

# Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador

The gangs that make El Salvador the murder capital of the world are not sophisticated global cartels but mafias of the poor.

## **Leer en español**

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SAN SALVADOR — On a sultry evening in late July, the Salvadoran authorities executed their very first assault on what they called the financial cupola of Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, the largest of the ruthless gangs that have made El Salvador the murder capital of the world.

Until that point, the National Civil Police had followed an almost choreographed routine, again and again, as they sought to cripple the gangs economically. In the dead of night, often accompanied by television cameras, officers would batter down the doors of ramshackle houses in marginalized communities and then arrest and put on display a cluster of tattooed and half-naked men.

Between 2012 and 2015, the total amount confiscated in these showy anti-extortion raids was \$34,664.75 — an absurdly tiny sum considering that the United States has designated MS-13 as a global criminal organization on a par with the Zetas of Mexico, or the Yakuza of Japan.

On July 27, however, in a mission baptized Operation Check, the authorities shifted gears. They deployed 1,127 police officers to raid scores of supposed gang fronts, including car dealerships and bars, motels and brothels.

With great fanfare, they presented to the news media rows and rows of impounded buses and cars, along with 77 suspects identified as the financial operatives of MS-13 and their collaborators. Among them were the supposed C.E.O. of the street gang, Marvin Ramos Quintanilla, and two other leaders portrayed as controlling millions and possessing luxuries unimaginable to the destitute gang members beneath them.

But the presentation was something of an exaggeration, as are many official characterizations of the gangs whose criminal sophistication and global reach tend to be overstated by authorities frustrated that they cannot vanquish them. For instance, that supposed chief executive officer hardly lived like a kingpin; he leased a squat concrete house with a corrugated roof in a neighborhood where rents rarely reach \$400. He owned an old Honda Civic and a Nissan van.

In collaboration with The New York Times, *El Faro*, a digital newspaper based in San Salvador, sought to pierce the secrecy surrounding the finances of the gangs that terrorize El Salvador, which is experiencing a level of deadly violence unparalleled outside war zones: 103 homicides per 100,000 residents last year, compared with five in the United States.

With an estimated 60,000 members in a country of 6.5 million people, the gangs hold power disproportionate to their numbers. They maintain a menacing presence in 247 of 262 municipalities. They extort about 70 percent of businesses. They dislodge entire communities from their homes, and help propel thousands of Salvadorans to

undertake dangerous journeys to the United States. Their violence costs El Salvador \$4 billion a year, according to a study by the country's Central Reserve Bank.

And yet, the reporting determined, MS-13 and its rival street gangs in El Salvador are not sophisticated transnational criminal enterprises. They do not begin to belong in the same financial league with the billion-dollar Mexican, Japanese and Russian syndicates with which they are grouped. If they are mafias, they are mafias of the poor. El Salvador has been brought to its knees by an army of flies.

MS-13's annual revenue appears to be about \$31.2 million. That estimate is based on information in the 1,355-page file of Operation Check, to which El Faro got exclusive access. Wiretapped conversations reveal that the gang's national leadership ordered its 49 "programs," or chapters, to turn over all the money earned in a single, typical week, which happened to be in April. It collected \$600,852.

It sounds like a lot of money. But if divided equitably among the estimated 40,000 members of MS-13, each gang member would earn \$15 a week and about \$65 a month. That is half the minimum wage of an agricultural day laborer.

But the gangs — MS-13 and its main rival, the 18th Street gang — do not distribute their proceeds equitably. They use them to pay for lawyers and funeral services, for weapons and munitions, and for the support of those serving long prison terms and their families. Theirs is a criminal subsistence economy; even many of their leaders are barely solvent.

"That the authorities call them 'businessmen' — either their intelligence is invalid or it's pretty crude," said Rolando Monroy, a former Salvadoran prosecutor who oversaw money-laundering investigations until 2013. "The gangs are like an anthill. They are all after the same thing: something to eat."

Unlike other groups considered global organized crime syndicates, the Salvadoran gangs do not survive on the international trafficking of cocaine, arms and humans. While they dabble in small-time drug dealing, gun sales and prostitution, they engage primarily in a single crime committed over and over within Salvadoran territory: extortion.

Inside El Salvador, they hold the reins of power largely because of a chilling demand repeated — or implied — daily across the country: Pay or die.

