, left her small community in central El Salvador with her sister and three children after the gangs moved in. A *marero* had thrown a homemade bomb into her neighbour's house, killing four people. Another had shot her brother, who was a former government soldier and thus an enemy in the gang's eyes. The gang warned the rest of the family to depart.

**Gangs routinely confiscate houses** in locations they see as "strategic" and turn them into *casas locas* (literally, "crazy houses"). If a family refuses to leave, they threaten all its members. The *casas locas* are hangouts where gang members smoke, drink and perform ritual initiation of new recruits. They may also take neighbourhood women and girls there to be sexually abused.

One reason why gangs could sink such deep roots in El Salvador is that they provide a sense of pride and belonging to their members, many from poor, broken families. "The *maras* are important when you have nothing, when you are born dead", says the Salvadoran anthropologist Juan José Martínez D'Aubuisson.

\* Some names have been changed.



***“It used to be peaceful in the cantones. Now there are gangs everywhere. Only the rich people are safe”.***

**Reina**

Gangs also claim to be providing a “community service” by protecting locals from other criminals and corrupt police. “The state has forsaken these territories and we have taken control of what it abandoned. We come from

disintegrated families and extreme poverty”, an unnamed MS-13 spokesperson told the Salvadoran news site El Faro. “The only living force that exists in our communities is the gangs”.



***“If a bus driver who pays us gets robbed in his bus, he comes to us to solve the problem, not the police. It is the media that portray us as nothing but rent collectors”.***

But Salvadorans pay the *renta* and toe the gangs' line for fear of retaliation – not out of loyalty or gratitude. “You can't work anywhere without permission from the local gang”, says Alex, 46, who worked in construction but decided to leave El Salvador when jobs dried up in his hometown. It was that or submit to the gangs' rule somewhere else in the country.

In the U.S., politicians invoke the spectre of MS-13's criminal and social power to promote an anti-immigration agenda.

The Trump administration is deporting tens of thousands of Salvadorans who have nothing to do with gangs – and refusing to admit thousands more who are victims of the *maras'* predatory ways. In January 2018, the U.S. announced that in September 2019 it would be terminating the Temporary Protected Status designation, which had allowed 195,000 Salvadorans to work and live legally in the U.S. for nearly twenty years. In June, then Attorney General Jeff Sessions slammed the door shut to still more Salvadorans fleeing life-or-death situations. Having suffered gang violence, Sessions said, will no longer be enough to claim asylum in the U.S.

So it's ironic that Salvadoran gangs are partly the byproduct of earlier U.S. immigration policies.





*Maras* like MS-13 were formed in the streets of Los Angeles 30 years ago by young men who had fled the 1980-1992 civil war.

After Washington toughened immigration laws, it deported thousands of *mareros* to their home country in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Soon MS-13 and Barrio 18 had expanded across El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

In El Salvador, gangs found fertile ground for recruitment with the country roiled by post-war political upheaval and mired in economic stagnation. Thousands of adolescents were roaming the streets with no jobs and little else to do.

The sense of belonging offered by the gangs was too much for many of them to resist.

Boys aged twelve and older are prime targets for recruitment. Girls can also be targeted at an early age, either to join the gang or to become sex slaves.

Salvadorans living in “red zones” have to spend hard-earned money on private transport or after-school programs so that their kids don’t come into contact with gangs.



***“We can’t put every gang member in jail. There is an image of us as Superman. But we can’t pay for all the ‘platos rotos’ [broken dishes] in this country”.***



**Most gang members were around fifteen years old** when they first joined. Nowadays, the average member is around 25 years old, lives in either a house in a poor neighbourhood or an overcrowded jail, has never held a formal job and did not finish secondary education. The large majority of gang members are among the poorest people in Salvadoran society, living on less than \$250 a month. Despite the *mareros*' youth, their faces are scarred and their eyes hollowed by years of dealing out death and taking abuse, making them look much older.

Media reports about MS-13 and other *maras* depict the members bearing archetypal tattoos and speaking in trademark slang. Not all gang members are so easily identifiable. The gangs remain rooted in the streets but have now penetrated every layer of Salvadoran society. Gangs have mutated from youth groups defending neighbourhood turf in the 1980s to hierarchical organisations that coerce, threaten and kill. Many members and sympathisers, particularly from MS-13, become teachers, lawyers, local government officials and even police officers who serve the gang's interests. Their influence has grown so great that every major political party in El Salvador and Honduras has at some point paid gangs during elections.

That's why it's so hard to arrest high-ranking gang members, who are usually tipped off about police raids in advance. And that's why it's been so difficult to combat the threat the gangs pose.

Top officials in El Salvador are aware of the magnitude of the challenge. Nevertheless, the government continues to rely almost solely on security crackdowns to tackle gangs. Over the last fifteen years, various Salvadoran governments have tried to crush gangs *con mano dura* – with an iron fist. They have mounted massive joint military and police operations in the capital and other cities, arresting thousands.

Behind closed doors the authorities agree that they are “fighting a war they cannot win”.

Óscar, the security official pictured above, uses a common Spanish expression, *pagar los platos rotos*. We can't clean up everybody's mess, he means.

