Beyond the *Maras*:

Violence and Survival in Urban Central America

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This is Andy, 17-year-old member of La *Mara* Salvatrucha (MS) and protected witness in the prosecution of spectacular murders he helped commit. Andy grew up poor in the midst of everyday violence, but unlike the children massing at the U.S. border, he did not leave. He is, in fact, an example of what many of these children are running from: since he was 8, Andy had extorted, killed and tortured for the Coronados Locos Salvatrucha—the most powerful clique of Guatemala's most feared transnational gang. But after spending most of his childhood justifying any kind of brutality against any kind of victim, he suddenly found himself risking his life to fight for what some might call justice.

*All photos taken by author unless otherwise indicated.

"I'll explain it this way," he said during our first interview in a cluttered prosecutor's office. "I'm 17, almost 18 now. When I'm 30 and the FBI comes here to Guatemala…I'll have information on everyone. So when they come, FOM! I'll help them get rid of all this. That's my game. Still infiltrating, finding out where the guns come from, all that. When the real good guys get here, I'll give them a hand, and we'll hit 'em with everything...For now, I'll help the government kill the *Mara* Salvatrucha…Those guys don't care…about killing little kids. I don't go for that kind of thing. How can you take the life of a little kid?"

Andy, May 11, 2012

He helped investigators indict, arrest, and prosecute perpetrators of a quadruple murder and decapitation. A week after his testimony, La *Mara* Salvatrucha found and executed him.

Andy was one of tens of thousands of youth involved in Central America's transnational gangs—known as *maras* or pandillas. Among the violent actors said to be driving children out of their homes, their neighborhoods, their nations, *maras* loom the largest and most spectacularly terrifying. Today, La *Mara* Salvatrucha and Barrio18—the two dominant *maras* in the Northern Triangle of Central America—are known for their distinctive slang, dress, tattoos, symbols, and structure inherited from deported U.S. gangsters as well as films caricaturing Los Angeles' Latino gangs. They did not start out as prima facie criminal groups. But, over the last two decades, *maras* have indeed transformed into brutal organizations engaged in extortion rackets, the urban drug trade, human trafficking, and murder for hire.

As violent and destructive as these gangs have become, dig beneath the nightmarish image they make in the media, or trace the networks linking gangs to corrupt state officials, organized crime, and "law-abiding" civilians and private businesses, and the *maras* become something else: they become a lens through which to glimpse a

vast and complex structure of violence feeding and feeding upon the insecurity and poverty overwhelming the region. Ultimately, *maras* are not the problem. They are a terrifying example of a civilizational problem. The *maras* have been made through a vast and tangled array of causes and conditions entwining their evolution with local, national, and transnational histories that root "their" violence deep in the firmament of U.S. and Latin American societies. The repercussions of these histories on contemporary urban life, especially for poor families, are dire indeed.

In this paper, I will provide a brief survey of the causes and conditions that have given rise to Central American *maras* to illustrate how deeply rooted the sources of contemporary out-of-control urban violence are. Then, drawing on my research in Guatemala, I will focus in on two interrelated issues. First is the problem of porous prisons. Prison facilities meant to isolate the criminal threat from society have in fact become organizational centers for criminal structures—gang and otherwise—from which they are able to project their influence onto the rest of the world. The second is extortion- the most feared and despised illicit business in Central America today—and which increasingly involves myriad actors who hide behind the smokescreen of the *maras*.

Porous prisons and growing extortion networks exemplify how violent criminal rackets criss-cross the blurred line dividing the so-called law abiding world from the underworld upon which it rests, the quandaries facing law enforcement, and what life has become for poor families living in the shadow of constant violence.

