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**Central American youth gangs in the Washington D.C. area**

*The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) has an ongoing project on youth gangs in Central America that focuses on government responses to gangs, human rights concerns, and the need for violence prevention programs. In connection with that program, WOLA is participating in a research effort led by the Center for Inter-American Studies and Programs of the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). The research, conducted by participating institutions in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua, and the Washington D.C. area, will produce a comparative and transnational study of Central American gangs.*

*As part of the study, this paper offers an evaluation and analysis of the characteristics, both local and transnational, of Central American gangs in the Washington, D.C. area. In two phases we have collected data about gang-involved youth of Central American origin in the metropolitan Washington area. The study documents the experience of gang members themselves through ethnographic interviews reports data on the background and activities of gang members, and examines how both governments and non-governmental agencies are responding to the gang phenomenon in the Washington area. It looks at how local governments have responded, as well as how the federal government's response has impacted the Washington area. And it looks at the responses of community based organizations, schools, clinics, and other service providers working in prevention and intervention.*

*In coordination with our partners in Mexico and Central America, we expect to conclude this project with a set of research-based policy recommendations, as well as recommendations for more in-depth research on this complex and important topic. Additionally, WOLA, in conjunction with groups active in the Latino community in the United States, hopes to make recommendations about how U.S. government agencies, both local and national, can most effectively respond to the challenges posed by the emergence of gangs made up of Central American immigrants and their children.*

## *1.0 Introduction*

This report summarizes the findings of a 5 month investigation into the transnational phenomenon of youth gangs whose members are of Central American origin in the Washington D.C. area. Since this is a transnational study of so-called Central American gangs we have been most interested in understanding gang-involved youth (and adults) who are Central American immigrants or the children of Central American immigrants living in the greater metropolitan District of Columbia area.

The two major gangs made of Central American immigrants and their children in the U.S. are 18th Street and *Mara Salvatrucha*. 18th Street does not have a strong presence in the D.C. area, though small cliques may form and disband occasionally. *Mara Salvatrucha*, perhaps the most well known of the gangs that exist in Central America and the U.S., does have a presence in the

Washington area, and all of the interviewees in this study who have been gang involved were involved in Mara Salvatrucha. While there are Latinos/Hispanics of various national origins involved in some smaller gangs in the Washington D.C. area, in addition to *Mara Salvatrucha*, there is no indication that these gangs have ties outside of the United States, so they have not been pursued in this study. In the interest of time and resources, this study focused on gangs that are directly associated with Central America by reputation and/or by the movement of people within the U.S. and transnationally; that has meant a focus on Mara Salvatrucha members in the Washington area.

This paper makes four major arguments.

First, it argues that despite sensationalist media coverage of gang violence (some of it driven by the demonization of Central American youth as a result of anti-immigration sentiment in the region and nationally), Central American youth gangs are a relatively minor security problem in the D.C. area. The problem is significant for particular communities, and especially for the youth themselves who get drawn into the gang life. But relative to other public security threats in the area, Central American gangs are not a high priority concern for area law enforcement.

Second, it argues, based on the experience of former-gang members interviewed for the study that the nature of youths' involvement in a gang varies significantly from individual to individual. The decision to join or to leave a gang, and how an individual participates in a gang, does not follow a single, simple pattern; widely held stereotypes about gangs and gang members are over simplified, and often inaccurate.

Third, the study argues that there are important examples of "best practices" in responding to youth gang violence in the D.C. area. Many local governments have implemented a three-pronged approach, that includes prevention, intervention and enforcement efforts, rather than focusing exclusively on policing. These approaches may be succeeding in reducing gang violence and helping young people who are at risk of joining Central American youth gangs.

Finally, the study argues that despite the positive approaches being implemented in the area, many youth are still at risk. Prevention efforts are under-funded and the needs of Latino immigrant youth (especially those at risk of joining Central American gangs) need to be more fully recognized and addressed.

### *1.1* ***The Context of the gang phenomenon in the Washington D.C. area.***

Central American gangs in the Washington D.C. area have to be situated in the geographical and social space of the area. They exist within several overlapping social contexts. The following sections touch on six key areas. The first section draws on the extensive literature in the U.S. social sciences on street gangs, ethnic gangs, immigrant gangs and youth gangs. It offers aa brief explanation of the history of gangs in the U.S. that places the current phenomenon in its historical context. The second section discusses the emergence of Central American gangs in the Los Angeles context. It is important to keep in the forefront of discussion of this transnational issue that the *maras* "origins" can be traced to Los Angeles, and that they are not an "imported" problem. *Maras* emerged in the U.S. initially and then traveled to Central America and back to

other parts of the U.S. via transnational migration patterns. The third section considers the changing demographics of the growing D.C. region. These demographics are important in locating Central American gangs in relation to other gangs, especially African-American gangs, in the area. Section four looks at the recent history of rates of violent crime in Washington D.C., comparing crime rates in the city to the historically much lower rates in the suburbs.

Sections five, and six place discussions of youth gang violence in the Washington area in the broader context of the U.S. national political debate. Section five examines the current debate about immigration in the U.S. Congress, as well as the on-the ground turf battles between immigrant day-laborers and local anti-immigrant activist groups, which have added an even more contentious layer to the context of the discussion of the Central American gang phenomenon in the Washington D.C. area. And finally, section six notes the importance of recognizing that the D.C. area is where the federal government is located and thus is the site of the intersection of local and national politics.

*1.1.a Brief Background on immigrant gangs in the United States*

Gangs in the U.S. were first documented in New York in the late 1700s. The first serious study of gangs was produced in Chicago in 1927 by Fredrick Thrasher. Thrasher came to two important conclusions: that the character of gangs varies significantly from one group to another, and is not reducible to a single phenomenon, and that gangs fulfill the social needs of marginalized youth. These conclusions continue to be true today.

But if some things have held steady about gangs, other things have changed over the years. Since the 1920s and 1930s the number of communities that report the presence of youth gangs has grown from dozens to thousands. With the increased availability of arms, gangs have become much more violent over the years (Egley, et al., 2006).

Additionally, the racial makeup of gangs has shifted, which is significant in the U.S. multi-racial context. (Comparatively, race and ethnicity are not significant identifiers of gang members in the Central American and Mexican contexts.) Predominantly African-American, Mexican and Mexican-American, and Puerto Rican gangs have long existed in urban centers in the United States. But until the 1960s, the majority of youth gangs in the United States were made up of youth of Western European, and later southern and eastern European backgrounds. Today, the majority of youth gangs in the United States are made up of Latinos, Asians and African Americans.

James Diego Vigil, who did the first major study of Mexican and Mexican American gangs in the U.S., argues that, "Chicano (or Mexican American) youth gangs, unlike other immigrant groups, have shown remarkable longevity" (p5, 1988). That is, many Mexican-American youth gangs have stayed in existence over long periods of time, as new members cycle in and older ones cycle out. Vigil attributes this longevity to the lesser degree of acculturation experienced by Mexicans and Mexican Americans, relative to other immigrant groups. This is partly due to the continuing influx of new Mexican immigrants to the southern region of the U.S; and partly due to the racialized experience of Mexicans, who are more racially identified and less integrated into mainstream culture than are earlier European immigrants (Vigil 1988). Additionally, Vigil

argues that the inter-generational poverty experienced by Mexican Americans in the "underclass" in urban centers such as Los Angeles creates the conditions in which gangs continue to thrive. (1988).

Additionally, Egley, et al., note a recent shift in the response to gangs: "[p]artly because of gang proliferation and increased violence levels, but also reflective of more conservative political times, the official approach to gangs has swung from prevention and social intervention to law enforcement control programs and 'crackdown' legislation" (xiii, 2006).

While Central American gangs in the D.C. area are unique in their geographic, cultural and historical position, they are in many ways like the gangs that experts have been learning about for many years in the United States.

*1.1.b The emergence of so-called Central American gangs in the U.S.*

This study is specifically focused on so-called Central American gangs which emerged from the areas in Los Angeles where Vigil observed Chicano gang life. In Spanish, the word "*mara"* is now widely used to talk about the specific gangs that this transnational study is tracking. In the context of Central America and Mexico, "*pandilla,"* or gang, is distinct from *mara*. *Mara* refers specifically to the gangs that developed during the 1980s in Los Angeles in predominantly Central American immigrant communities. Though there is debate about the origin of the term, it first became widely used to identify these gangs in Los Angeles. The *maras* are distinct, though not in absolute terms, from neighborhood or more "local" gangs. In English the *maras* are frequently referred to as Central American gangs. This is somewhat of a misnomer, since the commonly understood origin of these gangs is not in Central America, but within the political boundaries of the United States.

This paper uses the term "Central American gangs" interchangeably with "*maras."* When the terms Latino gangs or Hispanic gangs used, this is usually because the source does not specify if the gang members are Central American, or if they are using Latino/Hispanic as a racial or ethnic marker.

One could say that the *maras* themselves emerged from a political situation for which the United States bears heavy responsibility: the massive immigration of Salvadorans and other Central Americans to the U.S. fleeing civil wars in which the United States-backed forces were known for committing human rights abuses. As the now standard account of the origin story goes, Central American gangs began to form in Los Angeles in the 1980s as the large numbers of war refugees and their children made their way into previously Mexican and Mexican-American-dominated neighborhoods.[1] Upon arrival in Los Angeles, these Central Americans encountered Mexican and Mexican-American gangs, which, as documented by Vigil and others, had long existed in the L.A. area. In part to defend themselves, they formed their own gangs based on national identities, like *Mara Salvatrucha*, which was originally linked to specifically Salvadoran immigrants. While the origin of the *maras* is linked to confrontations with the Chicano gangs in

[1] While this origin story may be true, it has not been adequately documented. In addition, the reasons for the emergence of Central American gangs in the D.C. area more recently, is still not fully understood, and should be investigated.

Los Angeles, it is important to stress, that the literature about the emergence of gangs suggest that no single factor is likely to cause gangs to develop in a given community. It is likely that the Chicano gangs were one influence among many (i.e. lack of parental supervision, poor policing in communities, immigrants' feelings of alienation and lack of opportunity, etc.)

Though Central American gangs have emerged in the Washington area, and in many other communities in the United States, the oldest and largest concentrations of Central American gangs are still in Los Angeles. Central American gangs in Washington D.C., and in other communities, although related to those in Los Angeles, are distinct phenomena, with their own evolution and their own dynamics. This study looks at Central American gangs in the Washington D.C. area. What is true of gangs in Washington D.C. is not necessarily true for Los Angeles or other communities.

Once gangs had begun to emerge in the Central American immigrant communities in the United States, U.S. deportation policies helped spread their names, their style, and their influence back to Central America. Beginning in the mid 1990s, the U.S. adopted a new, more aggressive approach to deportation, identifying and deporting not only undocumented and legal non-citizen convicts as they completed federal prison sentences, but reaching out to identify and deport undocumented and non-citizen felons as they completed sentences in state and local prisons. The increasing deportation of gang-involved Central Americans from the United States fed an already-existing gang problem in Central American countries, which have many fewer resources than does the U.S. to address the societal threats that gangs pose. After arriving in the country to which they have been deported, with few networks and sometimes little or no working knowledge of Spanish, many gang members are likely to join forces and establish or join up with gangs in their home country, in prisons and in the streets. Meanwhile, immigration continues to increase the size of the Central American immigrant community in the United States. With few economic opportunities in the post war period, many Central Americans continue to immigrate to the United States, often without documents. Nationally, Central Americans are estimated to make up 20% of the11.5 million undocumented immigrants residing in the U.S.[2]

The result is a growing pool of youth at risk to join gangs. Sometimes families arrive together, but often parents leave their children behind for several years until they have established themselves with jobs and a home to support their children when they arrive. Re-unification of children and parents who have been separated because of the immigration experience, (discussed more below), can be an extremely stressful experience for a young person, who frequently feels alienated or not-cared for or understood by parents who work long hours, have developed new relationships or started a new family, and who may not pick up on the cues that their child is involved in gang activities.

*1.1.c. Demographics of the D.C. area*

Census Bureau data defines the Washington D.C. region as: the city of Washington (also known as the District of Columbia), Anne Arundel, Calvert, Charles, Frederick, Howard, Montgomery, Prince George's and St. Mary's counties in Maryland; Alexandria, Fairfax City, Falls church,

[2] http://www.ailf.org/ipc/policy_reports_2002_value.asp and http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf

Manassas and Manassas Park, and Arlington, Fairfax, Fauquier, Loudoun, Prince William and Stafford counties in Virginia with a total population of 5,733,511 according to the 2000 census. The scope of this preliminary investigation is more limited, focusing on the close in counties: Montgomery county, Prince George's county, Fairfax county and the District of Columbia, which have a total population of 3,216,664.[3]

The Washington D.C. area is among the fastest growing in the nation with a 5.7% increase in population from the year 2000 to the year 2003.[4] When broken down by ethnicity, the change in the ethnic make-up of the D.C. area population is dramatic. From the year 2000 to 2003 the Hispanic population of the D.C. area has risen by 19.4%. Hispanics now make up 9.3% of the total population of the D.C. area, according to the Census. Additionally, census data calculating numbers of Hispanic residents are thought to underestimate the actual population, because undocumented Hispanics may be less likely to respond to census forms due to fear of deportation. For example, estimates that include undocumented immigrants who do not respond to census forms bring the Hispanic population of the District of Columbia to 13 percent.[5] Similar figures are likely to be valid for the surrounding counties.

