



1. Can you provide current information about the street gangs in El Salvador?

The Mara 18 gang (also referred to as the 18th Street Gang, Calle 18, Barrio 18 or Dieciocho) is one of the largest gangs in El Salvador and is known to be extremely violent.¹ Reports cite the number of gang members in El Salvador as being 20,000 or 30,000 people out of a population of 6 million.² Originating in Los Angeles in the 1980s amongst Central American immigrants, Mara 18 spread through Southern Mexico and Central America when members returned from the United States.³

Initially the gang became involved in criminal activities such as drug sales and extortion⁴, but these activities grew to include extortion, murder and street crime. A 2011 report from the United States Overseas Advisory Council (OSAC) states that the two largest El Salvadoran gangs, Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18, are involved in ‘narcotics and arms trafficking, murder for hire, car-jacking, extortion, and violent street crime’.⁵ The gangs are well-armed and are able to acquire weapons due to lax customs enforcement and porous borders.⁶ The gangs roam the streets, ‘are quick to engage in violence if resistance is offered’, and ‘do not hesitate to use deadly force when perpetrating crimes’.⁷ OSAC also states:

¹ Gutiérrez, R. 2008, ‘El Salvador: Gangs Are “Perfect Scapegoats”, Say Experts’, *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 25 April <<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42129>> Accessed 17 March 2009; and Beaubien, 2011, ‘El Salvador Grapples With Upswing In Drug Traffic’, *NPR*, 31 May <<http://www.npr.org/2011/05/31/136727186/el-salvador-grapples-with-upswing-in-drug-traffic>> Accessed 30 March 2012

² United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012; Paranagua, P. 2010 ‘El Salvador calls for showdown with gangs to stem rising murder rate’, *The Guardian*, 21 September <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/21/el-salvador-central-america-gangs>> Accessed 27 March 2012

³ For a brief background on the origins of Mara 18 see: ‘Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment – Annex 1: El Salvador Profile’ 2006, *USAID*, April <http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean_democracy/els_profile.pdf> Accessed 17 March 2009; and Gutiérrez, R. 2008, ‘El Salvador: Gangs Are “Perfect Scapegoats”, Say Experts’, *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 25 April <<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42129>> Accessed 17 March 2009

⁴ Covey, H.C. 2010, *Street Gangs Throughout the World*, Charles C Thomas Publisher, Google Books, p. 140, <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=6ZA2-JroF30C&pg=PA140&lpg=PA140&dq=calle+18+gang&source=bl&ots=LjIEzcSDMJ&sig=z5BOU_o-gd_9B6lz8AAwVyKfabU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=mFNVT8XKHOiQiQfi0ZHWBg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=calle%2018%20gang&f=false> Accessed 28 March 2012

⁵ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

⁶ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

⁷ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

[G]ang members have become so brazen in their attacks that they are known to keep to a daily schedule, riding city buses from one stop to the next, mugging and committing criminal acts with impunity from criminal prosecution.⁸

Sources from 2011 indicate that gang related violence has worsened. In January 2012, the *Latin American Bureau*⁹ reported that '[e]xtortions constitute the gangs' chief source of income' and that '[i]nitially [the gangs] approached community residents for comparatively small sums, but over the years the shakedowns have become more extensive and sophisticated'.¹⁰ The report also notes that both Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 'have turned to raping girls, sparing only those, such as relatives or girlfriends, who are already linked to the groups'.¹¹ The *Guardian*, reported in 2010 that in the previous year, the national murder rate averaged 12 murders a day, with many 'blamed on the maras'.¹² Similarly, a 2011 STRATFOR report noted that 'violence has worsened as the drug traffic has increased', with El Salvador's homicide rate increasing 'by 6 per cent to 66 per 100,000 inhabitants between 2005 and 2010'.¹³ In 2011, *Diálogo* magazine¹⁴ noted that the operations of Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 have become more sophisticated and transnational:

The gangs' transformation from loose associations of small-time criminals devoid of strategic long-term planning into more coherent syndicates has alarmed authorities in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras... While the gangs are still highly focused on their neighborhoods and on extortion and kidnapping, human trafficking and auto and weapons smuggling, they are also moving into transnational drug trafficking, possibly under the tutelage of [Mexican drug cartel] Los Zetas.¹⁵

United States news organisation NPR¹⁶ also reported in 2011 that the gangs' connections with Mexican drug cartels have made them more dangerous:

The police chief says the Mexican cartels appear to be expanding their operations in El Salvador by hiring members of the 18th Street or Mara Salvatrucha gangs to do work for them. Both of these gangs are known to be extremely violent, and... their links to the Mexicans have made them even more so.¹⁷

⁸ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

⁹ A London-based research organisation focusing on human rights, development, culture and social and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean.

