



Centre for
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Armed violence and poverty in El Salvador

A mini case study for the Armed Violence and Poverty Initiative
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Mo Hume
University of Liverpool

The Armed Violence and Poverty Initiative

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) has commissioned the Centre for International Cooperation and Security (CICS) at Bradford University to carry out research to promote understanding of how and when poverty and vulnerability is exacerbated by armed violence. This study programme, which forms one element in a broader “Armed Violence and Poverty Initiative”, aims to provide the full documentation of that correlation which DFID feels is widely accepted but not confirmed. It also aims to analyse the **processes** through which such impacts occur and the **circumstances** which exacerbate or moderate them. In addition it has a practical policy-oriented purpose and concludes with programming and policy recommendations to donor government agencies.

This report on El Salvador is one of 13 case studies (all of the case studies can be found at www.bradford.ac.uk/cics). This research draws upon secondary data sources including existing research studies, reports and evaluations commissioned by operational agencies, and early warning and survey data where this has been available. These secondary sources have been complemented by interviews with government officers, aid policymakers and practitioners, researchers and members of the local population. The analysis and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or policy of DFID or the UK government.

Executive summary

One of the most powerful conflicts to affect Central America in the 1980s was that in El Salvador (1980-1992), resulting in the death of more than 80,000 citizens. The 1992 Peace Accords are widely recognised as having put an end to the twelve-year war, but have been accused of failing in their mission to bring an end to pervasive violence and to build a new and more equal society. Although El Salvador is now characterised as a middle-income country, in 2001, the UN estimated that almost a half of El Salvador's population continue to live in precarious conditions.¹ Over a decade since the formal cessation of its political conflict, El Salvador remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, ranking 0.54 on the GINI index, with over 40 per cent of its population living in conditions of poverty.² Efforts to build a meaningful peace and implement developmental progress have been hampered by continuing high levels of armed violence. Within Latin America, El Salvador stands out as one of the most violent countries. The boundaries between the definition of 'armed violence' and 'crime' are somewhat nebulous in the El Salvador context, since SALW are used in much criminal activity. Random criminal violence and highly visible gang activity have contributed to a situation where fear and insecurity still characterise everyday life for many citizens. This has exhibited itself through a sharp rise in street crime, a growing gang culture and high levels of violence in private realms of existence.

Research undertaken during the 1990s estimated that anywhere between 6000 and 8000 murders occur each year in El Salvador, a country of just over 6 million inhabitants. This recorded average murder rate more than doubled from 1991 (43.5 per 100,000 inhabitants) to 1994 (over 100 per 100,000 inhabitants).³ One observer has argued that the 1990s will have seen more violent deaths than the war years.⁴ Figures for other violent crimes are similarly high, with 25,548 violent crimes reported in 1998.⁵ One of the most notable legacies of the civil war has been the extreme militarisation of society. At a conservative estimate, there are some 400,000 - 450,000 arms in the hands of civilians. Around 35.7 per cent (14,000) of these are legally held.⁶ This translates into 2 firearms for every ten adults. There are an estimated 4 million firearms in the hands of civilians in Central America.

In addition to the massive challenges and costs of post-war reconstruction (US \$1,826 million as calculated on the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992),⁷ the last decade has seen a series of natural disasters that have further retarded the country's development. Together with historic structural inequalities and the weakening of social fabric, the end of the war left a huge inactive workforce. This was, at least in part, a result of the demobilisation of military groups, who received very little support for reinsertion into civil life, but it was exacerbated by the scarcity of sources of employment. The period of

¹ Human Development Report (2001).

² Ibid.

³ Cruz (2003: 19), citing De Mesquita (2002).

⁴ Ramos (2000).

⁵ Cruz *et al.*, (1998: 4-6).

⁶ Ibid: 25

⁷ Dunkerley (1993).

post-war reconstruction coincided with the implementation of a stringent neo-liberal agenda and structural adjustment policies. This severely limited public services and reduced sources of employment. The Land Transfer Programme (PTT) stipulated by the peace accords was limited in its scope and only included registered combatants. Added to the massive circulation of arms, a historic lack of respect for the rule of law and weak state institutions, this combination of factors has allowed other long-standing social conflicts/problems to be brought to the fore and generate new spaces for armed violence.⁸ Some demobilised groups have been accused of becoming involved in organised crime, especially ex-members of the military. The fledgling National Civil Police (PNC) that was formed after the signing of the Peace Accords was ill-equipped to deal with the wave of crime and violence. There has been a steady erosion of confidence in the security forces in the last decade and this is reflected in the growing privatisation of the security apparatus: there are currently an estimated 70,000 private security agents in operation whereas the PNC has an active force of approximately 20,000 officers.⁹