“Look, the thing is we’re not joking around,” said one threat in childlike handwriting delivered to a bus owner recently. “Get something together. If not, we are going to burn one of your new minibuses.” It was signed by the 18th Street gang: “18 sends its best.”

## A Message Written in Lead

At 4 p.m. on a summer day in 2015, two young gang members intercepted a businessman as he was returning home from work. “I have kids. Calm down, please,” he managed to say before the youths grabbed him, threw him to the ground and shot him: in a shoulder, in the stomach, and twice in the face.

They were delivering a message written in lead.

“It was because of the extortion, not for any other reason,” the man’s son said.

The man owned a bus. His son, who also owned a bus, said his father, tired of being extorted, had finally stopped making his \$1 daily payment to the gang three weeks before his death. It murdered him because of \$21.

Among Salvadoran businesses, transportation companies, whose vehicles crisscross gang territory, have proved especially vulnerable to extortion. Over the last five years, it has been more dangerous to drive a bus than to fight gang crime: The gangs have killed 692 transportation workers — and 93 police officers. (This is according to an

analysis of internal government data that, like most data in this article, is not considered public information but was obtained by El Faro.)

Genaro Ramírez, the owner of a large bus company and a former member of Congress, calculates that he has handed over \$500,000 in gang extortion payments over the last 19 years. “It’s a matter of survival,” he said. “When they tell you they are going to kill you, you don’t have a choice.”

Between 2013 and 2015, the National Police received 7,506 reports of extortion, which the authorities see as just a small fraction of the total. In the same period, some 424 gang members were convicted of this crime, most of them low-level people who made the pickups and were caught with the cash.

The payment of extortion by bus companies is so commonplace that some have employees whose principal role is to negotiate with the gangs, which are continually raising their rates and demanding extras like Christmas bonuses or buses to take them to the beach or to the funerals of associates.

The only transportation company chief who has refused to be extorted — and has made his refusal public — is Catalino Miranda. Mr. Miranda owns a fleet of several hundred buses.

Since 2004, the gangs have killed 26 of his employees. But he refuses to reconsider his position.

“As I told one of them,” he said, referring to a gang representative, “go ahead and kill them. This cannot continue for a lifetime.”

Mr. Miranda spoke in his office, with a 9-millimeter pistol lying atop a mess of papers on his desk, and rifles and flak jackets piled in a corner. He spends \$30,000 a month on security, he said. He has cameras posted in all his buses and stations, and eight security guards, armed with assault weapons, who patrol the gang zones his buses move through.

When his employees are killed, he hires private detectives to investigate, because “the state does not have the capacity to protect witnesses.”

“They use you,” Mr. Miranda continued, “and they abandon you.”

Resisting the gangs is not an option for small-business owners, however. Many of them live in gang-controlled neighborhoods themselves and cannot escape the pressure to pay. That was the situation for the bus owner killed in the summer of 2015.

The bus owner’s son, who is 38, spoke of his father’s death in an open-air restaurant beside the Pan-American Highway. The son carried a pistol — he always has one by his side, even when he sleeps, he said — and sat facing the entrance, with his back to a ravine, so he could track comings and goings.

Like most businessmen who recounted their experiences with shakedowns, the man spoke on the condition of anonymity. His father was one of 154 transportation workers who lost their lives to gang-run extortion rings in 2015. To talk is to risk becoming another statistic.

It all started one afternoon in 2004, he recounted, when a couple of teenage gangsters boarded a bus on their route. The youths demanded the driver’s license and registration, reviewed the documents and then handed the driver a disposable phone before jumping off.

After the shaken driver returned to the terminal, the phone rang. The voice on the other end laid out the terms of their new relationship: \$10 a week not just for the one bus but for each of the 10 buses on the route.

The man, his father and the other bus owners held an emergency meeting to discuss whether to report the demand to the police.

Many victims do not bother. Extortion investigations require them to make payments to the gangs while the police watch and collect evidence. But the gangs almost always find out, and the victim is threatened or killed before the investigation is completed.

Even so, the men decided to call the police. Soon, two detectives stationed themselves inside their terminal and, posing as bus owners, negotiated a rate with the gang: \$1 a day per bus.

Over the next three years, the police arrested three gang leaders, including one who lived next door to the man's father. The investigation expanded to other crimes and dragged on. The bus owners kept paying extortion.