¹⁰ Wolf S. 2012 'The Maras – an escalating problem in El Salvador', *Latin America Bureau*, 25 January <http://www.lab.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1200%3Athe-maras-an-escalating-problem-in-el-salvador&catid=57%3Afocus&Itemid=39> Accessed 27 March 2012

¹¹ Wolf S. 2012 'The Maras – an escalating problem in El Salvador', *Latin America Bureau*, 25 January <http://www.lab.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1200%3Athe-maras-an-escalating-problem-in-el-salvador&catid=57%3Afocus&Itemid=39> Accessed 27 March 2012

¹² Paranagua, P. 2010 'El Salvador calls for showdown with gangs to stem rising murder rate', *The Guardian*, 21 September <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/21/el-salvador-central-america-gangs>> Accessed 27 March 2012

¹³ Hooper, S. 2011 'The Mexican Drug Cartel Threat in Central America', *STRATFOR*, 17 November <<http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20111116-mexican-drug-cartel-threat-central-america>> Accessed 30 March 2012

¹⁴ *Diálogo* is a professional military magazine published quarterly by the Commander of the United States Southern Command as an international forum for military personnel in Latin America.

¹⁵ Dettmer, J. 2011 'MS-13 and Calle 18 Developing Strong Relationships with Drug Cartels', *Dialogo*, 19 December <http://www.dialogo-americas.com/en_GB/articles/rmisa/features/regional_news/2011/12/19/aa-dettmer-gangs> Accessed 6 March 2012

¹⁶ NPR is a news organisation based in the United States.

¹⁷ 'El Salvador Grapples With Upswing In Drug Traffic', *NPR*, 31 May <<http://www.npr.org/2011/05/31/136727186/el-salvador-grapples-with-upswing-in-drug-traffic>> Accessed 30 March 2012

In March 2012, the leaders of both gangs agreed to a truce aimed at reducing the country's murder rate.¹⁸ As this is quite recent, the impact of the truce is yet to be understood; however, it has been reported that killings in El Salvador have appeared to have declined after the truce.¹⁹ This truce is discussed further in Question 2. Previous ceasefires had been agreed to in February 2010 and July and August 2009.²⁰

2. What efforts have the police and the government made to protect citizens from these threats and violence?

The El Salvadoran Government has introduced laws with tougher penalties for gang members, deployed the military to anti-gang taskforces run by the police and protected citizens through the Witness Protection Program. While the police have had some success, funding and equipment shortages and a culture of impunity have undermined their effectiveness in responding to gang related violence.

Laws to combat gang violence

In 2010, the El Salvadoran Government introduced a new law banning ‘ultraviolent mara youth gangs, criminal organisations and the –social extermination’ groups that claim to combat them’.²¹ The new legislation also doubled the maximum prison sentence for minors from seven to 15 years.²² In response to the law change, the two largest gangs in El Salvador (Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18) coordinated a transport strike throughout the country. The gangs threatened to ‘kill all bus drivers for a 72-hour time period if they continued with their routes’.²³ Ninety per cent bus drivers complied and ‘the country was paralyzed for 72 hours, with people walking hours to work due to very few buses operating’.²⁴ Commuters were offered ‘army transport and police escorts’.²⁵

Previous laws to combat gang violence have also received mixed reactions. In 2003 and 2004 the government introduced the *Mano Dura* (firm hand) and *Super Mano Dura* (super firm hand), respectively.²⁶ These laws were ‘defined as an integral plan to deal aggressively with

¹⁸ Aleman, M. 2012 ‘El Salvador Mara Salvatrucha, Mara 18 Gangs Reach Truce’, *CBS News*, 23 March <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-501715_162-57403447/report-salvadoran-gangs-agree-to-truce/> Accessed 27 March 2012

¹⁹ Aleman, M. 2012 ‘El Salvador Mara Salvatrucha, Mara 18 Gangs Reach Truce’, *CBS News*, 23 March <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-501715_162-57403447/report-salvadoran-gangs-agree-to-truce/> Accessed 27 March 2012

²⁰ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2010, *SLV103445.FE: El Salvador: The presence and activities of Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) and of Mara 18 (M18) in El Salvador, recruitment, measures taken by the government to fight the maras, and protection offered to victims of the maras (2008-2010)*, 3 June <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,QUERYRESPONSE,SLV,,4dd223432,0.html>> Accessed 6 March 2012

²¹ Paranagua, P. 2010 ‘El Salvador calls for showdown with gangs to stem rising murder rate’, *The Guardian*, 21 September <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/21/el-salvador-central-america-gangs>> Accessed 27 March 2012

²² Paranagua, P. 2010 ‘El Salvador calls for showdown with gangs to stem rising murder rate’, *The Guardian*, 21 September <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/21/el-salvador-central-america-gangs>> Accessed 27 March 2012