CAUSES AND CONDITIONS GIVING RISE TO THE *MARAS*

The array of local, national, and regional factors driving criminal violence in Central America is truly dizzying in its variety.[1] These include "… rapid urbanization, persistent poverty and inequality, social exclusion, political violence, organized crime, post-conflict cultures, the emergence of illegal drug use and trafficking and authoritarian family structures."[2] Legacies of authoritarianism and armed conflict feed and feed upon the pervasive machismo of Central American societies, which *maras* distill in their hyper-masculine ethos and rites of passage.[3]

1 John Hagedorn roots the "institutionalization" of gangs across the world in a wide array of localized factors, including ethnic identity, urban conditions, and local drug markets.

2 Cited in Oliver Jütersonke, Robert Muggah, and Dennis Rodgers, 2009, "Gangs, urban violence, and security interventions in Central America." *Security Dialogue*, 40 (4-5). pp. 373-397. ISSN 1460- 3640 (World Bank, 2008a. *Urban Crime and Violence in LAC: Status Report on Activities*, Sustainable Development Department, Latin American and Caribbean Region. Washington, DC: World Bank.)

3 It is estimated that there are over two million unregistered small arms in Central America. (cf Rodgers, Jütersonke, Stevens pg 6.)

The Palace of Justice and the Fountain of Peace, Guatemala City

Maras are often framed as a specter arising out of the ashes of failed social movements for progressive change.[4] The history of civil war militarization has also left a huge cache of small arms in circulation throughout the region, making gang war, and social conflict in general, all the more deadly.[5] The transition to peace has indeed been messy and incomplete; since the early 1990s, gangs and other criminal groups have arisen in spaces left ungoverned by weakened, hamstrung post-war security apparatuses.[6]

Central American criminal violence and United States policies are linked at the hip. The anti-immigrant hysteria of post-Cold War America led to the massive deportation of Central American born gang members to their countries of origin. The symbols, language, and imagery traveling via migrant bodies, Hollywood films, and the internet still contribute to Central American *maras*' style and structure, and to

4 Sanford, 2003. Put another way, mareros are foot soldiers trapped in the "slumwars of the 21st Century," (Rodgers and Jutersonke) a "new urban insurgency" (Manwaring 2005) born out of "the failed promise of peace" (Zilberg).

5 Small Arms Survey

6 Rodgers, 2006a

their allure for poor youth.[7]

U.S. foreign policy has exacerbated the conditions of violation from which the *maras* arise. Cold War support for Central America's repressive, even genocidal regimes ensured that these highly polarized and unequal societies would remain so. Since the 1990s, economic reforms connected to free-trade agreements between the United States and Central American governments have helped drive destitute rural populations into the cities, where newly arrived youth become easy prey for the *maras*' allure. Finally, over the last decade the U.S. War on Drugs in Mexico has pushed cartels to transfer more of their drug transport operations to Central America. Since the cartels often pay middlemen in product, supplies of inexpensive cocaine and crack have greatly increased across the region. *Mara* violence has intensified as rivals strive to dominate the burgeoning urban markets.[8]

Transnational and global factors link with and help shape personal desire and communal dynamics driving children to join gangs. The *maras*' evolution is tied to the growth of a globalized consumer society and its inherent brand name fetishism. "Kids desperate for 'real' Nike kicks will spend a family's whole remittance check, sell crack, or steal to buy them. Acquiring style is costly and requires some effort. Clearly, poverty is not the only thing drawing…youth into gangs."[9]

While absolute levels of urban poverty are not significantly greater than in prior epochs, widespread access to globalized media has made poor youth keenly aware of their lowly position on the proverbial totem pole. Gang membership can provide a "pathway to manhood" for ambitious youth with few options of finding dignified licit employment.[10] Children growing up in poor urban neighborhoods have plenty of other reasons to join gangs: for self-protection, for revenge, to make money, to become desirable, to gain a sense of belonging, to survive.[11]

Inequality, globalization, violent masculinity, civil war legacies, state corruption, transnational drug markets, U.S. domestic and foreign policy, authoritarian state and family structures, personal desperation, the weak, troubled shell of democratic

7 Zilberg, 2007. More generally, street gangs' increasing reach and organization is linked to rapid growth in internet access and cellphone technology (Sullivan).