The situation deteriorated. Between 2004 and 2012, MS-13 killed five bus drivers on their routes and one of the police investigators assigned to their case. In 2012, the gang tried to kill the man himself, surrounding his house, he said at the restaurant.

After his father's murder, the gang increased its extortion on the route — to \$1.50 a day.

The man sold his bus.

## Little Devil of Hollywood

When the Salvadoran authorities draw a flow chart of MS-13's organizational structure, they always put a mug shot of El Diablito de Hollywood, the Little Devil of Hollywood, at the very top.

Hierarchically, El Diablito — Borromeo Henríquez Solórzano, 38 — is as far above “homeboy” as one can get. If gang leaders are enriching themselves at the expense of the rank and file, Mr. Henríquez should be the wealthiest capo di tutti. And yet.

In the late 1970s or early 1980s, Mr. Henríquez and his family fled the Salvadoran civil war along with thousands of their compatriots who resettled in Los Angeles neighborhoods dominated by Mexican gangs. Mara Salvatrucha was born there and then.

At the end of the 1990s, as part of an anti-gang offensive and a crackdown on “criminal aliens,” the United States shipped planeloads of gang members made in the United States back to El Salvador and other Central American countries. El Diablito returned to his homeland in one of those waves of deportation.

He was just a teenager, but in that era coming from Los Angeles conferred status in the branch of Mara Salvatrucha that had sprouted in El Salvador. (Loosely affiliated but largely autonomous branches now exist in other Central American countries and in pockets of the United States outside California.) It was like arriving with a seal of “original product,” and El Diablito, clever and garrulous, quickly parlayed that into a position of power.

Prison, where he was sent in 1998 after getting a 30-year sentence for homicide, only solidified his stature.

Soon after he was first locked up, Mr. Henríquez summoned the leader of one of Mara Salvatrucha’s most powerful cells to visit him in prison, the leader related in an interview. At that time, the gang had no reliable revenue stream, though members sold drugs on street corners, committed petty robberies and demanded small handouts from bus drivers. But Mr. Henríquez had a moneymaking plan, he told the leader.

El Diablito said he wanted to institutionalize extortion nationwide, the leader related. He was insistent that the leader accede to the plan, or quit: MS-13 would tolerate no dissidents. The leader communicated the new directive to his troops. A few years later, the leader quit and emigrated to Washington, D.C., where he now owns a small business in a Salvadoran neighborhood.

Like El Diablito, most of the national gang leaders operate from behind bars. Through ready access to cellphones and private visits with lawyers, they retain tight control of their organizations — the money the gangs earn and the

havoc they wreak.

This became chillingly apparent in 2012 when the government was negotiating a truce with the gangs and Mr. Henríquez was emerging into the public eye as a spokesman for MS-13. The leaders sent out an order from behind bars: Stop killing. And from one day to the next, homicides dropped 60 percent to a level that, with small variations, was maintained until the government's negotiations with the gangs, which were highly unpopular, ended two years later.

During the truce, a team from El Faro was allowed to interview gang leaders in the Ciudad Barrios jail, which was dominated by MS-13. For over a decade, the gangs have been separated by institution to reduce internecine warfare; this has had the unintended effect of strengthening them by uniting rather than dispersing their leadership.

Dressed gang-fashionably in baggy, black athletic attire, Mr. Henríquez insisted that he survived on money sent by relatives in the United States and by a brother who sold used cars in El Salvador.

“Do you realize it is difficult to believe that one of the most visible leaders of MS-13 does not derive a penny of his income from illicit activities?” a reporter from El Faro said.

Mr. Henríquez paused, then responded: “My money does not come from extortion.” But he was pressed: What about illicit activities more generally? El Diablito answered with a derisive smile: “It doesn't come from extortion.” And all the other gang leaders laughed, cryptically.

That year — 2012 — the United States Treasury Department designated MS-13 as a transnational criminal organization, alongside four criminal syndicates: the Zetas, the Yakuza, the Russian Brothers' Circle and the Italian Camorra. It was the first street gang that had ever received that designation.

The next year, the Treasury put personal sanctions on Mr. Henríquez, which had the effect of forbidding Americans to do business with him and authorizing federal investigators to freeze his financial assets.

No evidence has surfaced that any of Mr. Henríquez's properties or assets in the United States were frozen.