²³ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

²⁴ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

²⁵ Paranagua, P. 2010 ‘El Salvador calls for showdown with gangs to stem rising murder rate’, *The Guardian*, 21 September <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/21/el-salvador-central-america-gangs>> Accessed 27 March 2012

²⁶ ‘Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment – Annex 1: El Salvador Profile’ 2006, *USAID*, April <http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/els_profile.pdf> Accessed 17 March 2009

delinquents through law enforcement, as well as to provide for prevention and intervention initiatives'.²⁷ While *Super Mano Dura* resulted in the arrest of 11,000 gang members in one year,²⁸ the approach was criticised for 'driving the gangs underground and closer together'²⁹ and resulted in an 'upsurge in extortions, particularly in the transport sector'.³⁰

Recent anti-gang efforts

As indicated above, the government has responded to increased gang related violence by strengthening security measures. In March 2012, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that 'round-ups by the police in El Salvador continue, with the arrests last week of more than 50 young men suspected of being gang members who committed murders, extortion and illegal assembly'.³¹ The United States Department of State (USDOS) reported in 2011 that in 2009, 'military personnel were deployed to join the police on patrols and anti-gang and other task forces'.³² The report also states that the head of the anti-gang taskforce, the Ministry of Public Security, provided protection to over 3,000 people through its Witness Protection Program during 2010.³³ The police service also provided protection to 104 people during 2010.³⁴ Nevertheless, the report states that 'street gang intimidation and violence against witnesses contributed to a climate of impunity from criminal prosecution'.³⁵

In a different tact, it has been reported that the El Salvadoran Government was involved in negotiating a truce between El Salvador's two largest gangs, though the government denies playing a role. In March 2012, *CBS News* reported that the leaders of Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 'have reached a truce aimed at reducing the country's homicide rate'.³⁶ Following the truce, *InSight Crime*³⁷ questioned whether the agreement may have been the result of a government decision to transfer '30 imprisoned leaders of the [two gangs] from maximum security institutions to prisons with more relaxed rules on visitors'.³⁸ This is disputed by the government, however, with the Defence Minister David Munguia stating, 'I want the

²⁷ 'Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment – Annex 1: El Salvador Profile' 2006, USAID, April <http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/els_profile.pdf> Accessed 17 March 2009

²⁸ 'Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment – Annex 1: El Salvador Profile' 2006, USAID, April <http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/els_profile.pdf> Accessed 17 March 2009

²⁹ 'El Salvador's crime wave' 2007, *The Economist*, 29 January <http://www.economist.com/agenda/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_RGTGVJR> Accessed 20 March 2009

³⁰ Wolf, S. 2011 'Mano Dura: Gang Suppression in El Salvador', *Sustainable Security*, March <<http://sustainablesecurity.org/article/mano-dura-gang-suppression-el-salvador>> Accessed 29 March 2012

³¹ 'Crammed into caves, inmates fight for their lives, and a sense of justice' 2012, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 March <<http://www.smh.com.au/world/crammed-into-caves-inmates-fight-for-their-lives-and-a-sense-of-justice-20120323-1vpa5.html>> Accessed 27 March 2012

³² United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Human Rights Report: El Salvador*, 8 April <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/wha/154505.htm>> Accessed 28 March 2012

³³ United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Human Rights Report: El Salvador*, 8 April <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/wha/154505.htm>> Accessed 28 March 2012

³⁴ United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Human Rights Report: El Salvador*, 8 April <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/wha/154505.htm>> Accessed 28 March 2012

³⁵ United States Department of State 2011, *2010 Human Rights Report: El Salvador*, 8 April <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/wha/154505.htm>> Accessed 28 March 2012

³⁶ Aleman, M. 2012 'El Salvador Mara Salvatrucha, Mara 18 Gangs Reach Truce', *CBS News*, 23 March <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-501715_162-57403447/report-salvadoran-gangs-agree-to-truce/> Accessed 27 March 2012

³⁷ *InSight Crime* is a research organisation dedicated to organised crime and security issues in Latin American and the Caribbean, based in Washington and Colombia.

