
BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Urban Violence: *Maras*, Meanings, and Murders

Sonja Wolf

Cátedra CONACYT, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), MX
sonja.wolf@cide.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets. By Thomas Abt. New York: Basic Books, 2019. Pp. 304. \$30.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781541645721.

MS-13: The Making of America’s Most Notorious Gang. By Steven Dudley. New York: Hanover Square Press, 2020. Pp. 352. \$28.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781335005540.

Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City. By Anthony W. Fontes. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. 332. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520297098.

El Niño de Hollywood: Cómo Estados Unidos y El Salvador moldearon a un sicario de la Mara Salvatrucha 13. By Óscar Martínez and Juan José Martínez. Mexico City: Debate, 2018. Pp. 272. \$16.95 paperback. ISBN: 9786073169004.

La tropa: Por qué mata un soldado. By Daniela Rea and Pablo Ferri. Mexico City: Aguilar, 2018. Pp. 336. MXN339.00 paperback. ISBN: 9786073177795.

Gangs of the El Paso–Juárez Borderland: A History. By Mike Tapia. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019. Pp. 200. \$45.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780826361097.

Carta desde Zacatraz. By Roberto Valencia. Madrid: Libros del K.O., 2018. Pp. 381. \$20.00 paperback. ISBN: 9788416001866.

State of War: MS-13 and El Salvador’s World of Violence. By William Wheeler. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020. Pp. 150. \$15.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781733623728.

The United States is the birthplace of the Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13) and Eighteenth Street gangs and the region’s largest consumer market for illicit drugs. Successive US administrations have largely viewed these social and public health problems as criminal threats and responded by expelling noncitizen offenders and bolstering law enforcement agencies both domestically and abroad. The Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)—torn apart by political violence in the 1980s and home to many of these deportees—and Mexico have, for two decades, tackled gangs and drug cartels with their own brands of heavy-handed policing. Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala employed *mano dura* (iron fist) policies to curb gangs and burgeoning homicides, since murders are disproportionately committed by gangs.¹ Their northern neighbor launched a drug war to dismantle criminal groups and disrupt narcotics supply chains. These militarized strategies focused on arrest and incarceration rather than structural measures, such as institutional strengthening and social prevention and reintegration. They were motivated by electoral considerations rather than violence reduction concerns, and they dramatically failed to achieve their objectives.

¹ Robert Muggah and Katherine Aguirre Tobón, *Citizen Security in Latin America: Facts and Figures* (Rio de Janeiro: Igarapé Institute, 2018), 8.

These prohibitionist policies have played a central role in giving the gangs and criminal groups the complexity and lethality they have today. Mexico's drug war saw homicides and disappearances escalate and prompted the drug trafficking organizations to diversify their illicit activities, even dabbling in the kidnapping of irregular migrants. The NTCA's street gangs made the prisons their central leadership base and turned extortion into their most profitable business. The terror they inflict in neighborhoods under their control is displacing more and more people from their homes. Estimates of forced migration due to nonstate armed violence are difficult to obtain. However, UNHCR figures show that by the end of 2019 NTCA citizens had lodged an accumulated 378,314 asylum applications worldwide.² Cognizant of institutional fragility, and the gangs' de facto governance in many local territories, politicians in El Salvador and Honduras have since 2012 turned to negotiating nonaggression pacts with these groups.³ Exasperated police and soldiers, for their part, have committed extrajudicial executions of suspected gang members.

The existence of the gangs and criminal groups, and the role security policies have played in their transformations, has spurred a sprawling literature.⁴ Much of it is in-depth qualitative research, including a number of commendable ethnographies. Over time, the policies have perhaps come to be scrutinized more widely than the nonstate actors they target.⁵ Furthermore, not only scholars but also increasingly journalists seek to understand and explain the reasons behind the violence. These shifts concerning content and authorship reflect, on one hand, the realization that government responses to violent crime have exacerbated it. But they also reveal the growing difficulties of researching gangs and criminal groups up close. Although they were always hard to access, these actors have reacted to law enforcement suppression by becoming more hermetic and suspicious of outsiders. The all-too-real dangers of approaching these groups, or simply the territories under their command, make such research ethically fraught and for many too risky to contemplate. Compounding these challenges is the limited access to public information in a region where state compliance with transparency obligations is weak, and available data tend to be inconsistent, unreliable, and politicized.