Hispanics are concentrated, particularly in the District and the inner counties; there are neighborhoods and cities which are 35-50% Hispanic.[6]

The Hispanic population in the Washington includes substantial numbers of people of Central American origin. According to the District of Columbia's Office on Latino Affairs, over one-third of the foreign born Latinos in the city are from Central America, the majority from El Salvador. When the number of those born in the United States but of Central American ancestry is added to the number of those born in Central America, the share of population made up of people of Central American origin goes up substantially. In the Washington D.C. area as a whole, almost half of the Latino population is composed of people whose national origin is Central American; 31% come from El Salvador alone.[7]

Central Americans have immigrated to the U.S. because of political events, natural disasters, and ever-present economic opportunity in the U.S. coupled with the relative lack of opportunity in their home countries. In the 1980s, civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, and the contra war in Nicaragua, led many to flee their homelands. Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001, and Hurricane Stan in 2005 also led Central Americans to leave home and settle in the U.S.

While statistical information is not available on the national origin of gang members in the region, based on ethnographic interviews and discussions with law enforcement, service providers and former gang members, Latino youth gangs appear to be made up of primarily first or second generation Central Americans. Significant media attention has been focused on *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Mara 18* (18th Street), both of which are linked to El Salvador. All of

[3] See Annex 1 for map of Washington D.C. metropolitan area.
[4] Source for DC area demographics: United States Census Bureau
[5] http://ola.dc.gov/ola/cwp/view,a,3,q,568739,olaNav,|32535|,.asp
[6] Census data refers to Hispanic rather than Latino as an ethnic, not racial, category.
[7] http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/mayjune00/washington.html

the 15 former-gang members interviewed for this study were Salvadoran or Salvadoran-American and they had all been involved with *Mara Salvatrucha*.

Gangs made up of Latinos of various national origins are active in the D.C. area but studying them was beyond the scope of this investigation. This study is specifically looking at "*maras*" as a transnational issue, so while law enforcement and even social service providers may consider *Mara Salvatrucha* and a local gang with Hispanic/Latino members as part of one single phenomenon, this study is looking specifically at gangs which are related to the phenomenon of transnational "*maras*."

*1.1.d Historical presence of crime in the D.C. area*

Violence has been declining in the U.S. generally and in the D.C. area specifically over the past 10 years, although rates of crime in the area vary dramatically from one jurisdiction to the next. Washington D.C. proper has a history of violence, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s the city was knows as the "murder capital" of the United States with over 500 murders per year in the city limits. Homicides rates declined from 70.3 per 100,000 in 1997 to 44 in 2003 (making intentional homicide rates in the city of Washington similar to those in El Salvador.) [8]

In contrast to the District, the inner suburbs have historically had very low crime rates, with the exception of a few "hot spots" in Prince George's county. Montgomery County historically has low rates of crime and has had declining crime for the past 4 years. Fairfax County crime has declined by 13.3% over the past 4 years. At odds with this trend, Prince George's County crime rate has increased by 23% over the past 4 years.[9] Media reports frequently associate this increase with the movement of less affluent African Americans out of Washington D.C. and into PG county due to the pressures of gentrification.

There has been an upward bump in some forms of crime in the last year. In Montgomery County, the most recent statistics for the first quarter of 2006 show an increase of 12.2% over all and increase of 9.1% for serious violent crime.[10] However, crime by "Latino" gangs has been reported to decline by 25%.[11] In Fairfax County, violent crime has increased by 13.7%.[12] Still, the general trend in the region and in the U.S is toward less violence.

Despite the generally falling rates of crime, youth gang violence has been an issue of great public concern. There have been several highly visible cases of violence involving Central American gang involved youth as well as African American youth over the past several years, which has been covered in both national and local media.[13] The role of the media in the perception of Central American gangs as an issue of grave importance for the security of the larger community will be explored further in this document. Later in this document I also explore the how other

[8] http://www.ops-oms.org/English/AD/DPC/NC/violence-graphs.htm
[9] http://www.co.pg.md.us/pgcounty/government/publicsafety/police/2004Statistics/12-Year_YTD_Trends.pdf
[10] http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/POL/crimestats/2006_3rdQuarter.pdf
[11] Conversation with Luis Cardona, quoting the Montgomery County Pd statistics
[12] http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/police/pdf/2004_crime_stats/page3.pdf
[13] National Geographic's 1 hour show, "The World's Most Dangerous gang" about Marasalvatrucha, specifically covers the Brenda Paz story which took place in the DC area and was covered extensively in the press.

political factors, such as the national debates about immigration and post 9-11 xenophobia may contribute to the perceived threat of Central American gangs to the larger community.

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that looking at crime statistics and gangs places the focus on gang involved-youth as criminals rather than on gang-involved youth as members of society whose needs are not being fulfilled. Not all gang involved youth are criminals and, according to interviews with service providers and ex-gang members themselves, the majority of them will leave the gang if given a viable option.

*1.1.e The Immigration Debate, nationally and in the Washington area*

The emergence and treatment of the gang phenomenon must be considered in relation to the current and heated debates about immigration in the United States today, including in the Washington area. The recent rapid increase in size and impact of the Latino population in the D.C. area, in combination with the federal government's post 9/11 focus on Homeland Security, has produced what some service providers as well as community based organizers describe as "anti-immigrant sentiment" in the region.[14] Anti-immigrant sentiment is also a current issue nationally, as changes in immigration law and enforcement issues are hotly debated in Congress and across the country. The active presence of the Minutemen, a national group that opposes so-called illegal immigration, in the D.C. area illustrates the local immigration tensions. Starting in mid-October of 2005, members of the Minutemen, a group known for "protecting" U.S. borders with its own armed militia of civilians, began to take action at a day labor site in Herndon, Virginia. In order to intimidate both day laborers and the contractors who hire them, the anti-immigrant activists took photographs of people at the sites and claimed they would report the contractors to the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. tax collecting agency. Later in the year, Herndon residents voted out the mayor and city council members who had supported the development of an official day-laborers site in the city.[15]

In response to the growing anti-immigrant sentiment, in May of 2006, thousands of immigrant and their supporters marched on the Mall in Washington, in a national call for immigration reform which would allow for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently residing in the U.S. And continuing the tug of war in the public sphere, back at the local level, in September 2006 Herndon, Virginia Town Council approved a proposal to seek federal training for their local police officers to enforce federal immigration laws.[16] In the U.S. traditionally, local police do not enforce federal immigration laws because local residents are not likely to report crime or trust the police if they fear being questioned about their immigration status (see discussion below).

So, while the Latino community in the D.C. area grows, and the need for services grows with it, anti-immigration sentiment makes an already difficult transition from home country to the U.S. even more difficult. Additionally, anti-immigration sentiment can contribute to feelings of isolation, especially among at-risk youth. According to many of the service providers who work with "at risk" and gang-involved youth in the D.C. area, living in an environment where anti-

[14] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/08/AR2005120802068.html
[15] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/27/AR2006092700328.html
[16] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/27/AR2006092700328.html

immigrant sentiment is expressed and condoned puts youth at higher risk of feeling isolated and hopeless about their future: it puts them at greater risk of joining a gang.

Latino immigrants, among them Central Americans, face anti-immigrant sentiment and discrimination in the area of criminal justice as well. In addition to increasing the risk factors for youth who might join a gang, anti-immigrant sentiment may also affect the way laws are written and enforced. Studies suggest that about a third of all young people commit illegal acts, but that Latino and African American youth are much more likely to be charged with committing a crime than are white youth.[17] A study by the National Council of La Raza indicates that Latinos, including both adults and youth, are overrepresented and unfairly treated at every stage of the U.S. criminal justice system.[18]

*1.1.f. Washington DC: the intersection of federal and local politics*

Finally, the location of the national legislature in an area in which Central American gang violence is a much-publicized phenomenon has had some impact on federal policies. Members of Congress live and work in the Washington area, and their exposure to gang violence in the D.C. area, and the media portrayals of it, may make them more open to harsh anti-gang proposals that come from fellow legislators who live in the same gang-affected suburbs. Some activists suggest that the recent emergence of gangs in the D.C. area, specifically, has made it a national issue with a federal response because it now affects law-makers living in the D.C. area who otherwise were not interested in the subject.[19]

***1.2 Objectives of the D.C. area study***

This study seeks to develop a preliminary understanding of the nature and extent of youth gang violence in the Washington D.C. area, and to assess governmental responses to date. These research objectives are inscribed within our larger policy objectives, which are to build support for a comprehensive approach to youth gang violence in Central America as well as in the U.S. WOLA believes that Central American governments should adopt a three-pronged approach, discussed in greater detail below, which includes prevention, smart policing, and rehabilitation. WOLA believes that U.S. officials and agencies should encourage their counterparts in Central America to adopt such and approach, and should offer technical assistance, training, and funding to move in that direction.

This particular paper aims to both analyze the governmental and non-governmental response to the issue of gangs in the Washington area, as well as to bring the words of ex-gang members into the research. Too often the experience of disenfranchised youth is lost in the horrific stories of violence. WOLA supports the prosecution of violent individuals who are a threat to themselves and their community, but we also support a humane and constructive response to at risk youth, and to youth gang members who have the interest and capacity to be rehabilitated.

[17] JPI, Ganging up on Community Report, 2005. "While a third of youth may engage in serious delinquency, researchers from the Pre-trial Resource Center reported that 82% of youth charged in select adult courts were minority youth, and that 7 out of 10 youth sentenced to an adult correctional term were African American or Latino."

[18] Walker, Nancy E , J. Michael Senger, Francisco A. Villarruel, Angela M. Arboleda "Lost Opportunities: The Reality of Latinos in the U.S. Criminal Justice System." Presentation to Congress October 14, 2004.

[19] Interview with Angela Arboleda, National Council de La Raza. February 7, 2006

### *1.3 Methodology*

The pressing and sometimes competing concerns of human rights and public security are the backdrop to this study. Central American gangs in the Washington area (and in the United States in general, and in Central America) tend to be treated as a security threat rather than as a social problem, or a human rights issue. This paper aims to balance these concerns, and to note as well, the threat that the proliferation of gangs has on not only the public in general, but specifically on young people who are at risk of joining gangs and their families.

#### *1.3.a Literature Review: academic, policy materials, police and "Gang Task Force" reports,(questionable) statistics*

This research began with an extensive literature review on the topic of gangs in the U.S. and internationally. The academic literature on gangs is varied, offering multiple approaches and lenses through which to see the issue. Within the academy, there are pressures on researchers and readers to consider the positionality of the researcher and to acknowledge the limitations of any one study. The academy values approaching knowledge production critically in order to "consider the definitional stances and methodological strategies adopted by each researcher. The representativeness of the study sample, reliability of informants, and adequacy of comparisons groups are critical elements of the context of gang research and the information it produces" (Egley, et al. 2006). The academic literature tends to paint the gang phenomenon as one about which it is difficult and dangerous to generalize. In contrast, the literature drawn from gang task forces and law enforcement conferences, which focus on training police officers and other government officials on the use of suppression techniques, often generalizes freely about gang members, their lives and their activities by creating a criminal "definition of a gang" and a "gang member" as well as listing the typical activities in which so-called gang members take part. In the interest of enforcement, these definitions tend to be totalizing.

#### *1.3.b Ethnographic interviews with (former) gang members*

As a researcher working for a human rights advocacy organization, I wanted to focus both on the individual situations of the particular subjects I interviewed, as well as on the broad social dynamics that had led to their gang involvement. With this aspect of the phenomenon in mind, I interviewed 15 former-gang members in a combination of one-on-one interviews, small group interviews and focus group-like interviews. While I tried to gather demographic data on each subject, I did not always gather a complete profile. There were cases where the need to gain trust precluded complete data collection. Ten of the 15 people I interviewed identified as Salvadoran; 5 of those ten were born in El Salvador, and five in the U.S. Of the remaining five, one was born in the U.S. shortly after his Salvadoran mother's arrival, and I can not confirm the birthplace or national origin of the other 4 individuals. Thirteen of the interviewees were under 25 and two were over 25. All of the interviewees identified as former or ex-gang members, although some of them had left the gang life as recently as within four months of the interview. I use the qualitative data gathered in these ethnographic interviews throughout this report, to shed light on the personal side of the gang phenomenon as told by young men living in the D.C. area. I focus

on three distinct individuals to give a sense of the diversity of the gang members' experience and circumstances, and also weave in the words of other individuals throughout.

Interviewing former gang members posed some challenges. I met most of the interviewees through meetings of local violence prevention groups. After attending a meeting, I would announce my interest in the subject and ask for volunteers. It usually took me two or three attempts at contacting an individual before he would respond. Frequently the subjects would say they were interested and willing to talk to me in person, but when I would call to follow up, they would not respond. There were, however, a few interviewees who were excited to talk to me about their lives and how they related to my research.

A second challenge when interviewing former-gang members relates to the "gangster mentality." As a researcher, my intention was neither to perpetuate gang identification or activity, nor to be an active part of judging it as wrong or anti social. However, I found it quite interesting how the interviewees told me that they maintained aspects of their "gangster" values, even though many of them had long left the gang lifestyle, served time in prison and presumably tried to leave all aspect of the life behind. Often when telling stories about their "gang-banging" days, I had the sense that re-living the experience through their story telling was somehow perpetuating the "gang mentality." For example, at the beginning of one interview with a young man who has been out of the gang life for well over 7 years, he said to me, "I hate to say it, but I wasn't a really hard core gang-banger or anything." He expressed shame that he had never really done anything extremely violent, although he told stories of witnessing rape and beatings. While talking with former-gang members I always felt I needed to be reserved with my reaction so as not to encourage boastful story telling, or embellishment of details.