Post-war violence in El Salvador has exacerbated existing social cleavages. Fear and mistrust work together to undermine social capital in many ways and create a vicious circle for the reproduction of violence. The disintegration of social networks has further reinforced the existing fragmentation and political and socio-economic polarisation of society, and public spaces for collective action have been reduced. Communities' capacity to deal with conflict is limited and violence has become part of everyday neighbourhood interaction. For example, squabbles between neighbours often result in physical fights and weapons (knives, pistols etc) can be used. Drunken fights are aggravated by the use of SALW, as are traffic incidents. Figures from the PNC, estimate that 86 per cent of murders are caused by "social violence", such as family disputes, fights between neighbours etc. According to sources from the PNC, SALW are used in around 85 per cent of homicides.¹⁰

In the last decade, one of the most dramatic developments in the pandemic of violence has been the emergence of youth gangs (*maras*). Largely made up of young men from low-income neighbourhoods, *maras* have become synonymous with terror and insecurity. The groups are heavily armed and use knives, home-made weapons (firearms and grenades) and legally and illegally held SALW in their activities. Figures estimate that there are anywhere between ten and thirty thousand active gang members in El Salvador.¹¹ Few rehabilitation and prevention programmes exist for gang members and state responses to gangs have been largely repressive; for example, the *Super Mano Dura* (Super Iron Fist) legislative measures that have been implemented to combat the problem.

Violence is not experienced by all members of society in the same way and it is often the poor who are more vulnerable to extreme violence. It is important to emphasise that poverty does not cause violence and not all poor people are violent. In situations where

⁸ Amaya Cobar and Palmieri (2000).

⁹ Melara (2001).

¹⁰ Interview with PNC (September, 2004).

¹¹ El Diario de Hoy, 24 July, 2003, interview with PNC.

poverty and inequality overlap, armed violence is employed as an option by some people, with particular lethality when these conditions coincide with SALW use.

In urban areas, high density and overcrowded housing, limited access to basic services and limited livelihood opportunities have put increased pressures on communities, with an accompanying explosion in violence. There are few spaces in Salvadoran society that are free from violence/threat and the problem of violence is also serious in rural areas. Urgent action is needed to address the problem of violence in a holistic manner, since current state programmes tend to be largely repressive and both state and non-state prevention programmes are limited in terms of both resources and scope. The devastating effect of SALW on current levels of violence should not be underestimated, contributing to levels of violence and also the destruction of human capital. Reforms to the current firearms legislation are urgent. Existing laws are lax and highly permissive. There is a widespread culture of SALW use in El Salvador and educational programmes targeted on the dangers of SALW are necessary. Some steps have been taken by the UNDP's *Violence in a Transitional Society* Programme; however, these need to be replicated throughout the country.

1. Introduction

1.1 *El Salvador and armed violence*

The 1992 Peace Accords in El Salvador are widely recognised as having put an end to the twelve-year war, but have been accused of failing in their mission to build a new and more equal society.¹² Efforts to achieve peaceful and more democratic societies throughout Latin America have been undermined by existing (and, in many cases, deepening) social cleavages. These cleavages, which Kooning and Kruijt call "governance voids", provide key spaces for the propagation of violence. "In spite of the demise of authoritarian rule - violence is seen as a *normal* option with which to pursue interests, attain power or resolve conflicts".¹³ Indeed, Concha-Eastman asserts that violence "has recently acquired alarming proportions and dimensions in many countries".¹⁴ Within Latin America, El Salvador stands out as one of the most violent countries. Efforts to build a meaningful peace have been hampered by continuing high levels of armed violence. The boundaries between the definition of 'armed violence' and 'crime' more broadly are somewhat nebulous since small arms and light weapons (SALW), and other weapons, are used in much criminal activity. As such, the discussion below refers to both armed violence and crime.

Existing conceptual frameworks seek to locate contemporary violence in either a post-conflict analysis or within the study of new forms of violence and criminality. The reality is, of course, much more complex. Current levels of violence have indeed developed and new forces have emerged which differ from historic politically motivated violence. Nevertheless, it is impossible within a study of armed violence and poverty to consider only the overt 'expressions' of violence in isolation of the structural conditions that underlie its prevalence.. These structural inequalities, together with political authoritarianism paved the way for civil war in El Salvador and continue to shape the contemporary pandemic. Feldman stresses that violence is formative - it affects not only the development of individual and collective identity, but also how individuals interact with their social and physical environment.¹⁵ Further, Holden argues that the presence and persistence of state-sponsored violence has had a "pivotal role" in shaping society in Central America.¹⁶ Violence has worked through local networks, co-opting individuals and communities to blur the "distinction between violence carried out by public officials and that by civilians."¹⁷

In El Salvador, terror and violence have both characterised relations between the state and society and shaped the formation and reproduction of society itself. The implication of this history of violence - or violent history - is far reaching and its legacy can be seen in contemporary El Salvador relations, where violence remains a powerful and debilitating

¹² ECA (1999); Pearce (1998); Cruz (1997).