8 The U.S. War on Drugs in Mexico has pushed narco-cartels to transfer more of their cocaine transport operations to Central America, most notably Guatemala. Since both South American producers and Mexican distributors often pay local help in product, this has greatly increased the supply of inexpensive cocaine across the region.

9 DeCesare, 1998

10 Baird, Meanwhile, media scapegoating of youth from poor urban neighborhoods has made it even more difficult for them to find jobs and vulnerable to targeting by police and vigilantes, and so driven more kids into the maras. Huhn, Sebastian. Oettler, Anika. Peetz, Peter. (2006)

11 cf Brenneman, 2013; Baird, 2012

government, social prejudice, hyper-aggressive capitalism…the list of causes and conditions producing *maras* and driving them towards ever greater violence goes on.[12] And, in the final reckoning, all are relevant. They entwine and blend almost indivisibly in every act of violence committed by or imputed to the *maras*.

And so, it would seem that the "incomprehensibly dark reality"[13] that *maras* symbolize for so many is, in fact, all too explicable. The 10,000 explanations for gang violence show that it is an over-determined symptom of a sickness infecting human society as a whole. Little wonder, then, that every policy solution to quell this violence has failed, often miserably. The tributaries feeding it are too diverse, the contradictions giving rise to daily conflict too deeply submerged in the basic structures of society to be resolved without radical, multi-scaled transformations.

The challenges facing Central American governments are dire indeed. Which brings me to the problem of prisons.

12 Linking economic destabilization with civil war history, Benson et al write, "Gangs are a symptom of neoliberal reforms and amplified by residues of trauma from decades of armed conflict." (2008)

13 Goldman, 2007

Incarcerated gang member. Canada Prison, Escuintla, Guatemala

POROUS PRISONS AND THE FAÇADE OF STATE CONTROL

Through heavy-handed, often clumsy policing, Central American governments have been unwitting midwives to the rise of *maras* as highly organized and violent entities.[14] Prior to their mass incarceration in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the *maras* were little more than poorly organized groups of youth imitating an imported identity and battling each other for claims to neighborhood turf. What alliances existed between various Barrio18 and *Mara* Salvatrucha "franchises" were based mainly in symbolic allegiances to Southern California Latino gang codes as well as local histories of amity and enmity. In very little time, however, the prisons packed with mareros became crucibles forging new relationships between gang members from various urban zones and cities. The harsh conditions and violent prisoner hierarchies hostile to tattooed gangsters drove them to band together in alliances hitherto unknown and unlikely. Trapped in prison fighting a game of survival, extortion and other lucrative criminal rackets were the quickest and, perhaps, the easiest,

14 Both the territorial expansion and deepening violence of mara extortion rackets is due in no small part to the incarceration en masse of gang members. In the early 2000s, the Guatemalan government followed the lead of its Central American neighbors (inspired and advised by U.S. gang experts) in organizing a massive assault on the "gang threat". Guatemala never instituted a full-blown mano dura initiative against its maras, instead initiating a toned-down version known as Plan Escoba in 2003 (cf JM Cruz 2010). However, Plan Escoba was merely the officially publicized strategy for gang reduction. Under President Oscar Berger (2004-2008) government security forces combined mass arrests with extensive clandestine operations targeting suspected gang members for extrajudicial execution and, in some cases, torture (fieldnotes 7/13/2012). Police documents confirm that the Guatemalan authorities managed to arrest and incarcerate thousands of gang members and several top echelon leaders and "disappear" innumerable others.

means of establishing a steady cash flow to soften life in prison, feed their families, and keep themselves armed against their enemies on the street. The business of extortion in particular became corporatized and networked as a direct result of the state's clumsy targeting of the *maras*.[15] And today, prison-run rackets could not function without tacit cooperation of prison staff and other law enforcement agents.