The Central American gang literature developed with the arrival of US deportees whose lifestyle proved alluring in post-conflict societies struggling to rebuild. Following federal immigration reforms in 1996, which accelerated the criminalization of immigrants, the United States expelled some 46,000 convicted offenders to the NTCA between 1998 and 2005.⁶ Early studies situated the gangs in the historical context;⁷ analyzed the community marginalization that spawned them;⁸ surveyed their participants' characteristics and membership factors;⁹ and explored women's experiences and vulnerabilities in these patriarchal groups.¹⁰ In a later phase, investigations examined the gangs' growing criminal involvement;¹¹ debunked myths surrounding their transnational structure;¹² delved into the changing relationships in gang-affected communities;¹³ and probed how the gangs appropriate prisons¹⁴ or influence political participation.¹⁵ A

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2020), 79.

³ Steven Dudley, "Five Differences between El Salvador, Honduras Gang Truces," *InSight Crime*, July 12, 2013, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/5-differences-between-el-salvador-honduras-gang-truces/>.

⁴ For a discussion of this literature, see, for example, Sonja Wolf, "Criminal Networks in Mexico and Central America: Dynamics and Responses," *Latin American Politics and Society* 55, no. 3 (2013): 161–169.

⁵ An exception is literature produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century that examined the nature of Central America's transnational *maras* networks. See Sonja Wolf, "Maras transnacionales: Origins and Transformations of Central American Street Gangs," *Latin American Research Review* 45, no. 1 (2010): 256–265.

⁶ Sofía Martínez, "Mass Deportations Only Fuel a Cycle of Violence and Migration," *International Crisis Group*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mass-deportations-only-fuel-cycle-violence-and-migration>.

⁷ Deborah T. Levenson, *Adiós Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁸ Wim Savenije, *Maras y Barras: Pandillas y violencia juvenil en los barrios marginales de Centroamérica* (San Salvador: FLACSO, 2009).

⁹ José Miguel Cruz and Nelson Portillo Peña, *Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador: Más allá de la vida loca* (San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana, 1998).

¹⁰ María Santacruz and Elin Ranum, "Seconds in the Air": *Women Gang-Members and Their Prisons* (San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana, 2010).

¹¹ José Miguel Cruz, "Central American Maras: From Youth Street Gangs to Transnational Protection Rackets," *Global Crime* 11, no. 4 (2010): 379–398.

¹² Sonja Wolf, "Mara Salvatrucha: The Most Dangerous Street Gang in the Americas?," *Latin American Politics and Society* 54, no. 1 (2012): 65–99.

¹³ Juan José Martínez D'Aubuisson, *Ver, oír, callar: En las profundidades de una pandilla salvadoreña* (San Salvador: AURA Ediciones, 2013).

¹⁴ Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera, *Territories of Violence: State, Marginal Youth, and Public Security in Honduras* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁵ Abby Córdova, "Living in Gang-Controlled Neighborhoods: Impacts on Electoral and Nonelectoral Participation in El Salvador," *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 1 (2019): 201–221.

third strand of this literature considers how gang policies kindled these transformations;¹⁶ analyzes how media content helped justify and promote these strategies;¹⁷ reveals that truces give gangs more legitimacy in return for short-term political benefits;¹⁸ and shows how evangelical church affiliation enables gang exit.¹⁹

In Mexico researchers have used mixed methods to explain how the country's transition to multiparty democracy prompted criminal groups to resort to violence;²⁰ explained that the drug war, focused on repressing a lucrative illicit economy, cannot reduce violence;²¹ dissected leaked government databases to document the armed conflict's death toll;²² and demonstrated how drug cartels fragmented²³ or diversified their criminal activities,²⁴ including by forcibly recruiting irregular migrants into organized crime.²⁵ Finally, although there exists an extensive literature on US gangs, unusually few works deal with the Mara Salvatrucha and Eighteenth Street gangs. Notable works examine the role of disaffection and immigrant discrimination in gang proliferation;²⁶ describe the MS-13's diffuse form of leadership;²⁷ and uncover how law enforcement, increasingly federalized and transnationalized, relies too heavily on organized crime statutes to sustainably interrupt gang structures and operations.²⁸

The books reviewed in this essay, written by renowned academics, policy analysts, and journalists, draw on years of painstaking research into gang and state violence in North and Central America. Armed with persistence and good fortune, the authors tracked down a diverse pool of interviewees, perused court documents, and traveled to remote villages and prisons. The magnificent products of these resourceful investigations take readers to the US-Mexico borderlands and cities torn apart by gang and drug violence. The writers narrate how transnational gangs emerged despite, or because of, geographical frontiers; how state agents seek to end violence through violence; and why violence reduction efforts often fail to meet their targets. The authors add to the existing literature by looking at the subject from a micro-level perspective, considering historical influences, and foregrounding the United States' role in perpetuating the security crises it expects its neighbors to resolve.