¹³ Koonings and Kruijt (1999: 11).

¹⁴ Concha-Eastman (2001: 37).

¹⁵ Feldman (1991).

¹⁶ Holden (1996: 437).

¹⁷ Ibid: 444.

force in everyday life for many. This piece argues that continuing deep levels of social and economic exclusion, political authoritarianism and acute inequalities continue to shape Salvadoran society. Some authors have argued that current forms of violence are also political, since they result from political choices, such as policies that have exacerbated inequalities and the continued failure of governments to address structural problems.¹⁸ In the context of El Salvador, where the process of peace building has coincided with the implementation of strict structural adjustment policies, questions must therefore be asked about the nature and reality of peace and the democratisation process in the country.

Continued impunity and violence have contributed to the erosion of democratic expectations, undermining confidence in a fledgling democratic political system such as that found in El Salvador and other Latin American polities.¹⁹ The continued pervasiveness of violence in the region, therefore, has been linked with weak notions of citizenship.²⁰ Such notions cast doubt on the viability of the democratic project; to such a degree that Rotker claims that current levels of violence attest to an "undeclared civil war in major Latin American cities",²¹ resonating with the ECA (*Estudios CentroAmericanos*) editorial's assessment of El Salvador's current violence as an "informal war".²² Both Rotker and the ECA editorial pose that current levels of violence are rooted in protest, albeit random and unorganised, against pervasive structural inequalities. ECA suggests that "El Salvador, as it stands, is not viable without radical structural change", claiming that transition has not addressed the roots of the conflict.²³ Rotker argues:

This undeclared civil war clearly engages elements of fear and rage, but it is no longer a question of planting bombs or hiding in the mountains to take up arms against a dictator or corrupt government. It deals instead with a violence that resists a whole system, creating it in a more profound way, at the heart of its social relations. As it makes victims of us all, this undeclared civil war obliterates spaces of difference and differentiation, making all of us experience injustice, insecurity and inequality.²⁴

1.2 The historical context

During the 1980s, Central America was afflicted by a succession of brutal civil wars. One of the most powerful of these conflicts was in El Salvador, which claimed more than 80,000 lives, in addition to the forced displacement of more than one million men, women and children in the region.²⁵ In January 1992, the internationally brokered Chapultepec

¹⁸ See, for example, Tedesco (2000) on Argentina, and Pinheiro (1996) on Brazil.

¹⁹ In El Salvador, for example, those individuals responsible for the massive human rights abuses during the war have still not been tried due to an amnesty declared by the government prior to the publication of the report of the Truth Commission. See: Popkin (1999), Kaye (1999) and Méndez (1999).

²⁰ Moser and Winton, 2001; Kooning and Kruijt, 1999; Méndez, 1999; Vilas, 1996.

²¹ Rotker (2001: 18).

²² ECA (1999: 967).

²³ Ibid: 969.

²⁴ Rotker (2001: 18) is speaking of Latin America in general; however, her analysis appears particularly pertinent to the Salvadoran situation.

²⁵ Ardón (1998).

Peace Accord was signed between the government and the left wing FMLN, putting an end to the twelve year civil war. The Peace Accord brought with it the hope of prosperity and political transformation and while the last twelve years have seen many positive developments in the country, the reality of peace in El Salvador remains contested. The everyday lives of much of Central America's population remain characterised by exclusion, poverty and violence.²⁶

Random criminal violence and highly visible gang activity have contributed to a situation where fear and insecurity still characterise everyday life for many citizens. This exhibits itself through a sharp rise in street crime, a growing gang culture and high levels of violence in private realms of existence. Research undertaken during the 1990s estimated that anywhere between 6000 and 8000 murders occur each year in El Salvador, a country of just over 6 million inhabitants. This recorded average murder rate more than doubled from 1991 (43.5 per 100,000 inhabitants) to 1994 (over 100 per 100,000 inhabitants).²⁷ One observer has argued that the 1990s will have seen more violent deaths than the war years.²⁸ Figures for violent crimes are similarly high, with 25,548 violent crimes reported in 1998 alone.²⁹

In recent years, there has been an increased interest, both from the academic community and policy makers, to understand the development of the violence pandemic in Latin America. According to recent research by the World Bank, the Latin American and Caribbean region is one of the most violent in the world, following only Africa which, based on criminal victimisation rates, is considered the most violent continent.³⁰ Regional figures from Latin America in 1990 demonstrate a murder rate of 22.9 per 100,000, which is over twice that of a world average of 10.7 per 100,000 inhabitants (see Table 1.1 for murder rates from Latin America).³¹ Central America and El Salvador, in particular, stand out as particularly violent. Efforts to understand violence have identified the continuing social and political cleavages in the country as determining factors. Key themes for analysis have been: citizen security,³² crime,³³ gangs and youth violence,³⁴ state weakness³⁵ and social exclusion.³⁶ Two major studies on the availability and use of firearms have been published in recent years.³⁷

²⁶ Pearce (1998).