The lack of interviews with female gang members is important to mention and explain. While there are female gang members in *Mara Salvatrucha* in some areas, based on the interviews with service providers and former gang-members, female members of *MS* are very uncommon in the D.C. area. I did have contact with female outreach workers who had histories of being close with gang members, usually brothers or boyfriends. Additionally, some school police officers reported that girl gangs do exist in the high schools in the area, but the gangs are local and band and disband frequently. The instability of the female gangs made them more difficult to delve into as they fell outside of the frame of "Central American gangs" that this research is focused on. With more time I would talk with young women as well and mothers and fathers, about the *maras* and the effects of gang activity on family life and relationships.

*1.3.c Interviews with service providers, researchers and police*

In addition to ethnographic interviews, I conducted fact finding interviews with service providers, community police officers, school officials, researchers, and community activists. I researched prevention and intervention techniques used in the area and gathered information about the struggles that young Latinos are facing on a day-to-day basis. Interestingly, the service-providers were frequently very resistant to talking with me despite my attempts to build rapport and explain the human rights perspective of my work. One service provider said, "We've just been burned too many times," when I noted her resistance to share names of people who might be willing to talk with me, or information about how her organization worked with

gang-involved youth. While frustrating in the moment, the resistance of the service providers also illuminated the pressure and lack of support that they feel in their work, which in turn gives insight into the conditions and resources available to youth who are at risk of joining gangs. Police officers and think tank or academic researchers, when they could be pinned down for an interview, were most often pleased to share information.

In addition to the interviews I also attended several gang prevention or violence prevention forums in the D.C. area as well as forums geared toward law enforcement with a special focus on gangs. My methods in these forums were largely participant observation. These larger settings were most helpful at the beginning stages of my research when I knew less about the subject. Over time the larger forums became redundant.

## *2.0 Characterization of "Central American" gangs in the Washington DC area*

Unlike in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, the findings of my research show that Central American gangs in the Washington D.C. area are *not* a major threat to the security of the state or the area's citizens. The number of gangs, the number of gang-involved youth, and the percentage of crime for which they are responsible, are all relatively low. Central American gangs in the D.C. area, in general, pose the largest threats to each other and to the very specific communities in which they live.

The most important thing about Central American gangs that has been confirmed by this research is that gangs and gang-involved youth cannot be characterized or dealt with as if they were all the same. Gang involved youth are highly variable in the reasons they enter the gang, the activities in which they participate, the cohesiveness of their group identities, their response to prevention and enforcement, etc. The desire to develop a totalizing description and response to the gang phenomenon must be challenged in prevention, intervention and enforcement; targeted, yet flexible, approaches must be developed.

The story of particular gang involved youth varies significantly based on geographical, historical and cultural trajectory, with family circumstances usually, although not always, playing a large role. The media portrayals of Central American gangs perpetuate the idea that members of *Mara Salvatrucha,* for example, are the same from San Salvador to Canada. Additionally, the enforcement response frequently fails to effectively distinguish between youth who fall into gangs for social support and belonging and gang-involved youth who are also involved in serious criminal activity.[20]

Research that approaches Central American youth gangs from a human rights perspective,—in contrast to the security/enforcement approach most commonly used by the media, lawmakers and the police—highlights the lost opportunities for youth who become gang involved, as well as the specific risks of living, working or going to school in areas with a significant level of gang activity. Research interviews with social service providers underscored the needs of Latino immigrant youth, and the scarcity of services to respond to those needs. Social service providers all reported that there were many more Latino youth and families to assist than they could possibly manage. It is difficult to get enough resources, and even youth who do make it to some of the agencies cannot be adequately served because they need intense intervention that most agencies cannot afford to provide.

But if there is much to criticize about how local authorities understand and respond to the problems of Latino immigrant youth and youth gangs, there are also important examples of constructive approaches. In response to high profile incidents of violence, some Washington area jurisdictions have implemented targeted, multi-dimensional approaches that include prevention, intervention and enforcement programs to contain and respond to the problem.

[20] See discussion later of the National Geographic special, "The World's Most Dangerous Gang."

## *2.1 Number, types and organization of Central American gangs in the D.C. area*

Gangs in the United States

Youth gangs in the D.C. area need to be understood in the context of the national situation, and national discussion about gang violence. Figures about gangs and gang membership are notoriously unreliable; not only is data collection and standardization difficult, but there is little agreement on the definition of a gang, or the criteria for gang membership. Reliable empirical data is scarce, and discussions are often colored by prejudices and pre-conceptions. Additionally, since it is the police, generally an enforcement-focused institution, who usually gather the statistics, much information important to understanding gang-involved youth, is not collected. Such useful information might include information about a gang member's life history, their experience of violence previously, their experience with gang-prevention, or intervention programs and other social service oriented questions. Additionally, we do not have accurate numbers, for example, of gang involved youth who have no previous history of criminal activity, or even delinquency, but who became involved in criminal activity after joining a gang. Despite the limitations of the available data, it is important to begin by looking at the available information and to utilize it provisionally.

According to the FBI, there are some 30,000 gangs in the United States, with some 800,000 members. According to an FBI official, "those groups range from those that do almost no criminal activities to the most violent."[21] Nationally, *Mara Salvatrucha* is often described by the media as one of the most violent gangs (a judgment that some law enforcement officials share.) It is difficult to calculate the number of people involved in *MS*, but estimates have been made by the FBI.

> Due to a lack of a national database and standard reporting criteria for the identification of gang members, the frequent use of aliases by gang members, and the transient nature of gang members, the actual number of MS-13 members in the United States is difficult to determine. However, the National Drug Intelligence Center estimates there to be between 8,000 and 10,000 hardcore members in MS-13.[22]

Nationally, there is growing concern about youth gang violence, particularly by Latino/Hispanic gangs.

> In 2001, 27 percent of police agencies polled by National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) reported increased gang activity in their jurisdictions. The next year that number jumped more than 40 percent. The most recent NYGC survey confirmed that all cities over 250,000 reported having gang activity as did 87% of suburban counties.[23]

The same survey found that 49% of gang members nation wide are Hispanic.

At the same time, a study by the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) suggests that reports of a national "gang crisis" may be exaggerated; media portrayals of the problem may be having an impact and

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[21] Stanely Stoy, the Deputy Director of the FBI's National MS-13 Task Force said this in a presentation at the Kay Spiritual Life Center at American University on March 23, 2005.
[22] From Statement of Chris Swecker, FBI, Congressional Testimony April 20, 2005 www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/swecker042005.htm
[23] Joint County Gang Prevention Task Force (Montgomery and PG, MD), page 3

anti-immigrant sentiment may shape perceptions as well. A JPI report that used statistics from the Office of Justice Programs reports, "[v]iolence by perceived gang members declined by 73 percent between 1994 and 2003 in the United States."[24]

As noted above, the prevalence and characteristics of youth gangs is a controversial and often politically charged topic. The FBI approach to gangs which does not discriminate between offending, violent gang members and non-criminal gang members, illustrates the importance of a strategy toward gangs that distinguishes between criminal and non-criminal gang involvement. When there is not a distinction between violent gang involved youth (the minority) and youth who are associated with the gang but haven't been violent, as in media portrayals as well as much of the law enforcement literature, the potential for intervention are lost and youth are criminalized by association.

**Central American Gangs in the D.C. area**

Local gangs, or "crews," have long existed in the D.C. area. Neighborhood based gangs, many involved in drug dealing, have plagued the area for years, but there have been relatively few connections to larger national gangs, such as the Bloods and the Crips. More recently the Bloods and the Crips have become active in the prisons in Maryland.[25] Gangs based in predominantly Latino neighborhoods, and with links (sometimes only in name) to nationally known, primarily Central American gangs, are a relatively recent phenomenon emerging in visible numbers in the mid 1990s.

The FBI traces Central American gangs in the D.C. area back no further than 1993. According to an FBI report:

> "In 1993, three MS-13 gang members from Los Angeles, California, moved to the Northern Virginia and Washington, DC, metropolitan area to recruit additional MS-13 members."[26]

Gang lore from interviews with gang members also supports this claim about the movement of *Mara Salvatrucha* from the Los Angeles area to the D.C. area, however I was not able to talk with anyone who knew the original Los Angeles gang members, or if their motivation to come to the D.C. area was in fact to start the gang here. Academic research about gangs suggests that this is not the way that gang culture usually moves from place to place. The idea of "colonization" by gangs, which is frequently invoked by law enforcement, is disputed by academic experts on the subject of gangs. According to the academic experts, gang culture usually travels as a byproduct of movement based on other social needs (i.e. moving because of connections with family members in a region, re-unification of families, job opportunities, etc).[27]

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[24] Jason Ziedenburg. "Ganging up on Communities: putting gang crime in context." Justice Policy Institute July 2005, page 6.
[25] Statement of Capitan Leonard Johnson, State of Maryland Department of Corrections, at The State of Maryland Gang Summit, Columbia Maryland June 1, 2006.
[26] From Statement of Chris Swecker, FBI, Congressional Testimony April 20,2005 http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/swecker042005.htm
[27] Conversation with Dr. Cheryl Maxson, University of California, Irvine, Dpt. of Criminology, Law and Society, WOLA Office March 29, 2006.

In contrast to D.C., Central American gangs emerged in the Los Angeles area following the first wave of Central American immigrants in the 1980s. While the D.C. area also saw an influx of Central Americans in the 1980s, the problem of Central American gangs has not emerged until more recently here. This is due, in part to the different histories of immigration in California versus the D.C. area. When Salvadoran and other Central American immigrants arrived in the D.C. area in the 1980s, they did not confront an already well established Chicano community (and gang network) as those who arrived to California did. And thus, they did not need to organize and defend themselves in the same way. However, many of the other factors that are thought to contribute to the evolution of gangs did exist for Central American immigrants upon arrival starting in the 1980s.

Because the Central American gangs are newer phenomenon in the Washington area, police, community activists and policy makers have the opportunity to learn from the L.A. experience and the experience of experts in Central America. Additionally, the emergence of the issue at this time in the D.C. area may provide an example of how to build effective responses to gangs which may be adapted to the Central American situations and other U.S. situation. As noted in the section below on responses to gangs, the D.C. area has had some success in responding to Central American gangs.

The Washington D.C. area is divided into jurisdictions with separate systems for education, police and other public services. While people, including gang-involved youth, travel back and forth between Maryland, Virginia and D.C., government-funded, service provider, and community based organization reports are usually published to address the specific situations of their jurisdictions. Collaboration between jurisdictions is not common. (See discussion of Gang Response in section 5).

The chart below is a compilation of statistics on numbers of Latino/Hispanic gangs in the counties and cities looked at in this study. These statistics were all collected by police units, however, as noted above, the methods for defining and counting gang members varies across the counties. As you can see

| **County/City** | **Number of gangs** | **Number of gang "members"** |
|---|---|---|
| Alexandria | 3 org. | NA |
| Arlington | 15 org. | 250-350 "members" |
| Fairfax | NA | 2,500 "members" |
| Loudoun | 20 org. | NA |
| Prince William | 8 org. | NA |
| Montgomery | 20 org. | 500 "members" |
| Prince George's | 20 org. | 200-2,000 "members" |
| District of Columbia | NA | 450-500 "members" |

While statistics are gathered differently across jurisdictions, they are drawn upon by individual departments and used comparatively, even though comparing numbers from county to county may lead to inaccurate or unproven conclusions about the growth of gangs. An example of jurisdictional data collection was reported in a presentation by Montgomery County police officers. In that presentation, officers expressed concern about the gang problem, noting a 50% increase in the number of gangs in the county from the year 2000 to 2001.[28] The presenter does note the limitation of data collection in the county and the region and then goes onto estimate that that there are 3,600 gang members in the Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, and that there are nine major gangs and more than 100 additional crews. The "Gang Task Force" report that the officers used does not distinguish between Central American or "Latino" gangs and other gangs in numbers, but it does note that Hispanic gangs tend to form based on national origin, while African American gangs form based on where they live and their disputes are mostly territorial.[29]

Montgomery County officials estimate that in their county there are 20 gangs, both major and minor, and 560 gang members. *Mara Salvatrucha* is described as the most organized and most violent of the D.C. area gangs in that 2004 report. More recently, Maryland police officers reported that neither MS-13, nor any other "Latino/Hispanic" gang, is the most menacing gang in the State, but that the Bloods and the Crips are. The 18th Street gang, another Central American gang, is known as MS-13's rival and is also present, but much less visible.[30]

One significant limitation of the systems for counting gang members is that there is no criteria for taking names out of the gang database in the event that an individual leaves the gang life. This is a problem both in terms of having an accurate sense of gang numbers, but more importantly this incapacity greatly inhibits intervention techniques. Many of my interviewees described the frustration of being stopped by the police and always perceived as a criminal even though they had left the gang life. Service providers also struggled with the ethical dilemma of telling gang members that there are opportunities outside of the gang life, when the discrimination and challenges ex-gang members face are so great.

Given the unreliable methods for gathering statistics on gangs, and the extensive media attention given to gang crimes which may over-represent the problem, it is difficult to quantify the presence of Central American gangs in the region. Overall the research indicates that Central American gangs are not a major public security problem and they are responsible for only a small minority of crimes in the region, though when involved in crimes, they can be very serious. The conclusion that Central American gangs are not a major threat in the region is based not only on a review of the often inexact statistics on the number of gangs and gang members. In addition, some law enforcement officials, when interviewed have said that gang crime makes up a small percentage of all violent crime in the area.