Historical and Ethnographic Understandings of Gangs

Gangs of the El Paso-Juárez Borderland presents an inventory of gangs in the said border corridor spanning the last one hundred years. Mike Tapia draws on a wide range of sources, including archival and police records, intelligence and newspaper reports, and interviews with border dwellers and law enforcement officers to map the development of gang territories and violence. The profiles of local gang histories begin with early neighborhood-based societies and end with modern, larger, and more criminally involved gang networks, notably the Texas-born prison gang Barrio Azteca.

Hardline immigration rhetoric and policies notwithstanding, the artificial construct of the border cannot separate locales and populaces that have long been connected through commercial and other exchanges. The sociologist shows how the region's criminal subcultures have traditionally permeated this boundary and supplied the local vice industries. Street and drug gangs are not only deeply embedded in the community fabric but are also networked across the border, making it difficult to shut down their illicit economies. The

¹⁶ Thomas Bruneau, Lucía Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner, *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Sonja Wolf, *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Chris van der Borgh and Wim Savenije, "The Politics of Violence Reduction: Making and Unmaking the Salvadorean Gang Truce," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 905–928.

¹⁹ Robert Brennenman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²¹ Benjamin Lessing, *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²² Laura Atuesta, Oscar Siordia, and Alejandro Madrazo, "The 'War on Drugs' in Mexico: (Official) Database of Events between December 2006 and November 2011," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 7 (2019): 1765–1789.

²³ Angélica Durán-Martínez, *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops, and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁴ Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

²⁵ Jeremy Slack, *Deported to Death: How Drug Violence Is Changing Migration on the US-Mexico Border* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

²⁶ Sarah Garland, *Gangs in Garden City: How Immigration, Segregation, and Youth Violence Are Changing America's Suburbs* (New York: Nation Books, 2009).

²⁷ T. W. Ward, *Gangsters without Borders: An Ethnography of a Salvadoran Street Gang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁸ Tom Diaz, *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

Barrio Azteca, which emerged to protect Latino inmates from racial attacks, features here as a quintessential transnational gang. Since many of its members have family ties in Ciudad Juárez, the group could use these cross-border connections to expand its collaboration with powerful Mexican criminal organizations and evade US law enforcement pressure.

Tapia spotlights street gangs' ties to drug-trafficking groups, but acknowledges that the existence and extent of such links are difficult to ascertain. Gang members and police officers may either downplay these connections or exaggerate them to glorify their lifestyle or their crime-fighter role. In one of the most captivating parts of the book, Tapia documents how Mexico's drug war sparked bloody disputes over control of Ciudad Juárez's local drug market. The violence badly affected the city's economy and created a desperate demand for income-generating opportunities, even if derived from unlawful sources. In these circumstances many street gang members became more deeply involved with criminal organizations, working for them as lookouts and *sicarios* (hitmen). Tapia notes how these developments distanced the street gangs from the subculture of traditional and relatively innocuous turf-based youth gangs.

The book reiterates that place and history produce distinctive local gang subcultures. Socioeconomic conditions, crime, and governance uniquely shape violence in different areas. Even so, Tapia believes that gentrification and communication technology have heralded the decline of street gangs as we know them. Their members seem to have retreated from public spaces and renounced the trappings of affiliation in favor of monetized pursuits. The research below on California-born gangs, by Steven Dudley, Roberto Valencia, and others, echoes this shift from identity-based to more criminally involved groups. The implication is that if illicit economies constitute a valuable lifeline, gangs may well become permanent fixtures in many neighborhoods, with dire consequences for those who do not submit to their norms and demands.