²⁷ Cruz (2003: 19), citing De Mesquita (2002). These levels are very high: on a global scale more than 10 murders per 100,000 inhabitants is judged as extremely violent (Ramos, 2000: 9). Although these figures have since been questioned due to problems in the gathering of official statistics, El Salvador is still regarded as one of the most violent countries in the world (Cruz, 2003).

²⁸ Ramos (2000).

²⁹ Cruz *et al.* (1998: 4-6).

³⁰ McIlwaine (1999).

³¹ *Ibid*: 2, citing Murray and López (1996).

³² IUDOP/FUNDAUNGO (2003).

³³ Cruz *et al.* (1999).

³⁴ See, for example, Smutt and Miranda (1999); Homies Unidos and IUDOP (1998); Ramos *et al.* (1998).

³⁵ See, for example, Crustin (2001); Amaya Cobar and Palmieri (2000).

³⁶ See, for example, Savenije and Andrade Eekhoff (2003); Ramos (2000).

³⁷ UNDP (2003) and Cruz and Beltran (2000).

Table 1.1: Homicide rates in Latin America and the Caribbean (per 100,000 population)³⁸

Country	Late 1970s/ early 1980s	Late 1980s/ Early 1990s	1990s
Guatemala	-	150	75.3
El Salvador	-	150 ³⁹	41.3
Colombia	20.5	89.5	89.5
Jamaica	-	35	-
Brazil	11.5	19.7	-
Nicaragua	-	18.3	18.3
Mexico	18.2	17.8	17.8
Venezuela	11.7	15.2	16.0
Trinidad and Tobago	2.1	12.6	-
Dominican Republic	-	11.9	-
Peru	2.4	11.5	11.5
Panama	2.1	10.9	10.9
Ecuador	6.4	10.3	15.3
United States	10.7	10.1	-
Honduras	-	9.4	45.0
Argentina	3.9	4.8	-
Costa Rica	5.7	5.6	5.6
Uruguay	2.6	4.4	4.4
Paraguay	5.1	4.0	4.0
Chile	2.6	3.0	-

2. The context of armed violence

2.1 The underlying conflict dynamics

State brutality was a fact of everyday life for Salvadoran citizens for decades. Violence worked between and within social networks, employing members of articulated intelligence structures – the Democratic Nationalist Organisation (ORDEN) - within communities to spy on their neighbours.⁴⁰ The intensity of military brutality together with acute social and economic inequalities and the impossibility of democratic struggle ultimately proved decisive factors in the decision of the left wing political movement - Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) - to resort to violence.⁴¹ Beginning in 1980, the war continued throughout the decade until a military stalemate was reached at the end of the decade. Both sides were spent and social and international pressure to end the war was immense. On a global level, the end of the decade also

³⁸ PAHO (1997), cited by World Bank (1997); figures from 1990s taken from Cruz (2003: 17).

³⁹ El Salvador was still at war when these figures were recorded.

⁴⁰ At the local level ORDEN served as a unit for intelligence gathering and repression. The organisation provided an effective source of military intelligence with as many as 300,000 members (Holden, 1996).

⁴¹ There were repeated election frauds throughout the years of military rule, effectively denying the opposition any democratic voice. Furthermore, any sign of dissent was brutally quashed.

coincided with the last days of the cold war, lessening the geopolitical significance of the conflict.⁴² The end of the cold war had effectively removed much needed external assistance from both sides. The role of the US in the war had been immense and the millions of dollars provided in military aid undoubtedly prolonged the conflict.

Government figures published on the eve of the final truce in El Salvador estimated the direct damage of the war at US\$329 million and indirect damage at US \$708 million. They calculated the cost of reconstruction needs at US \$1,826 million.⁴³ In addition, the last decade has seen a series of natural disasters that have had adverse effects on the country's development. The widespread devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and, more intensely, the earthquakes of January and February 2001, effectively cancelled-out infrastructure and economic reconstruction since the end of the war. Figures indicate that 271,653 houses were damaged in the earthquakes, 163,866 of which were left inhabitable. It was the poor who felt the extent of these disasters most acutely and the situation brought to the fore existing problems in housing and deprivation. In 2001, the UN estimated that almost a half of El Salvador's population continue to live in precarious conditions.⁴⁴