**Despite the *mareros*' youth, their faces are scarred and their eyes hollowed by years of dealing out death and taking abuse, making them look much older.**

**Police raids are often indiscriminate.** It's common for teenagers, especially boys, living in areas controlled by the *maras* to be harassed by security forces who consider them gang suspects. The *mano dura* operations have also caught numerous residents in the crossfire. The only exception to the iron fist policy was the "gang truce" – an experiment with negotiation from March 2012 through mid-2013. Former President Mauricio Funes made efforts to improve conditions for jailed *mareros* in exchange for a gang ceasefire.

With 24 hours of the start of the truce, the homicide rate dropped by 50 per cent.

But the truce collapsed, mainly due to lack of support from the ruling party, as well as the Salvadoran public, much of which favours iron fist approaches. In a 2017 survey, 40 per cent of Salvadorans said they approved of torture as a crime-fighting technique and 34.6 per cent said the same of extrajudicial killing. In 2015, the government again launched a "war on gangs". The same year, El Salvador's Supreme Court labelled the MS-13 and the two factions of Barrio 18 as "terrorist" organisations. Prison conditions for gang members worsened and the *mano dura* operations resumed. Though MS-13 and the two Barrio 18 factions are mortal enemies, they forged an informal ceasefire in order to target army and police officers, as well as their families, creating a cycle of revenge.



After the failure of the 2012-2013 truce, the idea of negotiating with gangs is taboo. No politician dares advocate for it in public. In private conversations, however, there are many voices among the authorities who are convinced that some form of dialogue is the only way to bring peace to the country.

**There are other steps that can be taken.** The government can enforce its Safe El Salvador plan, which focuses as much on crime prevention as on law enforcement. It can promote more programs to rehabilitate jailed gang members and care for victims, especially the most vulnerable such as abused women. It can also ramp up projects to deter gang recruitment in poor neighbourhoods. The U.S. can help by either allowing Salvadorans with

Temporary Protected Status to stay in the U.S., or by assisting the Salvadoran government with reintegrating deportees through the creation of job opportunities and improvement of public services. Training and support for police, prison guards and judges could help the Salvadoran authorities target the most violent criminals and ensure that lesser offenders get a second chance outside jail.

For their part, gangs repeatedly say they want to start a new dialogue to obtain better prison conditions and cut down the number of police raids in their neighbourhoods. “We are open to dialogue with anyone who wants to hear the MS-13 voice, the gang’s spokesperson told *El Faro*. But the politicians fear to sit down with the gangs because that becomes an excuse for another party to attack them”.



**The politicians fear to sit down with the gangs because that becomes an excuse for another party to attack them.**

Ironically, the crackdown helps gangs tighten their grip. A state policy of reserving one prison for each gang has created incubators of crime, allowing *mareros* to strengthen their leadership, recruit new members and even run extortion rackets from behind bars.

***“I saw my son and my mother killed by gangs in the same week. My son was killed because he refused to pay ‘renta’. My mother was killed because the ‘marero’ came to my house and thought she was me. When I close my eyes I can still see my son’s entrails spread all over the floor. I want to leave Honduras no matter what. What can be worse than this?”***

Luisa



**Intensifying gang violence** is one of the biggest factors pushing hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans to flee their homes. In 2017, 296,000 people were displaced. Many escape to stay with relatives elsewhere in the country. But numerous others head north to seek asylum in Mexico or the U.S.

On the road, they meet other Central Americans like Luisa, fleeing towns and cities in Guatemala and Honduras that are also plagued by the *maras'* extortion and murder. In contrast with previous migration waves, there are now fewer young men making the journey in search of jobs and many more families with children and young or expectant mothers escaping poverty and gang violence.

**T**

he story Luisa tells rings true for the Salvadorans who are listening. It could easily have happened to them or to their neighbours.

As more Salvadorans are expelled from the U.S., the situation will only get worse. Having no jobs in El Salvador, and having been away for so long, the returnees are particularly exposed to rampant gang brutality. Extortion and constant fear will likely become the daily reality for thousands of them. Their children could face the biggest danger, as it's only a matter of time before the *maras* pick many of them out as targets. Many families will think that their safest option is to go back to the U.S., despite all the hazards that they will face along the way, the possibility that they will be denied entry, and the risk of another deportation.

And so the cycle continues.





Illustrations for this commentary are by Molly Crabapple. The lead contributor was Sofia Martínez, International Crisis Group's analyst for Central America's Northern Triangle, with editing by Chris Toensing and design by Kjell Olsson. Karim Lebhour, Head of North America Communications, coordinated the project. It was published 26 November 2018.

There is an online edition accessible on [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org)

For details of Crisis Group's analysts, their commentaries and reports countering the crisis of violent crime in Central America's Northern Triangle and Mexico, please see [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) / Latin America & Caribbean / Central America.



5041 Printed matter 0513



Print: Clausen Grafisk, Denmark 2018.

Copies: 1,000. Printed on 150g Munken Lynx from Arctic Paper



The International Crisis Group is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation covering over 60 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents, working through field-centred analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

[www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org)



Preventing War. Shaping Peace.