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[28] "Overview of Gang Activity and Prevention in Montgomery County" presented by Officer Rob Musser (MCPD 4th District-Wheaton Gang Coordinator), Mr. Jeffrey Wennar (Assistant Montgomery County State's Attorney) and Mr. Edward Clarke (MCPS Director of School Safety and Security). September 14, 2005

[29] Final Report and Recommendations—Joint Country Gang Prevention Task Force (PG/Montgomery), page 8

[30] Washington Post September 18, 2003

While local and national media accounts portray Central American gangs, specifically *Mara Salvatrucha*, as highly organized, there is not significant evidence that this is the case. One highly publicized case of trafficking women and a prostitution house in Montgomery County was portrayed as a sign that MS was becoming more organized, however in discussions, police officers have commented that the case was an exception and that the perpetrators may not have actually been particularly organized. The majority of gang related activities are not highly organized or structured.

If good quantitative data on Central American youth gangs is lacking, the qualitative characteristics of the lives and activities of gang–involved youth elude researchers as well. Further collaboration between school officials, other service providers, and police prevention efforts, may help to develop a more accurate picture of the problem of Central American gangs, the societal effects of the gangs, and potential solutions to alleviate the problem. I have used ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing (formerly) gang-involved youth in order to understand the phenomena in the words of the former gang members themselves. The life synopses of the life stories of three gang members written in the following sections aim to humanize the statistics and points to the difficulty in making generalizations about people involved in Central American gangs.

*Reasons for entering and leaving gangs*—What social service providers report

Community activists, think tank researchers, and service providers tend to focus on larger *societal causes* of the violence associated with gangs, such as anti-immigration sentiment, racism, lack of access to education, poverty, and language/cultural barriers. Some would even make the connection between gang involved youths' immigrant experience and global economies which produce mass migration and thus contribute to the disintegration of the social fabric which ties communities together. The isolation of the immigration experience may create a need for new ways for youth to find and create belonging.

Conversation with clinical and community education service providers in the D.C. area provide information about the experience of young Latinos "at risk" of becoming gang-involved. Over the past 5 months, I have spoken with twenty service providers from approximately 15 social service agencies and schools in the D.C. area. Service providers agreed that there are many different factors that contribute to putting a child at risk of willfully entering or being coerced into a gang. One D.C. area clinician prefaced his remarks by affirming that gang-involved youth in a community are a *symptom* of larger societal inequalities and isolation of young Latinos. He argued that gangs don't grow because a centralized organization or structure seeks to recruit and extend itself, , but that gangs are fueled by the risks and inequalities of society.[31]

A history of trauma is a risk factor that virtually all gang-involved youth share. One counselor suggested that most "at risk" Latino youth in the Washington area are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of witnessing war crimes in their home countries or because they are victims of domestic violence in their families. PTSD creates a feeling of pervasive disempowerment which can be relieved, at least temporarily, through gang

[31] Interview with Diego Uriburu, Identity, Inc., January 24, 2006.

involvement.[32] Service providers depicted the young people who join gangs as the most vulnerable and weak children who lack the social resources and internal resilience to avoid the gangs. Gangs, especially at first, fulfill a social and emotional need that the youth are not able to meet in other places like home, school, or extracurricular activities. Stress around re-unification of children and parents after years of separation, parents' lack of time to supervise their children's activities, parents' lack of knowledge of warning signs of gang-involvement, substance abuse in the family, domestic violence in the family, isolation due to lack of English-language proficiency, and many other factors contribute to the movement of Latino youth into gang activities.

Girls who enter gangs, still reported as a vast minority of gang members, have a different set of experience than boys. Most notably, their initiations rites, which may be coercive, involve sex acts with multiple boys. Also, the experience of pregnancy marks their gang involvement differently. One service provider said that *machismo* generally "protects" girls from entering into the gangs. Girls are not seen as capable of defending themselves or a fellow gang member and thus are generally considered ineligible for the Central American gangs like *Mara Salvatrucha*. However, if a girl is initiated into the gang it is usually through sex or prostitution. "The few girls who do enter into the gang are very weak; they have no sense of self."[33] Another service provider said that many girls in gangs have a history of sexual abuse.

While the service providers I interviewed feel that the prevention efforts they provide are beneficial for youth not yet in gangs, they expressed great frustration with efforts to assist gang members to leave gangs. Efforts to assist youth to leave gangs are inadequate because there is no system that will protect youth leaving a gang from retaliation by their own gang members or from rival gang members' attacks. There is not a system set up to help protect former gang members once they make the decision to leave a gang. Rather, the service providers fear that they may give a false sense of hope to gang members by encouraging them to leave the gangs because society doesn't offer them a different path to follow or protection once they are out. This is a particularly disturbing and challenging issue, and one that may have important parallels to rehabilitation efforts in Central America.

Three Cases

**Wilfredo's Story**

When Wilfredo was 5 years old, his father was killed in the Salvadoran civil war, and his mother emigrated with him and his younger brother from San Salvador to Los Angeles.[34] Like many of the nearly one million Salvadorans who fled to the United States to escape the war, Wilfredo's mother worked morning and night cleaning houses to sustain her family. From age 6, Wilfredo found his support network in the streets of his Los Angeles neighborhood. By age 13, Wilfredo had been officially initiated, or "jumped," into the then Los Angeles-based gang, *Mara Salvatrucha*. Over the following 15 years of gang-involvement, Wilfredo moved to the

[32] Conversation with Dennis Hunt, PhD, Executive Director of Center for multicultural human Services. February 4, 2006.
[33] Interview with Diego Uriburu, Identity, Inc., January 24, 2006.
[34] Pseudonyms are used in order to protect the identity of formerly gang-involved youth, who are frequently attacked by gang members for disassociating with the gang life.

Washington D.C. area where he continued in the gang life, and also traveled back and forth to El Salvador where he spent time in prison for gang activities. While Wilfredo continued his gang involvement when he traveled, that was not the reason he moved. He reported that he moved to the D.C area with his mother because his mother was trying to get him away from the gang lifestyle.

Wilfredo is the embodiment of the transnational nature of the Central American gang issue and represents what might be called the classic story of a Central American gang member. Traveling between El Salvador and the United States, as well as from coast to coast within the U.S., Wilfredo's support network was the gang. While serving 6 years in a D.C. area prison, he made the decision to leave the gang life. Wilfredo served time for the felonies of which he was convicted and now does gang prevention work.

**Juan's Story**

Juan was born in San Miguel, El Salvador and lived there until he was 15 years old. When he was 6 years old, his mother left El Salvador and emigrated to the Washington D.C. area. She sent remitances to his family every month and Juan said, "El Salvador depends on people in the U.S. That is the worst thing that can happen to you." He remained in El Salvador living with an aunt who became his mother figure. He grew very distant from his mother in the U.S. and though he respected and loved his aunt, when Juan was 12 he decided to join *Mara Salvatrucha* in San Miguel "because it was cool." Juan says he was not convinced by anyone but observed the *mareros* from afar and wanted to join, but that his fear of his aunt finding out that he was gang-banging kept him somewhat less involved in the gang life. While Juan was briefly the leader of a small clique of 12 to 15 year olds, he never got tattoos and his family did not know that he was gang-involved until the end of his time in the gang.

Juan dropped out of school during the 8$^{th}$ grade. He learned how to read and write, but could not multiply and divide when he arrived in the U.S. When Juan was 15 years old, he was almost shot in a confrontation with a rival gang member. His aunt was standing outside of her house when the incident occurred, and it was her disappointment with him that made him decide at that moment that he was going to leave the gang. "It was all about my [aunt] because every time we would talk [then] she would cry. She would tell me, 'I don't want to get a phone call saying you are in the morgue.'" Shortly thereafter, Juan was sent to the U.S. to live with his mother and her new husband. The reunification was not successful, and Juan left the home and went to live with one of his brothers and to do construction work. Juan faced many challenges and difficult situations after his arrival in the United States.

Juan never was involved in the gang life after leaving El Salvador. After his arrival in the U.S. he never spoke to anyone about his gang involvement in El Salvador until recently when he started working in gang prevention and outreach work. Juan worked his way through high school and is now attending community college.

**Jose's story**

"I have an addiction, I love the streets. I am part of that society, that environment." That is how Jose first described himself to me when we met for our interview. While in his mid-20's Jose was jumped into MS while in prison on charges for larceny (not gang related). Jose was born in Washington D.C. His mother is Salvadoran and his father is Ecuadorian. He remembers before Hispanic/Latino gangs existed in the area. Back then if one were looking for trouble, "you could go to Culmore [Northern Virginia]. Culmore had a reputation for [people with] *pleitos* and reckless behavior."

"I blame my uncle." He said when reflecting on the path his life has taken. "He came from L.A. with the *cholo* mentality. I looked up to him. He was an abusive drunk. He was violent and didn't have a problem slapping you around. My dad wasn't there." Jose was left alone with his uncle frequently while his mother worked cleaning office buildings. "Sometimes mom would try to get me to go to work with her," to keep him out of trouble.

"My uncle molested me; that's when everything went down hill. I didn't feel that there was any one to turn to. He'd call me a gringo, 'you faggot gringo!'...because I was born here. After that, I got into fights until I got to the point where I started liking them."

When reflecting on joining *Mara Salvatrucha* while in prison, Jose made it sound like a minor social decision he made in the prison context. With "joining" MS, he did not take on an identity that had a lasting importance. Even while in prison he said it was, "just something to do. 'You know, I'm part Salvadoran so okay, I'll get jumped in.'"

Jose is now out of prison and trying to stay straight.

These three brief profiles demonstrate the diversity of experiences of people in the D.C. area who get involved in Central American gangs. In one sense these three cases are exceptional in that all three young men are now trying to do work to prevent others from getting involved in gangs or other violent behavior. Additionally, these three stories provide a counter narrative to the frequent portrayals of Central American gang members as people who cannot be rehabilitated and are forever a threat to society.

Through out the text I will refer to these three cases in particular, as well as to other interviews I conducted, to demonstrate the importance of realistic portrayals of the gang phenomenon as well as to underscore the importance of prevention and intervention as part of a holistic approach to gangs.

## 3.0 *Factors associated with the emergence and reproduction of Central American gangs in the D.C. area.*

As stated previously, there are great disparities in crime and violence levels in the greater Washington D.C. area. While the city of Washington D.C has had historically high rates of murder and other crimes, and continues to have relatively high rates today, the Washington suburbs, with the exception of Prince George's county, have benefited from lower rates of crime.

The area is also racially diverse; the District of Columbia has a majority Black population. The growing population of immigrants, particularly from Central America, are a recent addition to this mixture, and tensions related to population pressure, ethnocentrism and racism exist. Additionally a xenophobic atmosphere in the post-September 11 environment, makes non-U.S. citizens especially suspect by law enforcement as well as in everyday interactions.

### *3.1 The social context of Central American gangs in the DC area*

Race, ethnicity, immigration status, anti-immigration legislation and activism, lack of resources for immigrant youth in school, and many other factors are a part of the larger context in which Central American gang involved youth are moving. As mentioned in the methodology section, it is important to keep in mind that Central American gangs in the U.S. context are a racially/ethnically marked group. That is, Central Americans and other Latinos in the U.S. context must manage a racial or ethnic identity in a way that they do not in the Central American or Mexican context where, with the exception of indigenous gangs which have recently emerged, gang members identify and are perceived as part of the racial majority, *mestizo*. Race is a charged issue in the U.S. as it is in most places. Central American gangs, which are usually lumped with all "Latino/Hispanic gangs" are categorized as a racial/ethnic group by law enforcement, as well as by school officials and other gangs.

Issues of race emerge in the discussion of how young Central Americans join gangs, but it is also a factor in the judicial system. Jose, who was born and acculturated in the U.S. described his decision to accept a plea bargain in a situation where he was accused of a crime he did not commit. "What am I going to do, go in front of a white jury with my bald head and tattoo? And I've got a bad record…" While Jose's situation by most accounts was not a favorable one, he specifically noted that a white jury would not be sympathetic to him as a Latino and a tattooed gang banger.

Additionally, Central American immigrants face language barriers that can lead to feelings of isolation, struggles with academic material, and lack of ability to find employment. Upon arrival, like other groups, Central American immigrants usually have limited education, and speak little English. According to the Mayor's Office of Latino Affairs for the city of Washington, one in every three Latinos in D.C. has trouble communicating in English.[35] Additionally, recent immigrants, and even more established Latinos living in the region, are less likely to have access to health care and have less education than their non-Latino white counterparts. As a demographic group, Hispanics, and especially recent immigrants from Central America, have specific needs, such as language classes, orientation to the school system, and basic social services, in an environment where resources are limited. Like most immigrant groups, Hispanic immigrants are a population with specific vulnerabilities and challenges, especially in the first months and years in the U.S. [36]

Lack of parental supervision and the use of drugs and alcohol are also significant factors in the emergence and reproduction of gangs. "Skipping parties" are gatherings held during the school day frequently in public parks and in the private homes of youths whose parents are working.

[35] http://ola.dc.gov/ola/cwp/view,a,3,q,598503.asp
[36] Reported at the Maryland Gang summit, June 1, 2006 Columbia, MD.