Sanctions were also placed on El Diablito's wife, Jenny Judith Corado. The Salvadoran government arrested her in 2013 and accused her of belonging to a Mara Salvatrucha extortion ring. It could not prove her connection to the ring, however; she was freed and ordered to turn over the money that a judge considered the provenance of extortion: \$50.

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Now, Ms. Corado does not appear to be enjoying a life of luxury or even comfort. With her children beside her, she spends her days hawking used clothing and lingerie from a stall constructed of tin cans in the busy public marketplace of San Salvador.

In the news conference announcing Operation Check (as in the chess move), the authorities spoke of gang leaders' "luxuries," their "investments" and their "various millions of dollars."

"These leaders are living a different life than the gang members beneath them," Douglas Meléndez, the attorney general, said. "The gang members beneath them should know."

It was a communiqué directed at the street, at those rank-and-file gangsters who put their lives on the line for little tangible reward: While their leaders may have been preaching a doctrine of brotherhood, they were secretly enriching themselves at the expense of their brothers, their soldiers, their homeboys.

The luxuries, however, consisted of 22 imported but used cars, each valued at about \$8,000. The confiscated cash amounted to \$34,500. And the investments numbered three: a taqueria and bar in Soyapango, a working-class community in the San Salvador metropolitan area; a vegetable stand in a rural marketplace; and a highway restaurant that is decorated with a deer's head, offers karaoke and has three waiters who primarily serve buckets of beer bottles.

The gangs' credo of fraternity and equality does not allow for any personal gain at the expense of the brotherhood, and they at least theoretically enforce it brutally. "He who makes himself rich at the expense of the street is going to die," a leader of the 18th Street gang said in an interview.

So even a vegetable stand is a risky venture, and the wiretapped conversations in the Operation Check file reveal that some gang leaders went so far as to pay extortion fees to their own gangs on their private businesses in order to hide their involvement with them.

Howard Cotto, the general director of the National Police, estimated in an interview that 50 to 70 gang leaders, including Mr. Henríquez, have accumulated some money or business interests. But only enough, he said, to permit their families to escape "conditions of poverty, overcrowding, unhealthy conditions and sheet metal" and have a chance at a future.

"I cannot say the leaders are living in places of luxury," he acknowledged.

Most of the leaders, in fact, are expected to spend the rest of their lives in prison, either in solitary confinement or in malodorous cells shared with dozens of others.

**'Keep Two Bucks'**

One day in 2014, an imprisoned leader of the 18th Street gang who goes by the alias Chiki was issuing instructions to a low-level gang member identified as Shaggy.

Speaking by phone from the Izalco penitentiary, Chiki, who was serving time for extortion, ordered Shaggy to make a pickup of an extortion payment. It was \$100 from an operation in Colonia Rubio in the department of La Unión. And, though Shaggy risked up to 20 years in prison if caught, there was something special in it for him, Chiki said.

“Keep two bucks so you can get yourself something to eat,” Chiki said, in what turned out to be a wiretapped conversation. He added: “And tell El Demente,” the Demented One, “to give you some custards for your kid.”

Chiki, whose real name is José Luis Guzmán, was the third in command of the 18th Street gang’s Southerners faction in eastern El Salvador. Another prison wiretap recording showed an even higher-level 18th Street leader, Carlos Ernesto Mojica, getting involved in negotiations with a chicken vendor who sought to lower her monthly extortion payment to \$200 from \$400.

That these leaders were overseeing such small-bore operations typifies the pettiness of gang business. While officials publicly portray the gangs as international criminal syndicates and narco-gangs, law enforcement records and data tell a different story — as do some authorities when speaking privately or in one-on-one interviews.

In the four years before Operation Check, the biggest sum collected in a police anti-extortion raid was \$6,377; some raids netted only \$5.

“I have never had a case involving the quantity of money necessary to maintain organized crime,” said Nora Montoya, a judge who has handled gang extortion cases for decades.

Similarly, Mr. Cotto, the police director, said the term “narco-gang” was “sensationalism” and could be misinterpreted as suggesting that Salvadoran street gangs were working directly with the Gulf Cartel or the Zetas in the transshipment of drugs from South America to the United States.

“This is not the case. It is definitely not the case,” he said.

Although Salvadoran gangs sell drugs, they do it like street-corner dealers, not international operatives. From 2011 to 2015, the National Police seized 13.9 kilograms of cocaine from gangs; that was less than 1 percent of the total seized. Three-quarters of the gang members prosecuted on drug charges over the last few years were charged with possessing less than an ounce.