It is through state officials that prison walls become porous membranes across which information and money, among other illicit commodities, can pass. In exchange for allowing gangsters and other inmates to communicate and exchange with operatives and loved-ones on the street, prison staff receive a steady flow of bribes.[16] Rank and file prison guards earn little more than the national minimum wage of 2000q/month (~$250) and the bribes they receive can easily double or triple their monthly income.

But even those who do not actively cooperate are often cowed into complacency. In Guatemala, prison authorities often find themselves locked in an uneasy détente with prisoner populations, able to maintain only the barest shell of control. A prison director characterized the state's tenuous authority in particularly stark, personal terms.

"I know perfectly well what is going on," he said. He then proceeded to list all the illegal activities in which prisoners, with clear collusion from guards, were involved: the constant flow of drugs, cellphones, and other black market goods; the extortion networks organized and directed by prisoners; the illegal businesses run inside the prisons that take advantage of the inmates' depressed wages. He understood some of this flow as a necessary pressure valve; "I know how much marijuana gets smuggled in here. But let them smoke their joints. It calms them down, makes the time pass. If I were to seize all the marijuana tomorrow, I would have an immediate riot on my hands."

He also made it clear that if he tried to plug up the porous membrane, even his own guards would turn against him. As we spoke, a guard in uniform brought the direc-

15 For a regional study of the effects of massive incarceration on gang networks, see JM Cruz, 2010 and Lessing, 2013.

16 Today, to carry out the daily business of extortion from inside the prison, inmates depend upon access to cellphones. The prison price for cellphones, cellphone batteries, and SIM cards varies depending on the prison, levels of security, and ease with which guards are corrupted or bypassed. In the three prisons I visited regularly during fieldwork, cellphones and cellphone parts were priced between eight and ten times what they cost on the street. Along with marijuana, cocaine, and other black market commodities, visitors, often in cooperation with prison guards, smuggle cellphones into the prison.

tor a sopa de mariscos (seafood soup) for lunch. The guard saluted, and as he left the room, the director nodded his head meaningfully towards his back, then down at his soup, then he fixed me with a stare and muttered. "If I mess too much with them [the guards], what's to stop them from poisoning my soup?"

The one thing that must at all costs be prevented, he said, was an escape. If even one inmate escapes, the director himself must take the blame, and he would end up incarcerated. And so, state agents maintain the illusion of daily control in order to avoid the very real possibility of ending up behind bars themselves. Indeed, five out of the last six Guatemalan ministers of government (the state organ in charge of overseeing prisons and law enforcement) over the last decade have been indicted for fraud and criminal negligence, and several have ended up behind bars. I met one of them in Pavoncito prison. When I asked him how he got there, he shook his head ruefully and sighed, "As soon as I got in office they started sawing the legs off my chair."

Caught between the need to maintain the façade of control, the temptations of kickbacks, and powerful prisoners willing to kill to maintain their networks, prison officials' authority is tenuous indeed. As the prison director muttered under his breath at the end of our interview, "I don't take money. I don't take payoffs, but I know perfectly well what is going on, and this makes me complicit because I say nothing. But if I said something, what would happen? I'd probably get killed."[17] And the problem of state authority goes far beyond the prisons.

17 Just weeks before my interview with this prison director, masked assailants gunned down the newly appointed director of Infiernito, a maximum-security facility. The man had tried to tighten control inside Infiernito by limiting visits and increasing cell searches. These changes angered powerful inmates, and so they ordered his execution. "A week before he died, we tried to warn him that he was sitting on a time bomb." My interviewee said, slumping back in his chair. "But he would not listen." Such events are common enough that prison directors and guards know that they must walk a careful line. (M. 2012)