Over a decade since the formal cessation of its political conflict, El Salvador remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, ranking 0.54 on the GINI index, and over 40 per cent of its population live in poverty.⁴⁵ Politically, society remains extremely polarised with both the left and right being regarded as the most extreme in the region.⁴⁶ Though UN sources estimate that the proportion of the Salvadoran population living in poverty fell from 65.7 per cent in 1991 to 47.5 per cent in 1999, there still exists a huge gap between rural and urban living standards. In 1999 the average rural income represented only 40 per cent of the average urban income. Furthermore, figures from 1998 indicate that the poorest 10 per cent of the population have only a 1.2 per cent share of the country's income or consumption. This contrasts with the top 10 per cent who have 39.4 per cent. As such, El Salvador remains one of the most unequal countries in Latin America. It is this context, characterised by inequality and vulnerability, which forms the backdrop of current patterns of violence in El Salvador.⁴⁷

2.1.1 Post-war armed violence

El Salvador is arguably a post-conflict state since the formal cessation of political armed conflict took place in January 1992 (i.e. over twelve years ago). However, the accords negotiated between the right-wing government and the left wing guerrilla movement, FMLN, failed to encompass any real measures aimed at socio-economic reform. Furthermore, a general amnesty was declared prior to the publication of the report of the Truth Commission, which effectively safeguarded both sides from facing justice. Instead,

⁴² Murray with Barry (1995).

⁴³ Dunkerley (1993: 12).

⁴⁴ Human Development Report 2001 (2001).

⁴⁵ See Human Development Report 2001 (2001). The GINI index is used to measure inequality based on per capita income. The global average is 0.4 and the average for Latin American is 0.47 (www.undp.org).

⁴⁶ Cruz (2003a).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the talks resulted in a settlement which aimed and indeed succeeded in opening new spaces for participation in political life. Spaces for political participation have emerged, allowing the FMLN to emerge as a major political party. Civil society has also been strengthened with the emergence of new forces, such as the women's movement, environmental organisations and health workers unions. In terms of violence, two key positive developments are:

- State sponsored brutality, which had been central to everyday life since 1932 and particularly acute in the late 1970s and throughout the war (1980 - 1992), has diminished dramatically.⁴⁸
- The military has been downsized considerably and the old security apparatus, responsible for 95 per cent of the serious human rights violations that occurred between 1980 and 1992 has been transformed to make way for the new National Civil Police (PNC).⁴⁹ However, one of the major problems facing the new police force is its weak capacity to address the high levels of armed criminality and violence in the post-war period.

Together with historic structural inequalities and the weakening of social fabric, the end of the war left a huge inactive workforce. This was, at least in part, a result of the demobilisation of military groups, who received very little support for reinsertion into civil life, but it was exacerbated by the scarcity of sources of employment. Added to the massive circulation of arms and a historic lack of respect for the rule of law, this combination of factors has allowed other long-standing social conflicts/problems to be brought the fore and generate new spaces of armed violence.⁵⁰ Some demobilised groups have been accused of becoming involved in organised crime, especially ex-army personnel. They have both the skills acquired during armed conflict and the access to weaponry. In some cases these groups are comprised of individuals who had previously belonged to opposing factions within the military.⁵¹ It would be simplistic to suggest that all of those who are now involved in criminality participated directly in the war or, indeed, that those who did participate in the war are more likely to be involved in criminal activities. However, a study of the prison system found that three of every ten prisoners played an active role on one side or the other during the war. This is relatively

⁴⁸ In 1932 30,000 peasants were killed by government forces following a tentative uprising in what is known as La Matanza (the massacre). This event paved the way for a series of military dictatorships which lasted until the outbreak of war in 1980. The military acted as agents of repression for the economic élite and, in return, the military controlled the machinery of the state (Mason. 1999).

⁴⁹ Aguilar *et al.* (2001), citing Truth Commission, (1993).

⁵⁰ It must be emphasised that given the high levels of brutality exercised by the state security apparatus and the corruption of judicial bodies in the pre-war era, it is hardly surprising that citizens feel that they have little access to justice. See Aguilar *et al.* (2001), Amaya Cóbar and Palmieri (2000) and Popkin (1999).

⁵¹ One 29 year old man serving a murder sentence makes a direct link between his participation in the war and his involvement in crime: "And then he said that you know I can't just lend you that gun, but I can also lend you any of these ones, whatever you want. You see he had been a sub-sergeant and was on sick leave [from the military]. I had been on sick leave too. In those days I had had gone to study in the army, even though my brother was in the *guerrilla*, that's how it was... I made friends with him [the sergeant] and, well, I think that he liked me because sometimes you just get on with people and he began to trust me. He told me that he could lend me guns to carry out crimes, that he could lend me the guns that I wanted. He had rifles, machine guns, pistols, revolvers and we went about together. He's dead now" (Hume, 2003: 108). Hence his participation in the war not only equipped him with skills that he could later use for criminal activity, but also supplied him with a network of contacts to secure his access to an arsenal of weapons.

high given that the proportion of the population that participated in the war "did not exceed 6 per cent in conditions of combat."⁵² The study points out that the prisoners with a history of participation in the war are those who tend to be more involved in crimes of a more violent character, with the exception of kidnapping.⁵³