A veteran cocaine dealer in San Salvador said serious drug-trafficking organizations wanted nothing to do with the street gangs, which are considered unreliable and volatile.

“The wholesalers I work with would not sell to the gang guys,” he said. “They don’t trust them.”

Over a decade ago, the police confiscated an account ledger from José Luis Mendoza Figueroa, a founder of MS-13, that contained no evidence of any drug business. Instead it showed weekly receipts that averaged \$14 from the 19 “cliques” — the smallest gang units — he controlled, and trivial outlays for bullets (\$8), taxis (\$25), Christmas dinners, liquor and “\$50 for the homeboys in prison.”

A couple of years ago, federal agents seized a similar ledger from the treasurer of the Park View Locos clique of the MS-13 in Usulután in southeast El Salvador. A log of one day’s expenses showed \$30 for a cellphone chip, \$10 for “mujer chief” (the chief’s wife or woman), \$35 for “another woman” and \$10 for food, with \$29 listed as the balance.

The notebook also contained the gang member’s grandiose musings: “The day I die I want to be remembered as a strong street-level soldier, a committed delinquent, and at the hour that the shots ring out, I want to be marked

‘present.’”

## Grunts Seeking Respect

According to an internal code, only leaders can speak on behalf of the 18th Street gang. But in the rural department of La Paz, one of the most violent in El Salvador, a 15-year-old gang member clambered to his feet from an old mattress on the dirt floor of a mud-walled house to defy that rule. He had agreed to grant an interview on two conditions: that his identity be protected, and that breakfast be provided.

The boy, gangly and pimply, is a fledgling member of the 18th Street Revolutionaries, a faction of the 18th Street gang, and he works as an extremely small-time roadside extortionist. He collects \$15 monthly from each of three food trucks that rumble through his district carrying chewing gum, Pepsi sodas and Bimbo bread. He then turns over the proceeds to the leader of his clique.

“All the loot goes to weapons,” the youth said; he himself was awarded a 9-millimeter pistol and many nights takes it out on “patrol.”

Like so many young recruits, the teenager is an obedient soldier who risks his life to protect his territory without earning a penny from his organization. It is a bargain for the gang leaders who manage the gang economy: tens of thousands of grunts who are not seeking personal profit, only respect and a sense of belonging.

One of 14 children, the boy never went to school and does not know how to read or write. He probably could have found work in the nearby sugar-cane fields, where, even if conditions were miserable, he would have earned \$100 a month. But, feeling bullied and vulnerable at 13, he believed that gang membership would give him something less tangible but more valuable at that age.

“I was a kid: I was stupid,” he said about joining. “A bunch of crazy guys were messing with me because I was a kid, smacking me in the head, knocking me around. It made me think: I have had enough. Since I joined up, nobody screws with me.”

The department of La Paz, with all its sugar-cane production, is fairly lucrative for the gangs. The Federation of Associations of Sugar Cane Producers said in June that its members had paid \$1.5 million in extortion fees over a recent five-month period.

But none of that trickles down to the rank and file. So in order to survive, the boy runs his own little racket on the side: “private extortion,” gang members call it. His particular clique forbids members to extort their neighbors. Instead, he collects and pockets “rent” from a few poor businesses on the periphery of his clique’s zone.

He said he netted \$40 a month — “only enough for what I’m going to eat.” Despite his age, he is mostly left to fend for himself by a hapless mother with too many mouths to feed.

While the teenage gang member talked, three of his little siblings circled the breakfast — scrambled eggs, beans and plantains — that waited in cartons on the floor. He gave his younger brother permission to open a carton. The little boy, who had matted hair and a dirty face, let out a squeal of delight, and proceeded to attack the meal with his hands.

In two years of gang life, the teenager has already witnessed and participated in significant bloodshed. He said he had been involved in two “collective homicides.” In both cases, members of a rival gang had dared to breach the invisible border that separates MS-13 from 18th Street territory. One man was looking to buy some marijuana; the other to meet girls at a village festival. They were killed for their defiance.

In the spring, the 26-year-old leader of the teenager’s clique — whom he knew as Shadow — died in what the police described as a clash between the authorities and gang members. The boy was not present, but he had

witnessed the deaths of three other clique members in February in another encounter described as a clash, he said.