Drugs and alcohol are usually consumed at skipping parties. Police have identified these parties as dangerous as fights often erupt or other violence occurs. In a recent highly publicized trial of 8 alleged members of *Mara Salvatrucha* the boys are accused of gang raping two girls at a skipping party. [37]

A final contributing factor is a tendency, often re-enforced by local government actions, to "criminalize" young people. For example, after several highly publicized and unusual murders in a short span of time, in which young people were both victims and alleged perpetrators, the mayor of the city of Washington tightened the curfew for youth under the age of 18.[38] For youth, this had the effect of further alienating them from police and law enforcement officials. (And it is likely to do little to reduce violence, since studies show that curfews do little to address crimes committed by minors.[39])

*3.2 Motivation of youth to enter and leave gangs*

Experts agree that youth and adults generally enter gangs because the gang offers them something that they feel cannot get from somewhere else. All of the sources I interviewed—academics, service providers, police, and former gang members—agreed that people enter gangs to fulfill needs that are not being met in other places. Some service providers and former gang members reported cases of coercion in which a person was forced to join a gang. But in the overwhelming majority of cases, individuals join gangs because the gang provides them with something they want or need.

Service providers in all of the agencies described an individual's reasons for entering the gang by providing a group of "risk factors" associated with gang involvement. The chart below, provided by the Center for Multicultural Health Services, illustrates the various aspects of a Latino youth's life that may put them at risk of joining a gang. (A specific study on the "protective factors" for youth who also have many risk factors would provide us with information about youth who manage to avoid gang involvement despite many pulls in that direction.) Following the chart, excerpts from interviews with former gang members offer some insights into how people with many of these risk factors are able to leave gang life.

[37] Ruben Castaneda, "Witness Tells Court About Gang Rape in MS-13 Trial," September 29, 2006.
[38] Allan Lengel and Clarence Williams, "Earlier Curfew for Youths in D.C. Starts Tomorrow," July 30. 2006. Megan Greenwell, "Group Says Role Models, Not Curfews, Could Help Youth," July 30, 2006
[39] Robert E. Pierre and Petula Dvorak, "Crime Measures Derided as Too Little, Too Late," July 31, 2006.

| Individual | Family | Community | Environment |
|---|---|---|---|
| Poor Academic Achievement | Parental Psychopathology | Feeling Unsafe In The Neighborhood | Negative Labeling in School |
| Truancy | Low Parental Academic Level | Presence of Gangs in the Neighborhood | Lack of Activities for Youth to Participate In |
| Friends Who Engage in Delinquent Behavior | Child abuse, Neglect | Low Socioeconomic Status | Racism |
| Low Self-Worth | Divorce, Marital Conflict, Domestic Violence | Availability of Firearms | Lack of Support Network |
| Lack of English Language | Lack of Support Network | Neighborhood Violence | Poverty |
| | Reunification Issues | | |

**Wilfredo's story of getting into and out of *Mara Salvatrucha***

When Wifredo arrived in the Los Angeles area at age 5, his mother worked day and night to support him and his brother. Wilfredo only spent time with his mother on Sundays when she did not work the whole day. At this young age, Wilfredo found himself hanging out in the streets and meeting other recent immigrants involved in gang activities. "I liked the love and respect that the homeboys on the streets had [with each other]. We were poor and the homeboys bought me shoes and clothes and ice cream. They became my family." In the most basic sense, the gang provided for Wilfredo when he was a young boy.

By age 11, Wilfredo was asking the older homeboys to jump him into the gang. He had been surrounded by their culture for most of his life, and he wanted to be a part of it. The older homeboys protected Wilfredo from entering the gang for a time, telling him that he was too young. At that age, he would hang out with the other homeboys, and give warnings of police

presence, but he was not officially in *Mara Salvatrucha*. At age 13, the homeboys in his neighborhood jumped Wilfredo into the gang. Three weeks later he did his first drive by shooting.

Wilfredo's reasons for entering into the gang life correspond to the risk factors outlined in the chart above. But his ability to break away form the gang life later while in prison is less readily understood. From early on in his gang activity, Wilfredo wanted to leave the gang life, but was not able to.

The apparent reasons for leaving the gang life and becoming interested in outreach or prevention work varied among the people that I interviewed. In Wilfredo's case, while in jail he met some older former gang members from a rival gang, 18th Street. The older men got to know Wilfredo and convinced him that since he was young and would have a chance to reform his life once outside of prison, he should leave the gang. They told him, "if you want to get out you can get out. You have a better chance of surviving if you get out now." Wilfredo said, "it was nothing new to me to hear about getting out. I had heard it from school counselors and police officers before. The difference was that someone who had lived that life and knew more than me [told me I could leave the gang]."

There is an active debate among gang intervention and outreach workers about whether people who have never been gang-involved can effectively do intervention work with gang members. This is discussed further below in the section on responses to gangs.

**Juan's story of getting into and out of *Mara Salvatrucha***

Juan simply stated that he joined *Mara Salvatrucha* in El Salvador at age 13 "because I thought it was cool." Juan experienced several of the risk factors associated with gang involvement, including separation from his parents due to emigration and the presence of gangs in his neighborhood. However, Juan also had several protective factors which seemed to limit his involvement in the gang. As mentioned previously, Juan's attachment and respect for his aunt, who was his caretaker in El Salvador after his mother left for the U.S., is the principal reason that Juan says he did not become more involved in MS. Additionally, Juan never used drugs or alcohol heavily. "I was into sports and I just didn't like that stuff," he said. Thirdly, Juan developed a friendship with a Jehovah's Witness who he met on the street one day. Juan says this friendship helped to keep him from getting more deeply involved in the gang life.

When Juan was later sent to the U.S. to reunite with his mother and her new husband, he was exposed to a series of risk factors, but he never went back to the gang life. The reunification with his mother did not go well, as she had heard about his gang-involvement and she stigmatized him as a gang banger. He left his mother's home shortly after his arrival in the U.S. and for some time did not have a strong support network, lived on his own, and went to high school and worked. In his second year in the U.S. he met a "gringo" family who took him in and helped him. He lived with them and went to school and worked to pay for rent. They provided him with food, and strictly enforce d a set of rules of the household. Juan faced many challenges

upon his arrival, but he completely separated himself from the gang life and found support in other areas.

**Jose's story of getting into and out of *Mara Salvatrucha***

Jose's story of entering the gang life is the most unusual of the young men with whom I spoke. Jose had been involved in criminal activities from a young age; he faced many of the problems and risk factors listed in the chart above. However, Jose never joined a gang formally until he was in prison. Additionally joining the gang was neither a significantly positive nor a significantly negative experience for him. "It was something to do. When they asked me, I thought, why not." Jose was never very active in MS and since he has been let out of prison on parole, he is trying to maintain a straight life. He does not particularly find the gang an appealing alternative, but he does say that avoiding criminal activity in general is a challenge. Jose goes to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings as well as anger management classes. He has become interested in prevention and outreach work because he wanted to help kids stay away from the life of the streets.

Some interviewees mentioned that they were recruited or convinced to join a gang at a young age. Several of them also described the way they were "trained" to recruit others, by glorifying the protection of the gang, the access to drugs and women and the potential to make money. Perpetuating the myths of gang life is a key element in the recruitment process.

On the other side, some of the interviewees cited finding a church, a religious group, one special teacher who became a support person, and personal determination as the major factors that helped them to leave the gangs. One interviewee, for example, mentioned having left gang life for over a year after being told by a school principal that he could get his high school diploma if he stayed out of trouble and completed his credits at an alternative high school. At the end of the year when he had completed the requirements she told him he would not receive the diploma and that she, "didn't want any delinquents in her school." After that experience, with much frustration and a lack of support, that interviewee returned to the gang life. Eventually he left the gang life again, but he still has not been able to get a high school diploma or GED and that frustrates him greatly.

The factors that lead youth to join and to leave the gangs vary. Social service providers have identified risk and protective factors and have many services in place for prevention as well as intervention which take those factors into account. However, the research shows that individual assistance is the most effective way to help a gang-involved person leave the gang. This is extremely labor-intensive work, and even individual interventions are not always successful. Frequently clients return to the gang after many resources have been used to help them.[40]

*3.3 The impact of immigration, migration and deportation*

The section below on "governmental response" to the gang issue will delve more deeply into deportation and its effects on the movement of people out of the U.S. In this section I discuss

[40] This was especially emphasized in interviews with service providers at Identity, Inc., Neighbor's Consejo and The Latin American Youth Center (LAYC).

immigration and immigration status issues, and how they affect communities and create risk factors for youth. The threat of deportation affects immigrant communities and specifically it affects communities facing violence detrimentally. Immigration of Central Americans to the U.S. and from the U.S. back to Central America is clearly a vector of gang culture in the broad sense. Interviews with former gang members gives some insight into the movement of gang practices between nations and from the west coast to the east coast of the U.S. None of the formerly gang involved people that I spoke with had experienced deportation. All of them faced the difficult circumstance of immigration, either because they immigrated themselves, or if they were born in the U.S., because their parents immigrated.

New and aggressive efforts to target and deport undocumented immigrants, especially those with any gang connection, have a broad impact on Latino communities. An interview with service providers at the Neighbor's Consejo, an agency that works with Latino immigrants living in the District, led to a discussion of the negative effects of recent changes in deportation policy. In January of 2005, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) service, a, part of the federal Department of Homeland Security (DHS) launched the national "Operation Community Shield," as a direct response to *Mara Salvatrucha* in an effort to find and deport members of MS. ICE later expanded the program to all "alien" gangs. With the launching of this operation, police/ICE raids in immigrant communities in the Washington area and elsewhere have increased, and the communities have responded with fear and mistrust of the police. The providers from Neighbor's Consejo reported that people hesitate to report incidents of domestic abuse for fear that their partners will get criminal records and then being more likely to be deported. "This is an issue of economics. Of course they want the violence to stop, or they want the person to stop coming around. But they do not want to lose access to child support, which is what would happen if their abusive partners were to be deported."

In the United States, traditionally, local police leave enforcement of immigration laws to federal officials, in order to maintain a level of trust with the entire community. Since laws about immigration are federal laws, federal agencies usually enforce them, using local police forces as necessary. But in some places, this is beginning to change. Recently in Herndon Virginia, for example, the city council approved funding for two local police officers to get training from federal agencies in immigration enforcement so that they can serve as immigration enforcers in Herndon. The result of this growing tendency to aggressively enforce immigration laws is to weaken community relations with the police.

In the case of all of the young men that I interviewed, their status as immigrants, and/or the children of women who emigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador, clearly impacted their life experiences greatly, and increased their risk factors for getting involved in gangs. All of the interviewees talked about significant time spent unsupervised because their mothers were working long hours at a low wage to support their family. Father figures were almost completely absent from discussion, and when mentioned it was usually to describe a feeling of abandonment. During that unsupervised time, or in the case of Juan, time spent living separated from his mother, the interviewees were introduced to the gang life. While Jose was not initiated into gangs until later in life, as a young boy his uncle exposed him to very violent behavior by beating people up in front of Jose, beginning when he was 6 and later molesting him twice. The conditions of immigrants in the U.S., while perceived as better than in a family's home country,

are a risk factor for young boys especially. The combination of a lack of supervision with the likelihood of violence in the neighborhood, make avoiding gangs more challenging than for other youth.

Several of the interviewees have moved to the D.C area from Los Angeles, where they originally became involved in MS. Wilfredo's mother moved to the D.C. area trying to get Wilfredo away from the gang life. It worked for a while, but he eventually fell back into the gang lifestyle. Another former gang member who grew up in L.A. and is now doing one-on-one outreach to help gang members choose a different lifestyle says, "the gangs here in D.C. are nothing compared to in L.A. Here you have a choice, there you have to protect yourself [and join a gan]." Regional differences will be discussed more in the following section on gangs, violence and insecurity.

The factors associated with the emergence and reproduction of Central American gangs include: the conditions of migration which leave children unsupervised, the experience of violence and trauma by gang-involved youth, the alienation caused by anti-immigration sentiment, racism, and linguistic isolation, and the presence of gangs offering something appealing to young people with few resources at their disposal. My experience talking with former gang members as well as service providers, leads me to conclude that in many cases, gang-involved youth are victims themselves who are trying to survive in a brutal world. While individuals can make choices, often the choices for immigrant youth are very limited. As we think about the phenomenon, it is important to characterize Central American gang members not as deviants who need to be eliminated, but as products of a violent society who need alternatives.

### *4.0 Central American Gang-members in the Washington D.C. area: causes of violence and insecurity and victims themselves*

While Central American gangs get a significant amount of coverage as brutal criminals in the national and local media, local law enforcement statistics, though unreliable, show that they do not pose a major threat to security in the region when compared to other crime. Central American gangs *do* affect particular neighborhoods and communities significantly, usually lower income and immigrant communities. Between 2000 and 2003, governmental and community organizations in the area began to respond to the phenomenon as a public security threat. The result of those efforts has been fewer gang-related incidents in most areas of the region in the most recent quarters.

Many community activists argue, however, that the gangs should be treated not simply as a security issues, but as a public health issue. Looking at the phenomenon more holistically brings Latino youth into focus as potential victims who may be drawn into the dangerous gang life, rather than only as perpetrators of heinous crimes. Prevention and rehabilitation programs focused on giving at-risk Latino youth options other than the gang life combined with law enforcement that controls the minority of gang-involved youth who are serious criminals, together, can reduce gang-related violence in the region.

#### *4.1 Central American gangs: security and crime in the Washington D.C. area*

Media portrayals of violent gang related crimes have contributed to perception of gangs like *Mara Salvatrucha* as a serious threat to the D.C. area population. Recent public discourse about immigration coupled with these incidents has at times, produced highly sensationalized reports of the threat of gangs in the region. Perhaps the most infamous was the case of Brenda Paz, a young Salvadoran woman who, as part of a plea bargain, became an informant for the FBI, giving agents information about *Mara Salvatrucha*, the gang in which she had been involved. Brenda's friends and fellow gang members found out that she was an informant and brutally murdered her in a rural area not far from Washington in July 2003.