It is important to note that the visibility of certain crimes affects social reaction and the ensuing social panic. Kidnapping, for example, has been considered a serious problem in recent years though it affects only a very small number of (powerful) people. Indeed, it has decreased significantly in 2004 with no recorded cases in the period January - August.⁵⁴ The visibility of this type of crime is key to ensuring policy provision and there has been a serious investment of resources to combat kidnapping with the formation of specialist divisions in both the PNC and FGR. Other common violent crimes involving firearms include: rape, armed robbery and extortion. See Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Crime figures from January to August 2003 and January to August 2004⁵⁵

Crime	Homicide	Injury	Rape	Kidnapping	Extortion	Robbery	Mugging
2003	1517	3461	740	8	197	3337	7505
2004	1796	2855	568	0	216	3363	6972

Source: PNC

In addition, there is a growing drug problem in El Salvador, both of trafficking and consumption. El Salvador is on the transport route from Colombia to the US and the use of crack cocaine has risen significantly in recent years. An estimated 10.5 million tonnes of illegal drugs pass through Central America every year.⁵⁶ The drug trade has very strong links with organised crime, and, latterly, youth gangs have been accused of heavy involvement in selling and consumption. There are a number of well articulated transnational crime groups which move within Central America, responsible for widespread car theft and illegal arms trafficking.

2.1.2 The emergence of youth gangs – ‘maras’

In the last decade, one of the most dramatic developments in the pandemic of violence has been the emergence of youth gangs. Largely made up of young men from low-income neighbourhoods, *maras* have become synonymous with terror and insecurity. The groups are heavily armed and use knives, home-made weapons (firearms and grenades) and legally and illegally held SALW in their activities. According to Ramos, membership of *maras* outnumbers that of the guerrilla forces during the war twofold.⁵⁷ Figures estimate that there are anywhere between ten and thirty thousand active gang members in

⁵² Cruz *et al.*, (2000: 71).

⁵³ Ibid: (71-72)

⁵⁴ Interview with Attorney General's Office (September 2004).

⁵⁵ PNC data; table compiled by author.

⁵⁶ UNDP (2003).

⁵⁷ Ramos (1998).

El Salvador.⁵⁸ There are two main gangs in operation, both with transnational links throughout Central America, Mexico and the US: Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18. There are also smaller gangs such as the Mao Mao and AC/DC. In recent years there have also been a proliferation of student gangs in the capital. Although markedly different from *maras*, these students are organised and create disturbances, fighting against groups from rival schools. Generally, they use belts and stones; however, there have been documented incidences where they use home made grenades.⁵⁹ In an interview with a female member of the 18 streetgang, she (referring to gangmember) highlighted that the relatively easy access to SALW in El Salvador has meant that Salvadoran gangs are better armed and more deadly than their US counterparts and it is not unusual for gangs to possess heavy weaponry.⁶⁰

In El Salvador, the government response to youth gangs has been repressive.⁶¹ A new anti-gang law - *Mano Dura* (Heavy Hand) - was introduced in July 2003. It was met with mixed reactions and regarded as a populist gesture in the run up to the presidential election (March 2004). Much of the law was unconstitutional and violated international human rights agreements (such as the Convention for the Rights of the Child - CRC) thus many judges refused to implement it. Due to these problems, it was renegotiated in 2004 and new legal reforms under the heading "*Super Mano Dura*" are currently being implemented. Representatives from different sectors of the state and civil society came together to discuss the reforms. According to one participant, the exercise was a success in political terms in that the state was seen to consult with different state bodies and representatives of civil society, though very little attention has subsequently been paid to the prevention and rehabilitation elements that were suggested in the process.⁶² Few rehabilitation and prevention programmes exist for gang members.⁶³ *Homies Unidos*, an NGO working with active gang members, has recently had to close because of lack of funding which has dried up since September 2000. Indeed, one of its workers left the country due to threats following the introduction of the *Mano Dura* law. He is now in jail in the US for illegal entry. Others are keeping a low profile.⁶⁴ In August 2004, there was a massacre in Mariona prison where 31 inmates were killed after a row broke out between members of the 18 gang and 'civilian' inmates. Over 30 more were seriously injured. On 23 September, gang members in the Chalatenango and Cojutepeque prisons staged a protest against the authorities. The members of the 18 gang were articulating their fears of the new reforms and demanded that the 50 prisoners who had been

⁵⁸ El Diario de Hoy (24 July, 2003); interview with PNC (September 2004).

⁵⁹ Interview with Wim Savenije (September 2004).

⁶⁰ However, it is important to emphasise that most gangmembers do not have access to such weapons and the most widely used weapon within gangs continues to be the knife (interview with 18 gang (September 2004).