In *Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City*, Anthony Fontes explores the histories, spaces, and violent spectacles through which the MS-13 and Eighteenth Street gangs have evolved. The ethnography also offers a deeply reflective account of researching gangs in a divided postwar nation that dissects the practical challenges and ethical dilemmas involved in accessing and writing about these groups. The human geographer Fontes hoped to penetrate the fears and rumors about gangs, but recognized, as Tapia did, that it was often impossible to separate fact from fiction. Instead, Fontes realized, fantasies and falsehoods are an intrinsic part of the production of knowledge about gangs and the making of violence. In Guatemala, where many murders are committed and go unpunished, people struggle to make sense of the insecurity. This "mortal doubt" (13) about the violence creates fear and protective measures. Primarily, however, all social and political actors seek to explain this senseless suffering and often blame it on the gangs.

This meaning-making produces stories about the gangs, but it is also bound up with the production and consumption of the spectacle of violence. As people try to categorize the victims and interpret the violence, visible symbols such as tattoos are decoded as gang identifiers. In this process of creating a sense of order, of deciding who is innocent or guilty, some deaths count more than others. In a tragically revealing part of the book, Fontes shows how gang members have elevated the visibility and brutality of their violence to make it mean something in a society habituated to murder. Since poor male corpses in poor urban areas have become routine occurrences, characteristics such as sex, class, and the location of victims have gained greater significance. Seeking maximum impact, "made-for-media murders" (192) involve the display of slain, mutilated bodies in strategic locations such as government offices or police stations.

Fontes insists that the gangs must be situated in the legacies of civil war atrocities yet also provide a window onto contemporary Guatemala. The country's ailing justice system recognizes the value of "real" gang members (widely imagined to be unfeeling killers) in clearing cases. But, as the brothers Óscar and Juan José Martínez also show below, it ultimately treats them as disposable witnesses. Penitentiaries, which are meant to isolate criminals from society, are extremely porous facilities over which the state has only tenuous control. Fontes's painstaking discussion of prison dynamics reveals how detainees, guards, and the free interrelate for power, profit, or survival. Given the lucrative nature of the various arrangements, prisoner reintegration and gang violence reduction may not be given the priority they deserve.

Repressive policing and society's unforgiving attitude toward gang members have made it exceedingly difficult for them to transform their lives. In what Fontes calls "liminal redemption" (212), gang members permanently struggle to free themselves of their past. Evangelical Christianity offers a way out of these groups, but tattoos and criminal records continue to make regular employment unattainable. More ominously, societal weariness of the state's failure to eradicate gangs and violence has generated widespread support for extrajudicial executions, typically committed by off-duty police and soldiers. This theme is also picked up by Daniela Rea and Pablo Ferri as well as the Martínez brothers. But *Mortal Doubt* emphasizes that the murders of poor young men are written off not because the justice system is overburdened, but because society and state regard them as necessary to stop the killing.

The Intersection of Gang and Immigration Policies

State of War: MS-13 and El Salvador's World of Violence takes readers through the country's US-sponsored civil war, the gang's emergence in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, and its post-deportation rise in Central America. The novella-length book draws heavily on essential studies of the history, gangs, and gang policy of El Salvador, as well as selected interviews with former gang members and police officers. Journalist William Wheeler begins with the familiar story (which Dudley, Valencia, and the Martínez brothers examine more scrupulously) of how the intersection of US foreign, immigration, and gang policies produced the MS-13. Its cofounder Alex Sánchez, whose life Wheeler sketches out, traded discrimination and bullying for protection and solidarity in the gang. But while the author decries how the United States exported this group with "urban warfare tactics" (25), he does not address its varied patterns of violence or its draw among Central American diaspora youth who had escaped it.

Wheeler casts an equally cursory glance at state violence, the subject of Rea and Ferri's extraordinary study of Mexico's armed forces. Police abuse has occurred throughout El Salvador following its Peace Accords, but extrajudicial executions appeared to surge after a recent temporary gang truce and a subsequent spate of attacks on off-duty law enforcement officers. The reporter narrates the workings of a police death squad from the perspective of one of its members. The former officer who Wheeler spoke to describes casually how the group collected intelligence on gang members, later murdered them, and altered the crime scenes. The officer later received gang threats and—ironically, given the hurdles ordinarily facing asylum seekers—successfully applied for asylum in the United States.