The boy said none of his homeboys had been carrying weapons that winter day. Hiding in a trash pile, he watched as the police killed his friends, teenagers like him, and then, he said, placed guns around their bodies to make it look as if they had fallen in crossfire.

Two neighbors who are not gang members supported his version of events in interviews, and it is not far-fetched: El Salvador's attorney general for human rights has 31 open cases against the police for alleged summary executions of 100 gang members over the last year and a half.

The day of that interview and in follow-up conversations throughout the summer, the boy made it clear he was scared of the police. Since February, officers had been stopping by his house from time to time, and he had spent much of his time hiding from them in the mountains.

“I need to save money to get out of here,” he said. “If they catch me, they're not going to let me live.”

They did catch him, in October, and arrested him for extorting \$40 — his private extortion — from a local merchant. He was jailed, and faces up to 15 years in prison.

## Failure of the 'Iron Fist'

As violence peaked in 2015, reaching levels unseen since the aftermath of El Salvador's long and brutal civil war, entire communities abandoned their homes because of gang threats. It became such a recurring phenomenon that television channels interrupted their programming to broadcast live the precise moment in which dozens of families fled, on foot or in pickup trucks tightly packed with suitcases, mattresses, chickens and pigs.

Having failed to guarantee them daily security, the police nonetheless supervised their moves. Pedro González, the chief of the anti-gang unit, showed up at one mass exodus, from a condominium building in suburban San Salvador. After imploring residents in vain to stay put, he led them in an alternate response.

“It doesn’t matter who here is Catholic or evangelical, let us raise a prayer,” he said. “That is the most important, let us turn to God.”

Over the years, the Salvadoran authorities have tried to quash the gangs with military might, to prosecute them into oblivion, to banish them with lengthy prison terms and, briefly, to negotiate with them. (The dialogue was corrupted by, among other things, the secret efforts of the two major political parties to court the gang leaders’ electoral support at the same time.)

When the government ratcheted up its “iron fist” approach last year, three gangs, working in coordination, responded with a show of force. On a Sunday night, they distributed written and oral messages to bus owners and employees: “He who takes out a vehicle tomorrow is going to end up glued to his steering wheel.” To underscore their seriousness, they killed a driver and burned three minibuses as a warning.

The next day, six drivers who had disobeyed their order were killed. The authorities sent soldiers and tanks into the streets, and deployed government vehicles to substitute for the buses, but the gangs succeeded in almost completely paralyzing San Salvador’s transportation system for four days. Some 1.3 million Salvadorans were affected; many high schools and universities suspended classes and the economy suffered an \$80 million loss, according to the Chamber of Commerce. It was a ruthless show of force.

This year, with Operation Check, the government conducted one of its most professional law enforcement efforts to date, and comments by senior officials suggested a new willingness to approach the gangs as a complex phenomenon with deep roots in the profound inequalities of a country where a third of the population lives in poverty.

Yet by hyping its findings, the government continued to misrepresent the gangs as sophisticated criminal organizations, ruthlessly driven by a thirst for financial gain. And though in Operation Check it acknowledged a distinction between the culpability of leaders and rank-and-file members, that distinction was lost on the street.

The authorities have continued to treat all gangsters as mortal enemies and have doubled down on their use of force. Some 424 gang members had died in confrontations with the police this year as of September.

“If the use of force is not the correct path in this moment, at this stage, at this juncture, then what is?” Óscar Ortiz, the country’s vice president, asked in late October.

The government cites as evidence a recent drop in murders: 4,431 by mid-October, compared with 5,363 by that point in 2015. But that is still the second highest toll since 1995.

In Operation Check, the government sought to sow dissent in gang ranks by portraying the leaders of MS-13 as self-interested profiteers. Afterward, a written message sent out from a Mara Salvatrucha-dominated prison demanded that “justice” be meted out to those revealed by Operation Check to have betrayed the gang, according to an American official in El Salvador who monitors the gangs.

As of yet, though, there do not seem to have been any revenge killings, internal purges or mass defections.

For a gang member tired of the gang life, at any rate, there is nowhere to go. Those who are not incarcerated are marked, quite literally with tattoos, for life. There are no rehabilitation centers where they can seek refuge, no programs to reintegrate them into society and no gang-prevention initiatives aimed at high-risk youths.

The only alternatives appear to be those that gang members themselves spray-paint on walls throughout the country: “Jail or the Cemetery.”

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