⁶¹ For example, in the mid-1990s, a group formed to kill gang members in San Miguel was seen as a "necessary evil" by the then governor of that department (province) (Ramos, 1998: 207). Recent incidences of decapitated corpses found in San Salvador have been likened to tactics used by the death squads in the late 1970s and 1980s. The authorities have attributed these murders to gangs and used them as a justification for the implementation of a new anti-gang law. However, rumours circulate about the involvement of the PNC in the murders given the similarity to death squad type murders.

⁶² Interview with PNC (September, 2004).

⁶³ No state programme exists to date, though there are various church initiatives, such as the Don Bosco University rehabilitation programme.

⁶⁴ Anti gang laws have also been implemented in other countries in the region; for example, *Plan Escoba* (Brush Plan) in Guatemala.

transferred to a high security prison be returned to the mainstream system since they feared for their safety. Territorial Anti-gang groups (GTA) have been formed on a national level that are made up of military and National Civil Police (PNC). These groups began to operate in August/September 2004 and it is, therefore, too premature to assess their impact. However, since *Mano Dura/Super Mano Dura* have been in place, the number of murders has *increased*.⁶⁵

2.1.3 The role of the state

Although there have been notable improvements in the quality of information generated and recorded by state bodies in recent years, there is still a dearth of unified and accurate data for certain types of violence. The quality of information is often dependent on the type of violence under scrutiny, due to chronic problems of underreporting and misclassification. The underreporting of crime and violence still remains a problem although in an interview with the Attorney General's Office, the *fiscal* stated that this was improving. Different state records can present contradictory views of the scale of violence and that certain areas (namely San Salvador) and certain crimes are better recorded than others. For example, figures from the Attorney General's Office (FGR) were more reliable for murder figures until 1998 and since then, the quality of PNC records are regarded as having improved considerably.⁶⁶

Depending on the source, murder rates in El Salvador can oscillate anywhere between 150 per 100,000 in the late 1980s/early 1990s (See Table 1.1) to 57 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2001, according to the FGR records (See Figure 2.1). On average, Cruz *et al.* maintain that the number of deaths from intentional homicides per year on a national level stayed over and above six thousand in the 1990s, with the highest rates being noted in the Western area of the country and the capital, San Salvador.⁶⁷ When disaggregated by age and gender, these figures are particularly high for young men between 15-34. The average homicide rate for this group is greater than two hundred deaths per 100 000 inhabitants, while for women in the same age cohort, it is not greater than twenty.⁶⁸ The prevalence of SALW has invariably contributed to the scale of fatal injuries.

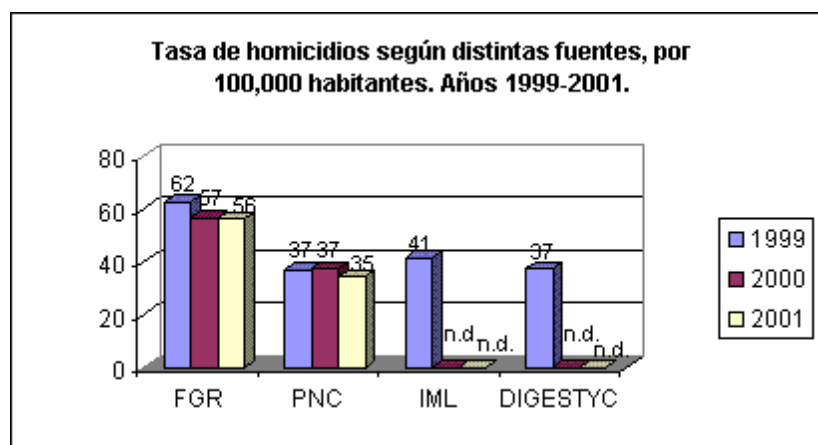
⁶⁵ Interview with PNC (September 2004).

⁶⁶ Interview with Miguel Cruz, IUDOP (September 2004).

⁶⁷ Cruz *et al.* (2000).

⁶⁸ *Ibid*: 20.

Figure 2.1: Murder rates per 100 000 inhabitants according to different state bodies (1999-2001)⁶⁹



In recent years, the homicide level has fallen to an average of over 2000 per year on a national level (see Table 2.2). These data highlight that the problem of armed violence affects both urban and rural areas, with a concentration of murders in San Salvador and the predominantly rural western region. Recent figures demonstrate that the Western city of Sonsonate has overtaken San Salvador in homicides in 2004⁷⁰ Media reports blame much of this violence on gangs; however, interviews with serving police officers estimate that gang violence does not account for any more than 30 per cent.

Table 3.1: Homicide rates 2000-2004⁷¹

Region	Jan-Dec 2000	Jan-Dec 2001	Jan-Dec 2002	Jan-Dec 2003
Western	620	567	586	616
Central	443	405	347	445
Greater San Salvador	446	470	462	547
Greater central	403	304	280	278
Eastern	429	461	349	275
Total	2341	2207	2024	2161

⁶⁹ Source: <http://www.violenciaelsalvador.org.sv/indicadores/indicadoresd1.htm>, citing registers from DIGESTYC, FGR, IML and PNC Accessed: 4 September 2003.