The truce, a central thread in *State of War*, is appraised through the eyes of a former gang leader and a police intelligence officer. Many Salvadorans viewed the government's shadowy deal with criminals as controversial. Wheeler adds to the polemic by claiming that the truce was the gangs' cynical attempt to consolidate their economic and political power rather than to reduce violence sustainably. El Salvador's main political parties have long been acutely aware of the gangs' territorial control, even paying them to influence voter behavior during the 2014 presidential elections. But Wheeler overstates the cease-fire's importance as a mechanism for the gangs' decisive power buildup, since their influence had developed gradually over the years. More problematic are the author's improbable claims that the gangs started burying their victims in clandestine graves; drug traffickers wanted to launder money through the initiative; and the former guerrilla FMLN party trained gang members in insurgent tactics. Wheeler makes his reconstruction of the truce appear relatively uncomplicated. As Fontes and the Martínez brothers remind us, however, sources can be unreliable and the line between reality and fiction fuzzy.

Steven Dudley, a journalist and codirector of the think tank InSight Crime, has studied the Mara Salvatrucha through the gaze of former members and families affected by it. *MS-13: The Making of America's Most Notorious Gang* surveys the forty-year existence of the group to explain how US and Central American policies shaped its influence. Dudley flags Washington, DC, and Long Island as areas where MS-13 has grown in low-income immigrant districts. Recently arrived youth, battling trauma, discrimination, and academic challenges, are easy gang targets at schools that struggle to integrate the newcomers. Whereas the gangs offer social support networks, under-resourced educational institutions pass perceived problem students on to school resource police officers who act as quasi-immigration agents.

The author acknowledges that Central Americans are more aggressively targeted for deportation than other ethnic groups. But he is perhaps more concerned with the law enforcement instruments that have facilitated the MS-13's proliferation in the United States. Dudley opposes the application of federal racketeering legislation to a street gang whose purpose, hierarchy, and modus operandi markedly differ from those of organized crime. That said, it remains to be seen if the East Coast cliques that are involved in serious criminal activity are outliers, as Dudley suggests they are, or if they denote a shift toward greater profit orientation. The toolbox also includes gang task forces, injunctions (restraining orders), sentencing enhancements, and databases. These components are widely used, with significant criminal, social, and immigration consequences, despite the inherent difficulties in defining and identifying gang members. Disconcertingly, virtually anyone in a gang's network, even unwilling collaborators, can be labeled a gang member.

Alex Sánchez himself, now a retired gang member and self-styled peacemaker, has faced frequent police harassment over the years and must feature in any story about MS-13. Like Fontes, Dudley is one of the rare authors who make a point of telling tales of redemption. The journalist provides a poignant account of how a young, war-traumatized Sánchez reunited with his Salvadoran family in Los Angeles, where he suffered maternal abuse and struggled to fit in. The gang protected him from bullying at school and became his new family. The book skims over Homies Unidos, the nongovernmental organization that Sánchez has been directing with much commitment and credibility to help gang members desist from violence. Instead, the volume concentrates on his fraught relationship with the police. Sánchez's past gang involvement makes

him uniquely qualified to support others in transitioning out of gang life. Law enforcement officers, however, tend to be skeptical of such transformations and dismissive of gang intervention programs, particularly those involving former gang members.

The Inconsequentiality of Human Rights

If human rights were somewhat tangential to the above books, they form the core of *Carta desde Zacatraz*. This piece of narrative journalism aims to explain El Salvador's gang history through the country's first media-constructed gang member, Gustavo Parada ("El Directo"). In the late 1990s, his case played a prominent role in debates about postwar human rights, legal reforms, and criminal justice. The meticulously researched chronicle is based on archival sources and interviews, including with the protagonist during his time in the Zacatecoluca maximum security prison (locally known as Zacatraz). The independent journalist Roberto Valencia portrays Parada as an intelligent, charismatic man from a humble family who found respect and gratification in the MS-13, but incurred the group's wrath and joined another gang. A loving father yet possessive husband, Parada ordered his wife killed for an infidelity and, aged thirty-one, was slain by his gang for violating internal norms.

