Central American Gangs as a Proxy for Criminal Activity and Terrorism

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Background

- Increased flows in undocumented immigrants resulted in a concurrent rise in gang migration.
- Deportation policies may have exported U.S. gang culture to Central America and Mexico.
- “Revolving door” migratory pattern emerged among MS-13 and 18th Street Gang (i.e., M-18).

MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs are known to have:

- Increased criminal activity related to guns, drugs, and human smuggling
- Engaged in activity related to extortion, kidnapping, and murder for hire
- Substantially increased social networks for illicit purposes
- Substantially increased their transportation infrastructure across the US-Mexican border


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Concerned threat to national security

- “MS-13 & M-18 gang members may be involved in smuggling operations and, by extension, could potentially use their skills and criminal networks to smuggle terrorists into the U.S.”
  
  (Franco, Congressional Research Services, 2008: 1; also see Johnson & Muhlhausen, 2005: 42).

- El Shukrijumah (i.e., an al Qaeda representative) meets with Mara Salvatrucha gang to smuggle members through Mexico to the U.S.
  
Research questions

1. What is the scope and nature of the problem (El Salvador & US)
   - Number of members
   - Involvement in illicit activity
   - Etcetera

2. Informal and formal organizational structure of MS-13 and M-18.
   - Cliques and subgroups
   - Connectivity
   - Types of association
   - Group activities
   - Leadership structure
Research questions, Cont.

3. Illicit activity (U.S. & El Salvador) of MS-13 and M-18
   - Drugs
   - Violence
   - Human smuggling
   - Etcetera

4. What methods and approaches could be used by third-country nationals to enter the U.S.
   - Location of cross-national network ties
   - Coordination with non-gang entities
   - Embeddedness within legitimate institutions
Study Setting

- Preliminary sites selected
  - Washington DC- Virginia Corridor
  - Alternate sites (Los Angeles, Boston)
  - El Salvador
  - Alternate site (Honduras, Guatemala)

See next slide
Number of MS-13 arrests: Feb 2005-Sept 2007
A Multi-methodological Research Design

- Interviews with local gang experts
- Document reviews
- Central American detainee survey
- Central American field surveys
Interviews with gang experts

- In-depth interviews
  - Semi-structured interviews
    - Approx. 2 hours long
    - Recorded (taped or notes) and transcribed
  - Conducted in El Salvador and USA
    - Interviews with line personnel will take place in the field
- Conducted with key stakeholders

**Examples of key stakeholders**
- Police
- Federal authorities
- Intelligence officials
- Courts
- University personnel
- Analysts
- Prisons
- Street workers
- Service providers

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Document reviews

**Official documents**

- Annual reports
- Intelligence, training and task force bulletins
- Inter-office communications
- Statistics kept by organizations

**Public documents**

- Newspaper articles
- Scholarly manuscripts
Central American detainee survey

- Methodology is modeled after the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) project and the Arizona Arrestee Information Network (AARIN)
  - [http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/drugs/adam.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/drugs/adam.htm)
  - [http://cvpcs.asu.edu/aarin/](http://cvpcs.asu.edu/aarin/)
- Data to be collected in federal immigration detention facilities
- Core interview instrument
- Voluntary, anonymous, and confidential interviews
- Professionally trained interviewers and site staff

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Central American field surveys

- Methodology has been used extensively in the past to study gangs, drug traffickers, robbers, gun offenders, burglars, etc.
- Skilled locals will conduct data collection
- Snowball sample methodology
  - Initial contact through community organizations such as churches, social service agencies, etc.
  - Participants will be asked to provide the names of other community members for sample recruitment
- Monetary incentive provided to subjects for participation and for referrals
- Voluntary and anonymous/confidential

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Frequently asked questions

- Are there any potential issues with Human Subjects Protection (a.k.a. IRB)?
  - Detention surveys and field surveys have been conducted by universities throughout the world, numerous times, with IRB approval.
  - Arizona State University has approved these methodologies in the recent past with adults and juveniles (e.g., ADAM, AARIN, Trinidad gang project, Mesa Gang Intervention Project).

- What about interviewer safety?
  - Interviewing gang members in the field has a long and rich history in the US & Latin America (since the early 1900s).
  - Follow established interviewer safety guidelines.
  - Incident reporting procedure.

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