But these cases are the exception. While there are cases of Central American gangs attacking random citizens, the overwhelming majority of their crimes are perpetrated against rival gangs, or against other Latinos in their communities.

If media portrayals can exaggerate the seriousness of the gang problem, and build support for hard-line law enforcement strategies, they can also sometimes have positive effects. The Chief of Police in Montgomery County, while conscious of the danger of sensationalized accounts of Central American gang crimes, argued that media coverage of the issue is very important. Other Hispanic immigrants experience gang violence, but outside that community, the average citizen in the county doesn't even know the problem exists and thus there has been a lack of political will to deal with the issue. Similarly in the District of Columbia, in 2003 when a wave of Central American gang-related crimes took place in the small neighborhood of Mt. Pleasant, an area where the majority of D.C.'s Latino immigrant population resides, it helped focus attention on the problem.

It seems clear that Central American youth gangs in the Washington area pose serious public security threats primarily to themselves, their immediate families and their immediate communities, which include schools and other public spaces. This threat is concentrated and cannot usually be generalized to an entire city or county. Most police as well as community and school activist would agree with this conclusion and following the recommendations of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) adopted three pronged targeted approaches to gang prevention, intervention and enforcement. (See section5).

*4.2 Central American gangs: crime and violence in the D.C. area*

**Law Enforcement Perspective**

Law enforcement groups in the area have developed their own views about how to identify gang members, and what gangs do.

In a presentation given to school employees on Gang Activity and Prevention in Montgomery County, officials named the following as warning signs of gang presence in schools:

- Change in youths dress habits
- Presence of gang symbols in notebooks, etc.
- Gang tattoos including MS, 213 (a Los Angeles Area code), or others
- Graffiti
- Use of hand signs by youth
- Weapons

The use of behavior and dress to profile gang-involved youth is a fraught with ethical concerns. The distinction between gang activities that are criminal and that should be prosecuted, and cultural behaviors of Latino youth which are similar to or associated with gang activities, raises important questions about efforts in the areas of prevention, intervention and rehabilitation. While the effort of police and school officials to identify characteristics of gang involvement is understandable, research must also be careful to explore how to distinguish between criminal and non-criminal behavior and develop distinct responses to each.

Both the Virginia and Maryland counties studied in the report have similar definitions of a gang, following the recommendations of the OJJDP. The Virginia definition, for example, says that a gang is:

> Any ongoing organization, association, or group of three (3) or more persons:
> - whose primary purpose is commission of certain criminal acts;
> - that has an identifiable name, signs, symbols;
> - whose members individually or collectively engage in a pattern of criminal gang activities.

Specifically, *Hispanic* Gang are reported by the Joint Task Force Report (Montgomery/PG counties) as engaging in the following criminal activities:

- Sophisticated car theft rings (Montgomery)
- Sophisticated prostitution rings (Montgomery)
- Tagging (PG)
- Spray painting (PG)
- Citizen robbery (PG)
- Homicide (PG)
- Intimidation or "protection" of prostitution (PG)—Hispanic gang members were charged with "trafficking-in-persons" for transporting women from New York and New Jersey to Langley Park for prostitution.

**Academic and Service provider perspectives**

The discourse on Central American gangs is dominated by law enforcement agencies that define gangs and their activities in terms of delinquency and criminal behavior, as exemplified by the above accounts. But academics and police officers alike report that the majority of the serious crime committed by gangs, are committed by a small proportion of gang members. One study from Orange County California reports that 8% of gang members are responsible for 50% of gang offenses (Wyrick 2006). A Maryland police officer speaking at the State Gang summit on June 1, 2006, recognized that most gang related activity is not serious criminal behavior, when he stated that, "depending on how you define it, up to 80% of 'gang activity' in Maryland could be graffiti tagging."

So, looking at Central American gangs holistically, we can both recognize the seriousness of dangerous criminals, and seek to assist gang-involved youth who can avoid involvement in serious criminal activities. If we gather statistic on numbers of youth entering and leaving gangs, effects of prevention and intervention programs along side crime statistics, we can gather a fuller picture of what is really going on with gangs and how to carry out effective prevention and intervention programs.

Much of the data in this paper relies upon information from police and community Task Forces which measure gang activity by looking at criminal gang activity. A holistic description and understanding of gangs provided by even more diverse stakeholders and which includes *non-criminal* gang activity, is needed in order to provide adequate prevention programs for gang-involved youth before they enter into criminal gang activity. Additionally, standardized and accurate ways of measuring criminal verses non-criminal behavior associated with gangs is necessary. Interviews with service providers and former-gang members gave some insight into the non-criminal activities of gang involved youth.

When considering "gang activities" in the interest of understanding the social problem of gangs holistically, it is important to keep in mind what academic researchers, such as scholar Malcolm Klein, have found. Klein argues in his work that gang-involved youth spend the majority of their time not involved in criminal activities, or even planning them. He argues that gang-involved youth spend a lot of time "hanging out" or "doing nothing"(Klein, 1995). Data from the ethnographic interviews confirms that much time spent with the gang involved simply passing

time together and receiving the support and friendship that is associated with all adolescent development.

**Central American Gang Crime Statistics going down in the area**

Targeted approaches to gangs along with prevention programs in schools, after school programs and the response of community organizations over the past several years, seem to have resulted in a reduction of gang related violent crime. (Again, statistics have been gathered over short periods of time, and do not capture the entire picture of gang activity, criminal or non-criminal, in the area). Violent crime by Central American gangs in the District of Columbia has been greatly diminished since the creation of the Gang intervention Project which started in late 2003. Montgomery county police officers report that no Central American gangs, or no Latino/Hispanic gangs in Maryland are now among the top 6 of the worst gang offenders. In other words, other gangs, mostly African American, are of more concern in the area. Fairfax County in Northern Virginia reports that since the creation of a Gang Task Force in 2003, they have seen greatly reduced rates of violent gang related activity. (See Section 5).

*4.3 Central American gangs: organized crime and drug trafficking in the D.C. area*

In general Central American gangs in the D.C. area are not involved in what is traditionally known as organized crime. Researchers have produced over one-hundred definitions of "organized crime," but the term is commonly taken to mean: a sophisticated network of criminals working within a hierarchy in order to advance a lucrative criminal enterprise.

There are a few examples of Central American gang involvement in the kinds of criminal activities traditionally associated with organized crime. For example, in 2005, Central American gang members were charged with "trafficking-in persons" when a brothel run by MS members was discovered in Prince George's. But these seem to be the exception and the level of organization in this particular case may have been limited

There is a movement in Virginia and Maryland law enforcement to use federal racketeering laws (RICO) to prosecute gang members who act in groups. The Washington Post reported on September 30th of the trial of 8 alleged members of *Mara Salvatrurucha* who are accused of gang raping two girls at a skipping party in 2003 that is currently taking place in Montgomery County. Prosecutors are using legislation originally aimed at organized crime to gain tougher sentences, and even the death penalty, for the accused.

The horrible violence that some gang members perpetrate against their victims should be punished. However, the complexity of the gang issue makes the use of "organized crime" as a label for gang members a dangerous trend. As this paper aims to explain, Central American gang involved youth have a wide range of activities from non-criminal association, or "wanna be" behavior, to violent crime. Risk factors, as well as normal adolescent development, lead some youth into the gangs but it may never lead them to become serious criminals. Youth gangs are too complex of an issue to fall neatly into the category of organized crime.

Data from interviews with former gang members indicate that the gang life is quite chaotic, with shifting "leadership" and spontaneous action, rather than carefully planned and executed criminal activities. While some of the interviewees were involved in drug sales, none of them had contacts with high level drug runners. Additionally, their criminal activities were fulfilling psycho-social need more than providing a lucrative business. One former gang member commented about the criminal activities he was involved in: "you feel like, I am good at this, so this is what I am going to keep doing"

*4.4 Central American Gangs in the D.C. area: a comment on media portrayals*

The sensational portrayals of gang-members in the media—in the region as well as in the U.S.—are a significant part of the "problem" that advocates face when searching for a constructive response to the phenomenon. One documentary, which perhaps received the most media coverage on the topic in the United Stats, is a National Geographic special about *Mara Salvatrucha* entitled, "The World's Most Dangerous Gang." In this documentary, *Mara Salvatrucha* is characterized as a uniform, transnational enterprise that "could be in a neighborhood near you." These sensationalist and inaccurate portrayals of Central American gangs are perilous because they shape public perception of the problem, and further stigmatize young people who become gang involved.

While the narrator of the documentary interviews gang members who have left the gangs, the audience never learns about that process, or sees "recovery" from gang life as a possibility. Young gang members are constructed as being, "like a virus" spreading across Central and North America and uniformly affecting a range of states in the U.S. as well as Canada, Mexico and Central American countries. As this paper argues, looking at the phenomenon across nations or within one city, the specifics of gang activity are very important for best understanding how to respond. Understanding different levels of involvement by individuals and different levels of organization as groups is the key to effective prevention, intervention and enforcement techniques.

Most importantly, portrayals like the National Geographic documentary dehumanize gang members. If we are going to take human rights into consideration when trying to manage gangs in society, we need to address the phenomenon holistically and acknowledge the social circumstances which produce disenfranchised youth. Media that portrays gangs and gang members only as the problem, rather than shedding light on them on them in their dual role as victimizer and as victims themselves, are perpetuating a cycle of violence that needs to be interrupted. Gang members, and all serious offenders need to be held accountable for their actions, however, criminalization by association of non-violent gang members is perpetuated by sensationalist media coverage.

## *5.0 Political Implications and Governmental and Civil Society responses to Central American Gangs in the D.C. area*

The issue of youth gangs has made it to the national agenda; even the President, George W. Bush, mentioned the problem and the need for prevention in his State of the Union address in 2005. Under the pressure of community activists who have been working on the gangs issue in the D.C. area since the mid 1990s, over the past 5 years local leaders and lawmakers have come to consensus, at least rhetorically, that a multidisciplinary holistic approach to the issue of gangs is the best. On the federal level, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the Department of Justice, has created guidelines and offers funding for creating community prevention programs to comprehensively respond to the issue at a local level.

Maryland and Virginia have used this model to form Regional Gang Task forces that are charged with using a three-prong strategy to approach the issue of gangs (see Annex C). Ideally, the three prongs—prevention, intervention and enforcement—can effectively keep the phenomenon under control and eventually prevent more youth from joining gangs.[41] In the area on the local level, hundreds of local gang prevention strategies are in place from primary schools through high schools, extending out to after school programs, and to community organizations and churches.

While these programs have grown in the last several years, and while the amount of financial resources available in response to gangs is significant compared to the paucity of resources in Central American countries, advocates for prevention are not satisfied. They note that significant funding from the federal government, received for gang issues by Virginia ($500,000 in year 1, $1.3 million in year 2 and $2 million in year 3) and Maryland, went almost exclusively to enforcement. And they point out that the city of Washington, a majority African American city with no voting representation in Congress and a lengthy history of issues with youth violence, has not received federal funding to address the gangs issue. Service providers and educators, and grassroots organizers report that funding for their prevention and intervention projects is lacking.

### *5.1 Governmental policies and programs in response to Central American gangs*

#### Federal Governmental Responses

*Prevention*

Prevention programs are difficult to fund because the results are difficult to quantify. Within the federal budget structure, where funding is often allotted for projects which produce "outcomes" it is difficult to quantify the outcomes of gang prevention programs. Dr Phelan Wyrick, the Gang Program Coordinator at OJJDP, and an expert on gang prevention, has composed a set of principles for effective gang prevention, "based on the proper balance of 1) attractive alternatives to gangs, 2) effective support systems for young people, and 3)accountability of young people to

[41] Though a complete understanding of why youth join gangs is still elusive, research shows that larger social pressures push them into the gang life and until those pressures are changed, gangs will not disappear.

their parents, schools, and communities" (Wyrick, 52:2006). These principles correspond to former-gang members' reports of how they do outreach to active gang members. One interviewee commented, "[t]hey want to leave, all you have to do is give them a better offer and they will. It's easy."

*Hearings on Capitol Hill*

Over the past 6 months hearings related to gangs have been held on Capitol Hill as well as in Virginia and Maryland by congressional Representatives. At the three hearings I attended, former gang members were asked to speak about their experiences being in the gang and making the choice to leave. The effort to have the voices of former gang members in the public discourse is significant in gathering support for intervention programs and for costly rehabilitation efforts.

*Enforcement/Deportation*

United States' policies such as Operation Community Shield, which seek to identify gang members based on police information and then deport them for immigration violations, may feed the transnational flow of gang culture, while aiming to ameliorate the problem of Central American gangs in the U.S. Central American gangs are becoming a "transnational" issue more and more as U.S. deportation policies send gang members to Central America where there is often little hope for rehabilitation, or re-integration into society. Since its inception in March of 2005, Operation Community Shield has resulted in the arrest of 2,388 individuals including at least 101 in the Washington DC area.[42] At a press conference in March of 2006, when pressed to determine how many of those who were arrested were actually gang members, ICE's Director of the Office of Investigation said he could not give a definite or even ball park figure. ICE's approach to gangs, especially with Operation Community Shield, which is gang-focused, is doing nothing to help with the rehabilitation of gang members, and is also contributing to the criminalization of gang members by association. In order to change the transnational dynamic of Central American gangs, ICE should use its resources and adopt policies that will help control the proliferation of gangs both in the U.S. and outside of the U.S. rather than contribute to it.