Like Dudley, Valencia takes readers back to El Salvador's armed conflict and the MS-13's emergence in California and Central America. He elucidates how, in the face of police and societal indifference toward them, deportees rebuilt their gangs and the mainstream media became fascinated with their dress and tattoos. The attention-grabbing news coverage made alienated local youth curious about the gang lifestyle at the same time as it turned Parada into a monster. The young man had assassinated several people, including the nephew of a local delegate of the country's human rights ombudsperson's office. The delegate and his friends in the police and prosecutor's office fed the press false information about Parada to ensure he would be tried as an adult and receive the maximum penalty. Their fabricated claim that the seventeen-year-old had committed seventeen murders fitted with the growing sense of insecurity in the country. As the gangs began to be depicted as public enemy number one, it became clear that the institutions were fragile and the media could be hijacked for personal and political agendas.

While the road to democratic transition was paved with many obstacles, the creation of a new legal and institutional architecture, guided by the United Nations, met with particular resistance. A major target was the juvenile penal law, which stipulated that anyone under eighteen would be tried and punished as a minor. Seizing on Parada's case, conservative politicians and media blamed human rights guarantees for the postwar crime wave. Valencia believes that the reforms were designed with undue regard for the complexities of a country accustomed to violence and authoritarianism. The problems, he argues, were (and remain) the lack of adequate reintegration programs and a National Civilian Police born from the illusion that civilians and erstwhile enemies, hired through a quota system, could work effectively side by side. Law enforcement's perceived incompetence helped create support for death squads. But Valencia dismisses the reforms too hastily, overlooking that they were the outcome of political compromises.

El Niño de Hollywood explores how macro-level processes shaped the life of Miguel Ángel Tobar, a former MS-13 hitman turned protected witness in El Salvador. From a family of coffee farm workers, Tobar joined the gang at the age of twelve, but went into hiding after it targeted him for death. For this piece of narrative journalism, *El Faro* journalist Óscar Martínez and his anthropologist brother Juan José Martínez interviewed a range of sources, including the protagonist, whom the authors unexpectedly met when he was already in witness protection. The book exposes the deplorable conditions of the safe house where Tobar and his family lived until his murder, and the ways his clique leader and the state used him for their own ends.

Some of the MS-13's earliest members had been child soldiers during the armed conflict and helped build the gang's disciplinary and strategic capacities. Against this background, the writers try to shed light on the Mara Salvatrucha's evolving relationship with organized crime. José Antonio Terán ("Chepe Furia"), a deportee and member of the prewar security forces, founded Tobar's clique in the mid-1990s and later became an influential businessman and local benefactor. The Martínez brothers portray him as a new type of gang leader who did not report his profits to the gang and used the clique as his private group of *sicarios*. The MS-13, they concur with Dudley, may be better armed and funded than in the past, but it is a "mafia of the poor" (210) rather than the criminal enterprise it is often claimed to be. A recent criminal investigation into the group's finances and money laundering revealed it to have an annual extortion income of some US\$30 million. Most of these proceeds, however, go toward family assistance, legal fees, and firearms, leaving the bulk of members with insignificant profits.

Echoing Fontes's findings in Guatemala, the Martínez brothers explain how the gangs may stage bodies in public areas or dump them in clandestine graves. Overwhelmed by violence, El Salvador lacks both the capacity and the resources to excavate their remains. Israel Ticas, the country's only forensic anthropologist,

works indefatigably to exhume these forgotten victims and give grieving families closure. Tobar's testimonial evidence permitted the location of a well where the MS-13 had abandoned an estimated twenty homicide victims. Ticas's team went through an excruciatingly slow bureaucratic process to obtain, unsuccessfully, the heavy machinery needed to recover their bodies before the defendants had to be released from pretrial detention.

This study of El Salvador's discredited justice system would not be complete without a hard look at the underfunded and dysfunctional witness protection program. Safe houses provide shared accommodation for eyewitnesses, victims, and cooperating witnesses. The identity of those who, despite this unpalatable arrangement, agree to testify in court is concealed through face masks and voice distortion. Once the cases are closed, the witnesses are dropped from the program. The state's indifference to their health and safety is both outrageous and surprising, given the extent to which prosecutors depend on them to achieve convictions. Tobar's story describes this vulnerability in harrowing detail. He spent four years in an unassuming dirt-floor dwelling located in Eighteenth Street gang territory, where he risked getting killed not only by gangs but also by resentful police officers. The monthly food ration was so meager that his family suffered malnutrition, and Tobar, in a desperate fight for survival, returned to extortion and marijuana sales.