EXTORTION AND THE *MARA* MASQUERADE

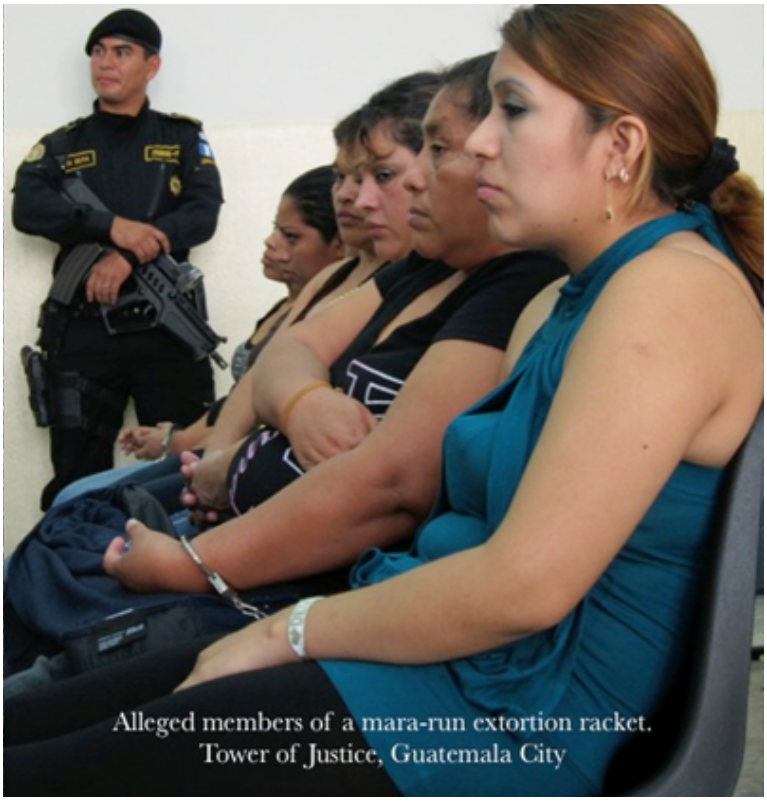
June 12, 2012. Tower of Judgment, Guatemala City.
Andy, sits on a raised platform before a panel of judges and an army of prosecutors. One of the lawyers is, for the record's sake, asking him to define certain key terms he used to describe his gang's activities.

> Prosecutor: What does "*la renta*" mean?
>
> Andy: *La renta*. *La renta* is when the *ramflero* gives and order to go and set up an extortion, ask for bills, ask for money from a *tienda* (store). For example: it's a big *tienda*, you understand, they come with a letter with a number that the dude has to call. When the dude calls, you give the vibe that you're gonna care for them and you'll give them protection and at the same time the dude will report with the gang (*plebe*[18]). So, they ask for approximately 5000 bills ($650) for entry for which they give a maximum term of 10 days for the dude to pay, and then they put it at 400 *barras* weekly you understand. With the dude you speak nicely (*de pinta*)…and if the dude doesn't want to collaborate with the *plebe*, the *ramflero* will be told and the *ramflero* gives the order to go and kill him. This is what extortion and charging *la renta* means.[19]

18 Literally, the plebeians, the common people, a term for fellow gang members of the same rank.

19 Andy, aka Jose Luis Velazquez Cuellar, was executed by La Mara Salvatrucha one week after he gave his testimony. (Velazquez Cuellar 2012)

Maras have indeed developed extortion into a smoothly run business. However, while local gang members and incarcerated leaders dictate how much tax to levy and from whom, it is often their neighbors, relatives, girlfriends, and wives who deliver the written demands or hand over the cell-phone with an incarcerated marero waiting on the line to threaten a victim. In Limón—a zone 18 neighborhood built into a ravine and dominated by Solo Raperos of *Barrio18*—children as young as 8 work as banderas (watchmen), taking note of what goes on in the neighborhood, while grandmothers collect la renta on the gang's behalf. As in other *mara*-dominated neighborhoods, the only individuals able to run tiendas or other small businesses are gang-members' kin, girlfriends, or other "gang-associates" (paros); everyone else gets taxed or threatened into bankruptcy.[20] In some peri-urban neighborhoods, as much as one third of the homes have been abandoned due to extortion demands that residents would not or could not pay.[21]