Looking at the role of public health providers in deportation provides a model for thinking about intervention on gang activity prior to deportation. In the case of communicable diseases such as Tuberculosis, the U.S. government funds the medical treatment of deportees, including medication, medical care, and sometimes lodging, for the duration of treatment, which can be as long as 9 months. If the gang issue is looked at through the lens of public health, we can imagine deportees spending time in a gang intervention program before being returned to their home county. More research needs to be completed on the deportation experience of gang-involved people in order to explore the moment of deportation as a potential point of intervention on the transnational movement of gang culture.

[42] See Annex 3. http://www.ice.gov/images/csmap082605.jpgi

*Anti-gang and anti-immigrant Legislation*

Two important pieces of legislation regarding "alien gangs" have recently been introduced in the U.S. Congress. The first, passed in the house (H.R. 1279,) makes non-violent misdemeanors grounds for deportation for non-citizens, even those here with documentation. The second piece of legislation to be presented is the "Alien Gang Removal Act" (AGRA) which gives the Attorney General the power to designate particular gangs as threats, and then make automatically deportable any foreign national deemed to be a member of such a gang. This could be applied to people who had never committed a crime.

This type of legislation is emerging as the debates about immigration in the U.S. persist and the opposing sides become more and more polarized. In this atmosphere, gang-involved youth, at risk youth and immigrants in general are at high risk of being targeted by enforcement approaches like Operation Community Shield and Operation Return to Sender (another ICE operation focused on deportation).

**Local Governmental Responses**

At the beginning of the State of Maryland's annual Gang Summit, an event directed mostly to law enforcement, the Patrick Word of the Montgomery County police Department started his presentation by saying, "We all know now that suppression is the easy part, the hard part is prevention, and we need to be working in prevention." Most federal officials, and many local officials have moved, at least rhetorically, to recognize that prevention is as important a part of a response to gang violence as is law enforcement. In the past several years government-sponsored "Gang Task Forces," as well as special police units, schools, activist groups and service providers have been developing responses to the growing presence of gangs and associated violence in the D.C. area. Groups have formed in three distinct areas with little collaboration, but some communication among them: Northern Virginia, Montgomery/Prince George's counties in Maryland, and the District of Columbia.

As noted by the FBI regarding national data, local data about crime generally, and gangs specifically, are gathered differently across jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction uses different methods to identify and document gang involvement and gang activity. This lack of continuity across jurisdictions limits the ability to compare the presence and activity of gangs regionally. Evidence suggests that a regional, if not national, standardization of information gathering regarding gang activities, arrests and gang-involved people would be a worthwhile investment.

**D.C. Latino Gang Unit**

The D.C. Latino Gang unit, a unit of the District of Columbia Police Department, was established in 2001 in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington D.C. Unlike similar efforts in Virginia and Maryland, the D.C. Unit does not receive special federal funding and, in fact, the department is under-funded. For the six officers and sergeant in the Unit there are two unmarked police cars. Officers I spoke with reported that high-ranking D.C. police officials do not acknowledge a problem with gangs for Latinos, African Americans or any other group in the city. The effort by the Latino Gang unit in D.C. is thus, an effort of community policing from

the bottom up. The officers recognized a need and have pushed at the precinct level to create their unit. The D.C. Latino Gang Unit is the police component of GIP, the Gang Intervention Partnership which has had great success in curbing violent gang related activity in the Latino community in the District (See discussion of GIP below).

**Fairfax Police Department**

Since the creation of the Northern Virginia Anti-gang Task force in 2003, Northern Virginia has seen a dramatic decline in gang related crime and gang activity. Through the Taskforce, Northern Virginia began to implement the OJJDP three pronged approach to gangs including prevention, intervention and suppression efforts. From 2005 to 2006, Fairfax saw a 39% decrease in regional gang activity.[43] Additionally there was a significant reduction in violent gang-related crime (murder, rape, robbery, arson, assault by mob and malicious wounding) from 35 crimes in the first quarter of 2005 to 6 crimes in the first quarter of 2006.[44] On the prevention side, from 2003 to 2005 the Fairfax County youth survey reports a 50% decline in the number of youth self-reporting having been in a gang.

*5.2 Nongovernmental policies and programs in response to Central American gangs in the Washington D.C.*

Through this research we have been in contact with some of the area organizations that are utilizing specific approaches in their communities and are having success in their prevention and intervention efforts. Unlike in Central America, where resources are more limited, here in the U.S. context and especially in the affluent area of Washington D.C. there are literally hundreds of gang prevention and intervention programs working with at risk and gang involved youth.

**Washington D.C.'s Gang Intervention Project (GIP)**

In 2003 Washington D.C.'s Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood experienced a wave of gang-related violence which culminated in the brutal shooting of a bus driver on 16th St. in central Washington. In response to this crisis, the Latino community mobilized with support from community organizations and national immigrants' rights organizations, with local city council member support, and with police participation, school participation, probation system participation, and the participation of many other sectors to create the Gang Intervention Partnership. In this partnership, many different agencies communicate with one another about specific gang-involved youth, trends in criminal activity or non-criminal activity, trends in schools truancy etc., in order to have a comprehensive system to address the issue of Latino gangs in D.C. Since its inception in October 2003, Washington D.C. has not had a gang related homicide reported. Several other cities in the U.S. have had similar success with targeted, multi-disciplinary approaches to gang violence—i.e. Boston's Operation Ceasefire. It is worth noting, that while overall crime has been falling in the District of Columbia, the city still has a high murder rate, 44 per 100,000 in 2003. Success in curbing Latino/Hispanic gang violence does not

[43] Fairfax County Gang Prevention: Year in review. September 25, 2006

[44] Again, statistics on gangs are not standardized across the region. While definition of a gang is very similar in Virginia and Maryland, methods for gathering and recording the data may very significantly.

suggest that other gang and non-gang related violence has been adequately addressed in the District.

**Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center (Montgomery/Prince George's county)**

Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center (CYOC ) opened in Takoma Park, Maryland in May of 2006. The center is located on the border of Montgomery County and Prince George's county close to a hot spot of Latino gang activity in the Maryland suburbs. Like GIP, the Center brings together services from several different agencies in order to address the needs of its clients. Partners of CYOC include two small non-profit organizations, Identity Inc., and Pride Inc., as well as the YMCA, Montgomery County Office of the Public Defender, Montgomery County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce as well as Montgomery and Prince George' county governments. The Center has provided services for over 130 families offering a range of services from mentoring to re-entry (from prison) case management, to assistance with relocation and safety planning. Police statistics from the first quarter of 2006 show that Latino gang crime has fallen by 25%, however, the drop in gang activity can't be attributed to any particular aspect of the county's approach.[45] Additionally, it is important to note, that while Latino gang crime rates decreased, African American gang crime increased.

**Barrios Unidos[46]**

Barrios Unidos is the agency in the D.C. area that has been working with gangs the longest. Since the mid-1990s, when the organization was started by a group that knew of the Barrios Unidos organization in California, Barrios Unidos has taken a grass roots approach to intervention and prevention. The Northern Virginia chapter of Barrios Unidos was the first organization in the area to acknowledge that gangs were emerging and to try to address the issue. According to leaders of the organization, ten years ago, Northern Virginia was dealing with "home-grown" gangs, not gangs imported from other areas of the U.S. or other countries.

Over the years Barrios Unidos has employed various methods to try to keep kids out of gangs including: offering job-training programs, in-school outreach and speakers' bureaus, street outreach, and creating community centers for at risk youth. Most recently, along with on-going outreach programs, Barrios Unidos has been planning a Youth Summits for Peace. The first Youth Summit for Peace put on by Barrios Unidos, took place in 1996. As I conducted my research, the Barios Unidos staff and volunteers planned and presented the Second Youth Summit for Peace, which I attended.

**In-school approach to gangs (Prince George's county)**

According to School Resource Officer Michael Rudinski, who is a Prince George's county police officer working in a public high school, "there are gang members in every school [in Prince George's county]." Officer Rudinski is also a member of the Regional Anti-Gang Enforcement (**RAGE**) Task Force and trains officers all over the country on how to deal with gangs. Officer

[45] This statistic was quoted to me by Luis Cardona, the Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator at the CYOC.
[46] The information about Barrios Unidos was gathered through an interview with one of its lead organizers, Juan Pacheco, observation at organizational meetings and media reports about the organization.

Rudinski's approach to gangs is, "we try to substitute what [the gang members] are missing [in their lives]." In the school where he works, officers and teachers work together creating systems of accountability for students who need a lot of guidance and structure in order to stay out of trouble. One example is a program called A.C.H.I.E.V.E. through which at risk students must get a series of signatures confirming the completion of their homework and their attendance in class. Additionally, Officer Rudinski stressed the importance of discouraging and breaking up "skipping parties"—parties that high school students organize in unsupervised locations during the school day. (As mentioned above, 8 alleged *Mara Salvatrucha* members are on trial for conspiracy in relation to a gang rape of 2 girls at a skipping party.)

Officer Rudinski, as well as others working in prevention and intervention, stressed the need for communities to acknowledge the issue of gangs in their communities and then begin prevention programs at an early age. Many elementary schools in the area have gang-prevention efforts on-going in their schools.

**Identity, Inc., (Montgomery County)**

Identity, Inc. is a non-profit organization located in Montgomery County, Maryland, that serves Latino youth and families. Service providers at Identity, Inc., have seen an increase in youth gang involvement since their founding in 1998. Many of Identity's services have gang prevention aspects, including their after school programs, fitness and education programs, as well as parent support groups and case management services.

A unique and effective project in which Identity, Inc. is involved is working with incarcerated Latinos by running support groups in the Clarksburg Correctional Facility. In addition to offering support to Latinos, many of whom are (former) gang members, through the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center (see discussion above) Identity is offering "re-entry" programs to inmates who are preparing to leave the facility and return to their communities.

*6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations*

This paper summarizes the situation of Central American gangs in the Washington D.C. area based on a literature review, interviews with former gang members themselves, and conversations with service providers and law enforcement officials. The evidence supports the argument that gangs are not a major public security issue in the Washington D.C. area. Central American gangs do affect specific communities in a serious way, however, and they need to be addressed. Heavy handed enforcement techniques, and the demonization of Central American gang members in the media, are part of the problem and not the solution. The issue of Central American gangs is a social problem that must be approached holistically. In the Washington area, governments have generally implemented multi-dimensional strategies, which have included prevention, intervention and enforcement aspects. These appear to have had some effect in reducing gang violence levels. But more needs to be done to address the situation of immigrant youth, including programs and services that recognize and respond to their unique situations.

6.1Recommendations

*6.1 a Domestically*

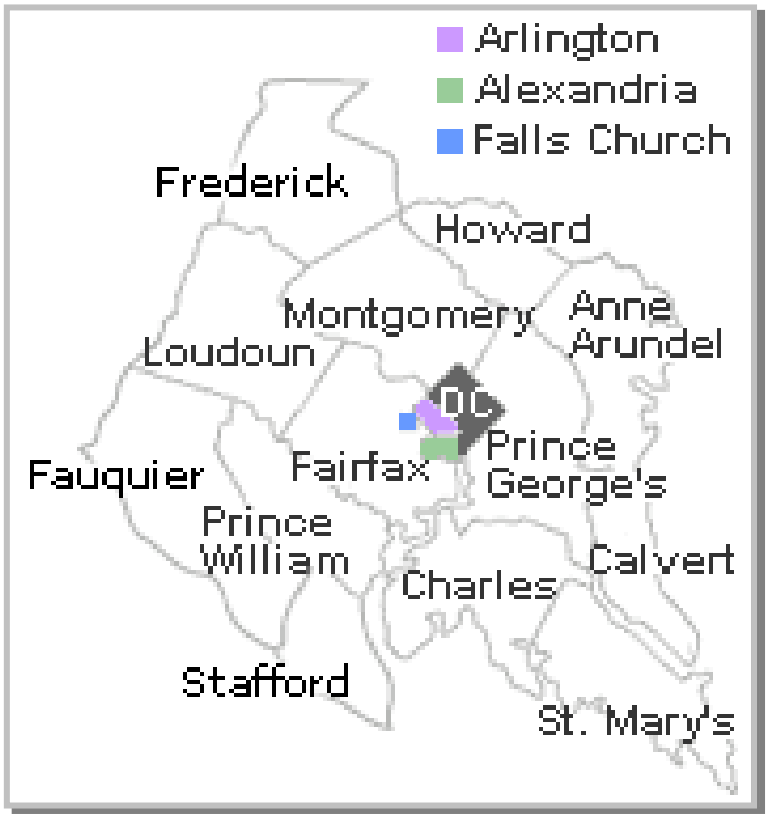
- U.S. deportation practices on deportees ought to be carefully evaluated, including how "criminal aliens" are treated, how home governments are notified about their return, and what happens to them after they return. The cost and benefit of these programs should be evaluated. In addition, research ought to evaluate how to apply a public health intervention model to those being deported as "criminal aliens."
- Federal support for comprehensive and targeted approaches (i.e. DC's Gang Intervention Project) ought to be increased.
- Federal and state governments ought to increase their investment in research on effective strategies for youth violence prevention and intervention, as well as policing. Research ought to develop regional, effective way to measure the impact of gang violence on Latino immigrant communities
- Federal, state, and local officials ought to recognize the unique needs of immigrant youth, and increase the resources available for local governments, schools, community groups and others, to respond to these needs.
- Aggressive deportation strategies that discourage immigrants from contacting local police about crime and violence should be reconsidered.
- Media education efforts ought to help provide a more balanced and less sensationalist view of the gang issues.