The Politicization of Violence

Journalists Daniela Rea and Pablo Ferri, who have written extensively about organized crime and victims' rights, adopt an explicit focus on state violence and human rights abuses. Mexico's drug war has seen soldiers torture, disappear, or kill scores of civilians, often with unnecessary cruelty or when they posed no threat. Since most of these murders remain in impunity, it is impossible to know whether the soldiers acted in self-defense or used excessive force. *La tropa: Por qué mata un soldado* invites readers to understand this violence from the perspective of the perpetrators. Rea and Ferri requested public information and managed to interview some twenty army soldiers, including some imprisoned for homicide. The research proved an emotionally conflicting experience for the authors, but the results offer a thoughtful critique of militarized security strategies.

The reporters initially tried to understand who the soldiers are and why they enlisted in the army. Although some joined to serve their country, most did so out of necessity rather than conviction. Those who sought to escape deprivation obtained from the institution the food, clothes, and education that their families could not give them. Rea and Ferri discovered, however, that the inequalities that characterize Mexican society also pervade the military. There are in fact two armies, that of the privileged (the officers), who exercise the command and defend its autonomy, and that of the poor (the troops), who follow orders and work in abysmal conditions. The characteristics of this second group (young age, background of hardship, limited education and job prospects) help produce more malleable and obedient troops.

Recruits' civilian identity is erased as they are taught discipline, obedience, and honor and are constructed as soldiers. Although this training is gender-blind, it would have been fascinating to learn how women internalize these values in a hierarchical institution that promotes a particular form of masculinity. Rea and Ferri want to show, however, that this system leaves soldiers underprepared and with reduced space for independent judgment. The troops are meant to go on patrol after two months of training in basic military doctrine, physical conditioning, firearms use, and stationary target shooting. They receive human rights classes but are chiefly trained to fight subversive groups, including through torture techniques. Compounding the difficulties of interpreting contradictory orders in the streets is the diffuse nature of the enemy in the drug war. The criteria soldiers are given to identify organized crime suspects are ambiguous, such as motorists' driving style, muddy vehicles, and the number of passengers. The frequency of fatal shootings may be attributable to limited training, the use of high-powered rifles, fear, revenge, the difficulty of distinguishing innocent civilians from criminals, and red tape—cases of injury involve more paperwork than fatalities. Rea and Ferri accentuate the "pedagogy of cruelty" (120), the violence soldiers have themselves experienced within the army before employing it against others. This process erodes, or perhaps extinguishes, the troops' capacity to empathize with strangers and to relate to them in an unoppressive manner. The deployment of soldiers, trained for extreme violence, may signal decisiveness and allow governments to score political points, but it is likely to beget more violence.

Concentrating on the United States, the public policy scholar Thomas Abt is concerned with decreasing urban violence (measured here primarily in terms of homicides) through strategies that focus attention and resources on the most dangerous places, people, and behaviors. *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets* recognizes that the victims of violence are mostly disadvantaged and disenfranchised young African American and Latino men. But before embarking on the larger and longer struggle for social and economic justice, one must "stop the bleeding" (4). Abt

consulted scores of program evaluations and interviewed perpetrators and victims of violence, police, outreach workers, and social service providers to draft his plan. This blueprint for urban violence reduction has three major components: focalized strategies, anti-violence coalitions, and communication.

Focalized strategies are required because limited resources need to be used efficiently, and violence clusters around chronic crime locations. Abt proposes three types of approaches. Place-based strategies lower violent crime in hot spots through policing, place making, and community building. People-based strategies deter serious offenders and would-be shooters through street outreach workers, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, improvements in homicide clearance rates, and functional family therapy. Behavior-based strategies address activities that facilitate violence through targeted crackdowns on gun carrying, gang violence, and violent drug dealing. Abt stresses the importance of balancing threats of punishment with positive incentives that motivate people to abandon violence. As the Central America observers above would agree, indiscriminate and overly punitive law enforcement strategies might produce more arrests but do not stop the killing. Abt, a former Obama Justice Department official, readily acknowledges that his plan builds on much prior research but that the issue is often politicized and workable approaches are ignored.