Alleged members of a mara-run extortion racket.
Tower of Justice, Guatemala City

Little wonder, then, that many urbanites consider extortion to be worse than imme-

20 Saunders-Hastings 2014

21 In 2007, the national police (PNC) received nearly 600 reports of homes abandoned to the threat of extortion across Guatemala City. Given the uncountable threats that victims never report for fear of retaliation from the perpetrator(s), it is likely that the actual number is far higher.

diate bodily violence."[Extortion] leaves one without hope," said an anti-violence expert. "Why are you going to work if they're going to take away the little you earn?"[22] And today, *maras* are the spectral face of extortion. The image of the tattooed gang leader residing comfortably at home, or even behind bars, as his network of extortionists suck the lifeblood out of hardworking citizens has been etched into the public consciousness.

Mass media has played a key role in forming and feeding this image. Virtually any day of the week, one can pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV to a flood of images and stories of gruesome murders, massacres, and mutilations. This murky "death porn"[23] has become standard fare for Central American audiences, and an important vector for enhancing extortion's profitability. Indeed, exceptional violence (dismemberment, rape, etc.) has proven an incredibly efficient business practice. The more spectacular the brutality imputed to the *maras*, the wider it circulates in the community and in the press, the further the *maras*' message of intimidation travels, and the more willing their "clients" will be to make timely extortion payments.

However, the quickness with which the media and the public root each new murder in gangs and extortion debts belies the uncertainty swirling about urban crime and insecurity.[24] When I asked Villa Nueva's chief prosecutor what part of the daily crime in her district could be verifiably connected to gangs, she replied, "It has become impossible to know because it is always changing. Neither can we differentiate between *maras*, narco-traffickers, and other organized criminal groups."[25]

Less than ten percent of violent crimes are ever successfully prosecuted, leaving the vast majority of violent acts subject to a "regime of rumor."[26] This state of affairs is rife with opportunity for those willing and able to perform the role carved out by mareros in public perception.

And so, the "*mara* masquerade" has deepened the confusion and terrifying uncertainty swirling about daily crime and violence. Anyone clever, desperate, or ruthless enough to emulate the gang approach can reap the profits. Former members of the military have been caught pretending to be mareros making extortion threats. In

22 Aguilar 2011

23 Alaniz 2005

24 As Walter, security analyst for the Guatemalan prison system stated in an interview, "the police and the media are too quick to connect every new murder, decapitation, and quartering to extortion when there is often no evidence whatsoever." (Pineda 2013)

25 Lima 2012

26 "…under the regime of rumor everything becomes patchwork; an infrastructure of hidden bricolage floats to social consciousness like a submerged, stitched together body." (Feldman 1995: 231)

rackets targeting public transportation, rival bus companies are thought to be responsible for up to 40 percent of the associated murders. Such violent competition has made driving a Guatemala City bus arguably the "most dangerous job in the world"—with more than 500 bus drivers gunned down between 2007 and 2011.[27] Disgruntled employees and even estranged family members have carried out extortion rackets against an employer or relative.[28]

Finally, there is the increasing problem of what I call "cold-call extortion:" men posing as mareros riffling randomly through telephone directories and calling in anonymous threats to perfect strangers. Cold-call extortion schemes are mostly sporadic, once-off affairs—a threat is made, the money collected, and that's that. They do not require the *maras*' territorial control and street operatives. Rarely do they pose any "real" threat- but this is precisely the point. Cold-call extortion merely requires victims made docile by fear. And the ready supply of such victims has made extortion profitable for a wide array of actors able to convincingly personify the violence flooding public consciousness day in and day out.

The ever-present possibility of extortion, like political terror, makes everyone feel they need to watch their back, watch their words, watch their neighbor. But unlike political terror, one's suspected ideological affiliations mean little; it's not what one thinks that matters.[29] If extortionists consider their target at all, it's how much money they imagine one makes, and how vulnerable one appears, that makes one a potential victim.

