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Barrio 18

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Barrio 18 El Salvador Guatemala
Honduras

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The 18th Street Gang, also known as “Barrio 18,” is one of the largest youth gangs in the Western Hemisphere. Like its better known rival, the Mara Salvatrucha ([MS13](#)), the Barrio 18 has cells operating from Central America to Canada, including the United States. With thousands of members

across hundreds of kilometers, and interests in a number of different illicit activities, the Barrio 18 is one of the more significant emerging criminal threats in the region. Still, it is questionable how far its different units are coordinated across borders, or even within the same city.

History

The Barrio 18 first emerged as a small-time street gang in Los Angeles. While some accounts trace its origins to the late 1950s, the gang began to take its current form in the 1980s after splitting from the Clanton 14 gang. It earned particular notoriety for its role in the Los Angeles riots that followed the acquittal of the police who brutally beat Rodney King, an African-American motorist, in 1992.

Originally, the group's many cells, known as cliques, were the exclusive province of Mexican immigrants in Southern California, and dominated neighborhoods such as MacArthur Park.

However, as other Latino nationalities joined the immigrant population, the Barrio 18 began to recruit members from a variety of backgrounds, a development that would facilitate the group's spread into other nations, particularly in Central America.

Efforts by US law enforcement to slow the gang's growth have not proven effective. In the late 1990s, a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) task force, along with local law enforcement, took down some of the Barrio 18's foremost leaders. However, this did not so much handicap the gang as give it another base from which to operate and recruit new members: federal prisons. Despite efforts to isolate gang leaders from their contacts on the outside and from their fellow prisoners, Barrio 18 bosses like Francisco Martinez, alias "Puppet," devised ways to continue running criminal activities from the inside.

The Barrio 18 spread south into Central America and Mexico largely as a function of a change to US immigration policies in the 1990s, which increased the number of criminal charges for which a foreign-born resident could be deported to their country of origin. The new policy was applied aggressively to gangs in California, where a large percentage of the Barrio 18's members were not US citizens. The deportations led to a sudden influx of Barrio 18 members in Central America and Mexico. As a result, some argue that US policy helped the Barrio 18 spread internationally.

The response of Central American governments to the rise in gang activity has also proven to be largely counterproductive. In the early 2000s, beginning in El Salvador, governments began passing more stringent laws that criminalized mere “association” with gangs. These so-called “[mano dura](#),” or “iron fist,” policies only encouraged the gangs’

growth by concentrating many members in prison, pushing them to reorganize and regroup. In Central America during the 2000s, the space created for extortion rackets and kidnapping gangs by weak police forces and a relatively open criminal landscape was filled in part by the Barrio 18.

Following a series of violent incidents in prisons between the Barrio 18 and its rival, the MS13, Salvadoran officials separated inmates from the rival gangs. Inside prison, Barrio 18 leaders increased their control over criminal activities like as extortion. On the outside, they branched into kidnapping, petty drug trafficking and contract killings. They also began to operate in a more sophisticated manner, laundering money through small businesses such as car washes, and trying to control community and local non-governmental organizations in order to influence policy at the highest levels.

In 2005, the Barrio 18 in El Salvador split into two factions, the Revolucionarios and Sureños.

In some regions, Barrio 18 cliques dedicate themselves to controlling territory and defending it against any incursions by rival gangs. Elsewhere, focused less on turf and more on profit maximization, they operate in territory controlled by rivals, peddling drugs and controlling brothels, and pay a quota to the dominant gang in order to do so.

Throughout the region, the Barrio 18 is known for a strict insistence on loyalty in its ranks, and often kills to punish transgressions.

The gang poses the greatest threat in Central American nations like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where weaker governments and larger gangs (relative to the population) have turned the “mara” phenomenon into a significant threat to national welfare — the gangs systematically extort public transport systems and entire communities.

In California, the gang has a close relationship with the Mexican Mafia, or “La eMe,” a street gang which also has a strong presence in US federal prisons. In many cases, the leaders of Barrio 18 cliques, called “shot-callers,” also report to the Mexican Mafia. Authorities allege that these groups, along with other members of an international alliance of gangs called the Sureños (for their Southern California heritage), run drugs from Central America to the United States. However, while much of the drug peddling in US cities is controlled by street gangs, evidence that the Barrio 18 is part of an international distribution network is anecdotal.

Still, the gang has its hand in a number of different criminal enterprises across the length and breadth of its territory, among them murder-for-hire, drug sales, prostitution, extortion, theft and kidnapping.