³⁸ Ramsey, G. 2012 'Is El Salvador Negotiating with Street Gangs?', *InSight Crime*, 15 March <<http://insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/2358-is-el-salvador-negotiating-with-street-gangs>> Accessed 28 March 2012

following statement to be loud and clear... the government of the republic is not at any time negotiating with any gang'.³⁹

More broadly, there is commentary on the ineffectiveness of the government and the police force in combating gang violence. In 2011, OSAC noted that while the police have had 'notable success in dismantling kidnapping gangs', the police is still 'somewhat ineffective'.⁴⁰ The OSAC report states:

The [police force] is still in the developmental stages of becoming a modern and effective police force that can protect the public. While several of the [police force's] investigative units have shown great promise, routine street level patrol techniques, anti-gang, and crime suppression efforts remain somewhat ineffective. Equipment shortages (particularly radios and vehicles) further limit their ability to deter or respond to crimes effectively.⁴¹

Similarly, *Time* magazine reported in 2009 that efforts to reduce gang violence were hampered by government corruption and lack of public funds. The article states that '[c]orruption at the highest levels of government has allowed many [gang] leaders to go free or conduct business from behind bars'.⁴² In the same article, the director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs⁴³ stated that 'El Salvador simply can't afford a full-scale war on crime and gangs'.⁴⁴

Regional and international response

Reports indicate that the El Salvadoran Government is receiving assistance in combating gang violence from local municipal governments, the United States Government, and other non-government organisations. The OSAC noted in 2011 that the US Government 'has assigned a Gang Advisor to assist the Government of El Salvador, and the FBI has established a transnational anti-gang unit with the [El Salvador police force], based in San Salvador'.⁴⁵ It was also noted in *The Economist* in 2007 that several initiative outside the national government offer anti-gang assistance:

Important initiatives at the municipal and private-sector level are also advancing. Following the advice of the government's bipartisan task force on crime, two municipalities—Soyapango and San Martín—have outlawed the carrying of guns in public places, and the results thus far are promising. Media organisations are contributing by de-sensationalising crime stories, in the hope that this will discourage the gangs from trying to outdo each other in the barbarity of their acts. Non-governmental organisations, mostly from Canada and the EU, have also stepped up

³⁹ Stone, H. 2012 'El Salvador Denies Negotiating with Gangs', *InSight Crime*, 19 March <<http://www.insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/2371-el-salvador-denies-negotiating-with-gangs>> Accessed 28 March 2012

⁴⁰ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

⁴¹ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

⁴² Gentile, C. 2009 'The Gangs of El Salvador: A Growing Industry', *Time*, 6 September <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1920741,00.html>> Accessed 6 March 2012

⁴³ A research group that monitors US-Latin American relations, based in the US.

⁴⁴ Gentile, C. 2009 'The Gangs of El Salvador: A Growing Industry', *Time*, 6 September <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1920741,00.html>> Accessed 6 March 2012

⁴⁵ United States Overseas Security Advisory Council 2011, *El Salvador Crime and Safety Report*, 4 March <<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=10561>> Accessed 28 March 2012

their work on gang prevention and intervention, areas that the government has mostly disregarded up to now, despite lip service to the contrary.⁴⁶

3. Do the gangs operate throughout El Salvador or are there cities other than San Salvador not affected by gang violence?

The Mara 18 gang is a transnational gang, spanning Central America, Southern Mexico, and the United States.⁴⁷ Within El Salvador, the gang's original bases began in the San Salvador suburbs of Apopa and Soyapango, and have since taken root in San Miguel and La Union.⁴⁸ The most violent areas of the country, which are also the areas where gangs are prevalent, are San Salvador, Sonsonate, Santa Ana, La Paz, and La Libertad.⁴⁹ The Mara 18 gang has a series of decentralized *clickas* [cliques], or smaller units, that cover specific neighborhoods.⁵⁰ The map below shows the population density of El Salvador, with the areas mentioned above marked by yellow stars.⁵¹



Figure 1 Population density of El Salvador with areas of gang activity marked by yellow stars.⁵²

⁴⁶ 'El Salvador's crime wave' 2007, *The Economist*, 29 January

http://www.economist.com/agenda/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_RGTGVJR Accessed 20 March 2009

⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, R. 2008, 'El Salvador: Gangs Are "Perfect Scapegoats"', Say Experts', *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 25 April <<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42129>> Accessed 17 March 2009

⁴⁸ Gentile, C. 2009 'The Gangs of El Salvador: A Growing Industry', *Time*, 6 September

<<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1920741,00.html>> Accessed 6 March 2012

⁴⁹ 'Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment – Annex 1: El Salvador Profile' 2006, *USAID*, April

<http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/els_profile.pdf> Accessed 17 March 2009

⁵⁰ 'Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment – Annex 1: El Salvador Profile' 2006, *USAID*, April

<http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/els_profile.pdf> Accessed 17 March 2009

⁵¹ 'Population Density Map of El Salvador', n.d., *World Trade Press*,

<http://www.atozmapsdata.com/zoomify.asp?name=Country/Modern/Z_ElSal_Pop> Accessed 29 March 2012

⁵² 'Population Density Map of El Salvador', n.d., *World Trade Press*,

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<<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,QUERYRESPONSE,SLV,,4dd223432,0.html>> Accessed 6 March 2012

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