Indeed, by taking advantage of the lack of oversight on financial institutions and the ease with which money can be electronically moved across borders, extortionists have gained regional reach. The Transnational Anti-Gang Unit (CAT)—an FBI trained and funded initiative— has traced extortion demands made from southern Mexico and El Salvador to Guatemala City, and inmates in Guatemalan prisons have extort-

27 Rumors and more rumors. Many leftist Guatemalans suspect actors connected to the military and loyal to now President Perez Molina orchestrated bus attacks to undermine his predecessor's administration. (Insight Crime 2011)

28 Pineda 2012

29 Even so, extortion has also become a useful political tactic for union-busting, threatening human rights activists, and stymieing political organization from below. *Maras* are inevitably implicated—but whether they act at the behest of say, maquila owners intent on taking out union leadership, are part of some other masquerade, or wholly uninvolved, is never certain. In these situations, the blurred lines between personal survival, political violence and criminal acts often disappear. For example, maquila bosses sometimes gather employees suspected of having ties to maras and threaten to fire them if any unions are formed. Then, as one activist told America's Quarterly, "it's up to (the *mareros*) to see what they have to do (to keep their jobs)."

ed businesses and families in El Salvador and Honduras.[30]

When demands for "la renta" can arrive from any quarter—business rivals, police, one's own family or employees, or random strangers based hundreds of miles away—the climate of uncertainty, fear, and impotent rage becomes inescapable.[31] For urban citizens without recourse to elaborate and expensive private security, the threat of extortion is like a sword of Damocles hanging constantly over their heads.

September 8th, 2011. Guatemala City and Villa Nueva.
I met Jorge Mejia, taxi driver, in September 2011, as he ferried me across the bridge connecting Guatemala City to Villa Nueva. Three years before, he had a job driving a bus, making a "decent" living, enough to own a small home in a gated community and to send his kids to school. Then the violence against bus drivers started ramping up, violence that seems to be connected to extortion rackets, and he had to leave. "Too many compañeros killed," he said. So he went to work as a guard for a private security company. While working, he was attacked, and they broke his shoulder. He spent all his savings on medical bills. Then he started working as a taxi driver. This does not pay well, and he eventually had to give up the home in which he had already invested his life savings. Now he and his wife are struggling to keep their children in school.

"I don't think I will be able to pay for the next semester," he said morosely. "My wife is going to start a little atol stand to make some money, but…"

And then, a year ago, extortionists executed his mother. Why? It's not clear, but most likely she refused to pay la renta for her little fruit-stand outside a Villa Nueva school. "It might have been gangs," Jorge said over garbled radio voices and the

30 Funes 2013

31 A 2007 Guatemalan police report illustrates the estimated financial costs of extortion rackets on Guatemalan society. Like all quantitative data produced on Guatemala, it is suspect and should not be taken at face value. Still, it gives an idea of how widespread the problem has become.

NATIONAL CIVIL POLICE REGISTRY OF EXTORTIONS (2007)		
Material Losses	**Cases**	**Monetary Value (in quetzales)**
Extortions against bus drivers	200,092	14,600,000
Extortions against homes and small businesses	25,012	52,000,000
Extortions from prisons	14,600	29,000,000
Extortions against maquila employees	44,250	10,620,000
Homes abandoned because of gang extortion	597	65,032,397

rush of traffic. “But I think the police were also involved. I saw my mother on the pavement under the plastic tarp they put over her and I wanted to take revenge… but I know this is not my work… Mano dura, mano floja (iron fist, weak fist), we end up with the same thing. It is up to God and God alone.” He leaned over and pulled out a newspaper clipping of his mother’s murder from the glove compartment. “Here, take it for your book.” I snapped a photograph of it and gave it back.

NUESTRO DIARIO - Guatemala, 21 de mayo de 2010

Ultiman a anciana

Vendía frutas en una escuela

Miriam Pacheco
★ Nuestro Diario

Presuntos extorsionistas mataron a balazos a una mujer de 61 años, en un sector de la colonia El Mezquital, zona 12.