The Barrio 18 has also allegedly linked up with some of Mexico’s most

notorious drug trafficking networks. Despite the Barrio 18's Mexican roots, the gang is not one of the strongest organizations in Mexico. It may, however, have links with groups like the [Zetas](#) and the [Sinaloa Cartel](#) based on its presence in the United States and Central America (where the Mexicans have been increasing their presence in recent years). Nevertheless, the diffuse, undisciplined and horizontal nature of this organization does not bolster the theory that it has integral [links to transnational organized criminal groups](#).

This may change in the future, however. In March 2012, Barrio 18 leaders and their rivals in the MS13 agreed to a nationwide "truce," which was mediated by local NGOs and the Catholic Church and facilitated by the Salvadoran government. As a result of this ceasefire, the homicide rate in the country plummeted. Whereas El Salvador saw about 13 or 14 murders a day in the beginning of that year, this

fell to around five a day, on average, in the subsequent months. Following the initial success of the truce, an unsuccessful attempt to emulate it was made in Honduras.

The leaders of both the MS13 and the Barrio 18 proved **alarmingly adept** at using their now heightened political profile to their advantage, fuelling concerns that the initiative could provide a means of increasing their criminal sophistication and overall influence in the country. To add to these concerns, extortion and disappearances reportedly continued to rise in El Salvador over the course of the truce, and homicides began rising again in mid-2013.

These problems came to a head in 2014, resulting in the breakdown of the gang truce and increased homicide rates. After President Salvador Sánchez Cerén took office, his government created a new security council meant to propose

how to combat crime and violence, and its members have been **emphatic** that future negotiations with gang members are off the table. Gang violence and homicides continued to escalate throughout 2014 and early 2015.

Homicides began falling in April 2016 following the announcement of a **non-aggression pact** between the two factions of the Barrio 18 and the MS13. For its part, the government insisted that the drop in violence could be attributed to a security crackdown that it initiated around the same time.

Under a package of **“extraordinary” anti-gang measures** approved by Congress, the government has implemented extended detention periods, involved the army in public security activities, increased flexibility for the execution of searches and seizures, and tightened administrative measures in prisons.

Although homicides continued to decline through 2017, the situation in El Salvador has begun to

resemble **low-intensity conflict** with security forces implicated in torture and extrajudicial killings and accused of running **clandestine jails** and **death squads**.

Leadership

Like the MS13, the Barrio 18 is organized into semi-autonomous cells, called “cliques.” While there is a hierarchy within the cliques, there is no military-style, top-to-bottom chain of command for the estimated thousands of members across North and Central America. The Barrio 18’s organizational structure is more decentralized and horizontal in structure.

After a truce between the MS13 and the Barrio 18 in El Salvador fell apart in 2014 and members from both gangs were transferred back to maximum-security prisons, a break in command created an opening for mid-level gang members who were upset by the truce to take more control. The Barrio 18 then broke into

smaller, competing cells that owed less allegiance to the central leadership. However the leadership showed some signs of being restored in March 2016 when representatives of the MS13 and the Barrio 18 instructed their members to stop committing homicides, prompting a precipitous drop in violence.

Geography

The gang poses the greatest threat in Central American nations like [El Salvador](#), [Guatemala](#) and [Honduras](#). In the United States, by contrast, the estimated [30,000 to 50,000](#) members of the Barrio 18 have adopted a more defensive posture.

The group operates in dozens of cities across more than 20 states. Many of its members are located in California, but the Barrio 18 also has a presence in states as varied as Iowa, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania

The Barrio 18 has also had a presence in Italy since the mid-2000s. The September 2016 [arrest](#) of an alleged

Barrio 18 leader in Spain hinted at the gang's desire to expand its presence in Europe.

Allies and Enemies

The Barrio 18 and the MS13 are fierce enemies, and internal divisions within the Barrio 18 periodically flare up into violence. The Barrio 18 in El Salvador is divided into rival factions, the Revolutionaries and the Sureños.

The gang also has a close relationship with the Mexican Mafia, and has reportedly established some links with the Zetas and Sinaloa Cartel. It is also known to have networks of lawyers, taxi drivers and mechanics as collaborators. The gang's reliance on extortion and its penchant for violence, however, puts it at odds with local communities to a greater extent than its rival the MS13.

Prospects

The Barrio 18 will likely continue to be a significant

source of instability for Central America. Authorities have responded to the group with [heavy-handed anti-gang crackdowns](#) that have not proven to be successful long-term approaches. Moreover, officials have warned that the Barrio 18 and its rival, the MS13, are increasingly [attempting to infiltrate](#) local politics in furtherance of their criminal activities.

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