*6.1b In Latin America*

- The United States, through a coordinated effort involving the Department of State, Department of Justice, USAID, and other agencies ought to urge Central American governments to adopt a comprehensive approach to the issue with coordinated prevention, intervention and suppression programs.

- The United States through training and technical assistance programs ought to promote smart policing practices in the region that both respect human rights and address the problem of violent gang members.
- The United States should continue to encourage regional governments to address the problem of gang violence as a public security and social problem to be handled by police, government agencies, and civil society, rather than an issue that should be taken up by the Armed Forces, whose role should be restricted to national defense.
- Goverments and regional organizations ought to study the best practices that have been employed in Mexico and Nicaragua, where youth violence has been more successfully controlled.

Annex A


Arlington
Alexandria
Falls Church
Frederick
Howard
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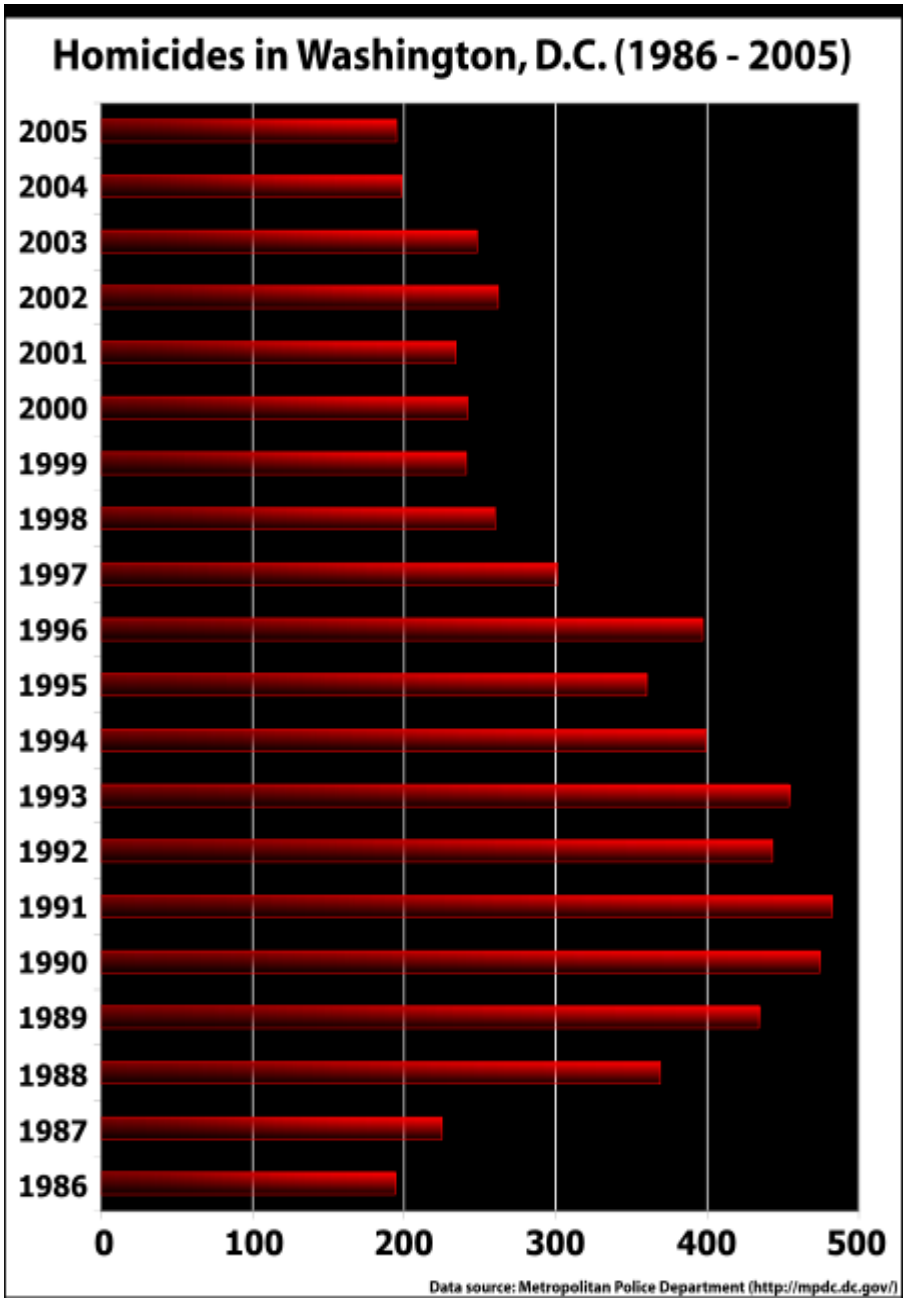
Loudoun
DC
Prince George's
Fauquier
Fairfax
Prince William
Charles
Calvert
Stafford
St. Mary's

Annex B


Homicides in Washington, D.C. (1986 - 2005)
2005
2004
2003
2002
2001
2000
1999
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1996
1995
1994
1993
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1988
1987
1986
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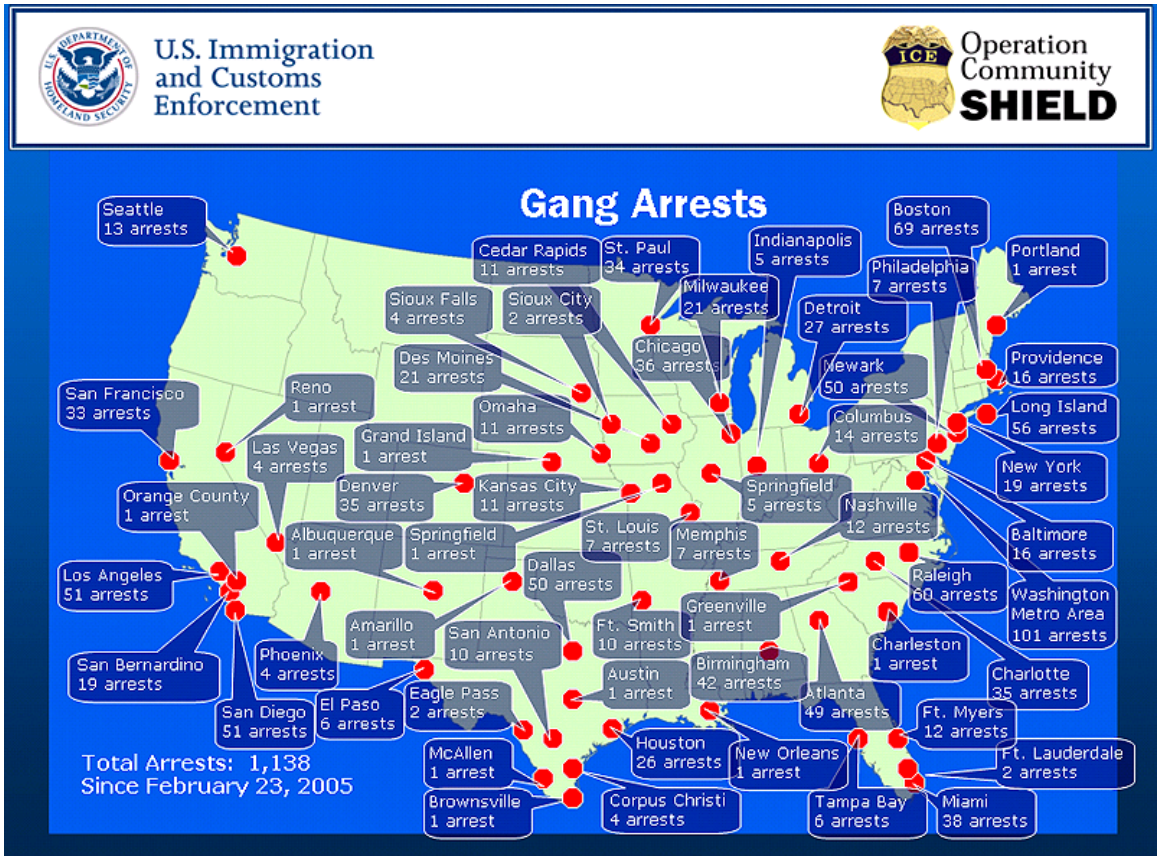
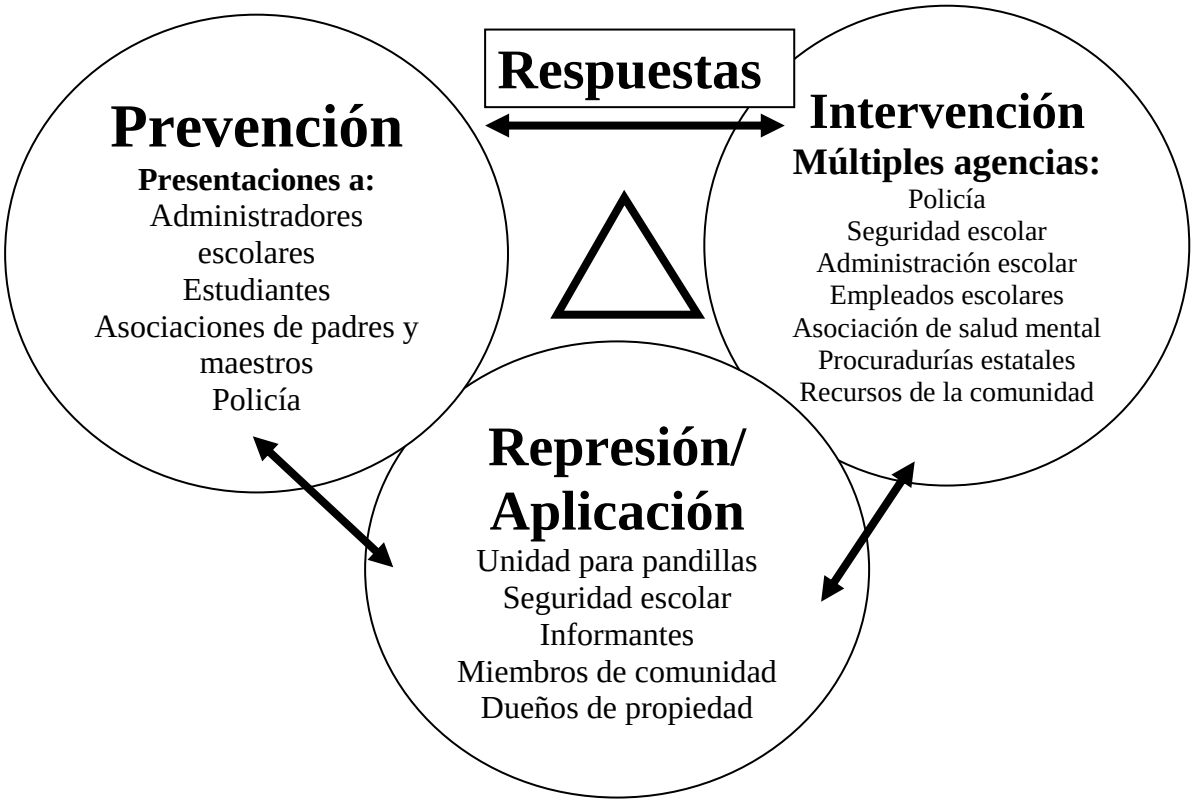
100
200
300
400
500
Data source: Metropolitan Police Department (http://mpdc.dc.gov/)

Annex C


U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
Operation Community SHIELD
Gang Arrests
Seattle 13 arrests
San Francisco 33 arrests
Reno 1 arrest
Las Vegas 4 arrests
Orange County 1 arrest
Los Angeles 51 arrests
San Bernardino 19 arrests
San Diego 51 arrests
Phoenix 4 arrests
El Paso 6 arrests
Albuquerque 1 arrest
Springfield 1 arrest
Denver 35 arrests
Grand Island 1 arrest
Omaha 11 arrests
Des Moines 21 arrests
Sioux Falls 4 arrests
Sioux City 2 arrests
Cedar Rapids 11 arrests
St. Paul 34 arrests
Milwaukee 21 arrests
Chicago 36 arrests
Indianapolis 5 arrests
Detroit 27 arrests
Boston 69 arrests
Philadelphia 7 arrests
Portland 1 arrest
Providence 16 arrests
Newark 50 arrests
Long Island 56 arrests
Columbus 14 arrests
New York 19 arrests
Baltimore 16 arrests
Washington Metro Area 101 arrests
Raleigh 60 arrests
Charleston 1 arrest
Charlotte 35 arrests
Atlanta 49 arrests
Ft. Myers 12 arrests
Ft. Lauderdale 2 arrests
Miami 38 arrests
Tampa Bay 6 arrests
New Orleans 1 arrest
Houston 26 arrests
Corpus Christi 4 arrests
Brownsville 1 arrest
McAllen 1 arrest
Eagle Pass 2 arrests
Austin 1 arrest
San Antonio 10 arrests
Amarillo 1 arrest
Dallas 50 arrests
Kansas City 11 arrests
St. Louis 7 arrests
Memphis 7 arrests
Springfield 5 arrests
Nashville 12 arrests
Ft. Smith 10 arrests
Greenville 1 arrest
Birmingham 42 arrests
Total Arrests: 1,138
Since February 23, 2005

Annex D

The Three Pronged Approach to gang violence, which has been adopted by the Anti-Gang Task Forces in Montogmery and Prince George's counties in Maryland and in Northern Virginia. The District of Columbia has not formally adopted this strategy, but effectively they are using a similar model.



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