The best-designed initiatives, the author accepts, stand little chance of achieving their goals without cross-sector alliances. The cooperation between communities and criminal justice authorities may be difficult when abusive police practices have undermined trust in law enforcement and made citizens reluctant to report crimes or testify. To restore trust, the police must be perceived to effectively protect people from harm, apply the law fairly, and create accountability for misconduct. The book's policy prescriptions are unlikely to prompt a change of direction if governments and state institutions are not committed to lasting violence reduction. Perhaps the most important message Abt has for his readers is that, if we want politicians to declare urban violence reduction a priority and develop budgets that match their promises, we need to transform the narratives around the issue. If the conversation can change people's minds, it may also create pressure for better policy interventions where there is no political will for them. *Bleeding Out* aims to be part of this effort by marshaling data, showcasing pioneering policy interventions, and sharing the stories of individuals who struggled with and survived violence. Abt makes an impassioned call for greater dialogue with those affected by violent crime in order to create empathy and build the necessary partnerships. In a way, he invites us to put the books aside for a moment and listen to the communities that are hurting.

Conclusion

Taken together, the books reviewed here raise a number of multifaceted issues, including the relationships of nonstate armed groups, US policy, and research communication. Gangs and drug cartels have evolved not in a vacuum but in the shadow of state violence and corruption. Conversely, viewing these groups almost exclusively through a criminal lens misses how entrenched they are in marginalized neighborhoods. The absence of the state, and with it the dearth of protection, opportunities, and services, permits illicit groups to fill this governance void. Whenever people cooperate with them, however reluctantly, they inadvertently give them even greater legitimacy and influence.

The United States has tended to see street and criminal gangs as security problems imported from its neighbors rather than fueled by marginalization and drug use within its borders. By dismissing these domestic factors for gang proliferation and illicit economies, the country has helped spread rather than curb the associated violence. Past US interventionism protracted the civil wars in Central America and created clandestine refugees whose exclusion from conventional society prompted some of them to join California street gangs or form their own. Today a new form of security imperialism funds NTCA law enforcement efforts to control mobility and deter perceived threats (gangs, drugs, irregular migrants) to the United States.

Research, no matter its strength of argument and evidence, is unlikely to end the policy status quo unless there is political will to do so or citizen pressure helps produce it. For almost two decades, scholars and journalists have critiqued and rejected the wars on drugs and gangs in Mexico and Central America, yet these ineffective and harmful strategies continue. Studies need to be more accessible and intelligible to the public, even though influencing people's minds may be more challenging in the age of social media and fake news.

The books also allude to topics that warrant further research and reflection, including state perpetrators, research in contexts of violence, and researcher trauma. In the fight against gangs and drug markets the line between offenders and victims is often more blurred than official narratives suggest. Opening police and armed forces to external and civilian scrutiny can both broaden and deepen our understanding of victimizers. Why do state agents resort to extralegal violence? How do their perceptions of institutional efficacy and internal abuse shape their thinking about human rights violations? What mechanisms might

successfully hold officers accountable for misconduct? On the other hand, how does exposure to violence affect their mental health?

More research is needed on the criminal governance of the MS-13 and Eighteenth Street gangs in Central America and their relationships to diasporic communities in the United States. But how can such investigations, which often require fieldwork, be done when accessing these groups and the territories they rule is impracticable and prohibitively risky? How can trust with research participants be generated and information be obtained ethically and safely for everyone involved? If approaching members of gangs or security forces is not feasible, could useful information about the dynamics in criminally governed areas be obtained from forced migrants, for example?

Finally, researchers are advised to conduct risk assessments, maintain digital security, and be situationally aware during fieldwork. What, however, is the emotional impact of research in contexts of violence? How can scholars mitigate and recover from direct or indirect trauma, yet continue to pursue their professional interests? Field safety training is widely available for journalists but less so for academics, even though they may face similar scenarios and hazards. What responsibilities should universities have to help staff and students prevent and heal from trauma through training and support? To what extent should research grants include funding for these purposes?

Author Information

Sonja Wolf holds a PhD in International Politics (Aberystwyth University) and is currently a Cátedra CONACYT Professor with the Drug Policy Program at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE), Mexico. Dr. Wolf's research interests focus on migration, violence, street gangs, and security policies, especially in Central America. She is the author of *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (2017).

How to cite this article: Wolf, Sonja. 2021. Urban Violence: *Maras*, Meanings, and Murders. *Latin American Research Review* 56(2), pp. 543–551. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1516>

Submitted: 27 August 2020

Accepted: 28 December 2020

Published: 15 June 2021

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LARR

Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 