Adela de Jesús Mejía Navas, "Mamá Adela", como la llamaban sus nietos, se dedicaba a vender fruta en la Escuela Nacional El Mezquital I.

Al momento del ataque, la anciana se dirigía a su puesto de venta.

Vecinos dijeron a la Policía Nacional Civil que el crimen lo cometieron dos jóvenes con apariencia de pandilleros, quienes luego del ataque huyeron.

Adriana Robles, nieta de la fallecida, dijo desconocer las causas del hecho.

si la habían amenazado o si ella se había negado a pagar alguna extorsión", comentó Robles.

apuntan a una venganza. Detectives investigan a pandilleros de la mara "18", quienes se dedican

comerciantes del sector.

Este asesinato se su… a los más de 300… dios ocurrid…

Foto: William Méndez

Foto: Noel Martínez

Familiares sufrieron crisis nerviosa.

Los criminales no respetaron ni la edad de la señora Adela Mejía, quien tenía 61 años y le dieron muerte.

“They kill an old woman. She sold fruit at a school.” *Nuestro Diario*, May 21, 2010

Epilogue: Victim-Perpetrators

Given the overwhelming array of factors driving contemporary criminal violence in Guatemala and across the Northern Triangle of Central America, it is tempting, as the United States and Central American governments and the media have done for so long, to keep a narrow focus on the *maras*. I have only been able to give a brief survey of the ways in which *maras* are hooked into and help to obscure a vast structure of violence. Close attention to these connections—and the stunning array of causes and conditions driving urban violence—is necessary for any long-term solutions. This means confronting the homicidal violence in the Northern Triangle with a holistic package of policies and a willingness to engage in a sustained, long-term battle against poverty, institutional corruption, socio-economic inequality, and, of course, the impunity that abounds at every level of society. Frameworks outlining

what is required already exist—just look to the unfulfilled promises written into the post-war peace accords. But Guatemala cannot do it alone. There is little will among Guatemala's rich for the kind of painful transformations that must take place, and it is they who control their nation's economy and government policy. The United States government, which is the only entity capable of applying sufficient pressure and funds for real change to happen, must open its eyes to just how deeply rooted the poverty and violence in the Northern Triangle has become. Otherwise, the rampant insecurity and dead-end future children growing up poor in the Northern Triangle face day in and day out will lead them deeper into the maras' open arms. Because, ultimately, what makes the *maras* so terrifying is that they have become a kind of solution to the problems of everyday violence and desperation for children growing up in their midst.

In our last interview, I asked Andy why he remained faithful to the gang for so long.

"It was a family that didn't leave me to die," he said. "When I needed most they gave me a hand and gave me food to eat, you understand. So I couldn't bite the hand that fed me."

"So they were your friends?"

"Not my friends. They were family," he insisted with an ineffable sadness in his voice. "They were my family when I had no family. It was all I had. I had no father, no mother, no siblings. They were my family."

Like countless others, Andy became caught up in gang life before he was capable of choosing not to, or even glimpsing what that choice might look like. And once children are in the gang, all possibility of a different life, a different world, a different way of being seems to disappear.

"I'm already grown and I'm always shedding tears, loco." Andy said the last time I spoke with him. "Because one knows that loneliness attacks, and one has a heart. … To not have a person who will listen to you, to be able to talk and have a peaceful life… But whatever, it's the life that I chose and so it has to be cared for."

"Choose?" I asked. "Do you think at the age of 8 you can really choose?"

"Like I said, I didn't know the deal then, I didn't know what I would get myself into. But here are the consequences, you understand, and I'm grown. All that's left to me is to tighten my belt and continue forward, with my chest high. This is what destiny wants."

“Would you say you were a victim?”

“No way, I’m no victim. No way, carnal.”

“A victimizer then?”

He paused for a moment, and then laughed uncertainly. “That’s it. Other people are my victims.”

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