⁷⁰ Interview with PNC (September 2004).

⁷¹ Police registers.

2.1.4 The National Civil Police (PNC)

One of the recommendations of the Peace Accords was the creation of a new National Civilian Police Force (PNC) to replace the old National Police, National Guard and Treasury Police. It was made up along the following lines: 20 per cent of posts reserved for ex- FMLN combatants, 20 per cent for members of the old security forces and 60 per cent civilians. The numbers of security agents were reduced drastically from 75,000 (including the army, the guerrillas, civil defence and the old police forces) to 6000.⁷² Initially this severely reduced new force enjoyed the support of the population, but has been detrimentally affected by a series of high profile cases, implicating agents in criminal activities in addition to a weak capacity for dealing with the high levels of crime and violence. Figures indicate that in 1996 and 1997 respectively, only 6.11 per cent and 8.17 per cent of murder cases were brought to trial.⁷³ This loss of public confidence is also reflected in the growing privatisation of the security apparatus: there are currently an estimated 70,000 private security agents in operation whereas the PNC has an active force of approximately 20,000 officers.⁷⁴ Links have been identified between private security agents and petty criminals who are combining to take advantage of lax arms control to distribute SALW illegally.⁷⁵

To date, there has been little articulate and cohesive state response to violence and criminality. State policies have been largely coercive - more police, longer sentences, less impunity, the stigmatisation of young people and the use of youth gangs as scapegoats. Some preventative initiatives have been facilitated by the National Public Security Council (CNSP) which works with communities in Greater San Salvador to encourage social organisation, recuperation of abandoned public spaces, promoting sport in communities, as well as cultural and educational activities. These initiatives are, however, largely restricted to Greater San Salvador, with limited work in Sonsonate. The PNC has tried to strengthen relations with communities with their community policing initiative - PIPCOM - however its impact is unknown, with officers blaming lack of resources.⁷⁶ Representatives from communities in Soyapango where the initiative was on trial had no knowledge of the PIPCOM and noted no improvement in their relations with the PNC.

Such initiatives remain isolated and the state response to violence in the country is still somewhat fragmented with little co-ordination beyond the state bodies whose specific remit is security, i.e.: PNC, CNSP and judiciary. There is very little explicit co-ordination with other bodies, such as the Ministry of Education (MINED), the Women's Development Institute (ISDEMU) or the Salvadoran Institute for the Protection of Minors (ISPM, now National Salvadoran Institute for Adolescence - ISNA). Instead, policies tend to be primarily repressive and superficial, based on combating existing expressions of crime and violence. Moreover, as mentioned above, the military has recently been

⁷² See Stanley (1996).

⁷³ Amaya Cobar and Palmieri (2000).

⁷⁴ Melara (2001).

⁷⁵ Godnick (2002).

⁷⁶ Interview with PNC.

employed to help the PNC implement the new anti-gang initiative. The presence of the military on the streets directly contradicts the aims of the Peace Accords.

2.2 The significance of small arms and light weapons

Although no registers are available for the pre-war years, there are numerous references to SALW in historical texts.⁷⁷ Historical data are scarce for rates of violence and criminality in the region. Cruz and Beltrán, however, cite Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) figures from the 1960s and 1970s, which indicate that El Salvador had a murder rate of around or greater than 30 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to Colombia and Nicaragua's 22 and 25 per 100,000 inhabitants respectively.⁷⁸ Such figures are demonstrative of a historical problem of endemic violence in the country, as they are not only over and above contemporary world averages, but well over what is judged as extremely violent: more than 10 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. According to the authors:

The truth is, that according to evidence gathered about the period before the war, Salvadorans already had a serious problem of violence. In this sense, the problem is not new and was not created by the war. However, the war did contribute greatly to the institutionalisation of violence in the system of values and norms that regulate social behaviour in a tacit way as a part of personal interaction. When violence ceased to have a meaning in the socio-political order, the space for it was reinforced in interpersonal relations.⁷⁹

One of the most notable legacies of the civil war has been the extreme militarisation of society. Although the Peace Accords included a project to disarm ex-combatants, lax laws and a high level of illegal firearms in circulation (dating from the war but also coming into the country in recent years) mean that, at a conservative estimate, there are some 400,000–

450,000 arms in hands of civilians. Around 35.7 per cent (143,000) of these are legally held.⁸⁰ This translates into 2 firearms for every ten adults. There are an estimated 4 million firearms in the hands of civilians in Central America.

Weak institutions, lax gun laws and a high social demand for SALW have invariably affected the lethality of violence in El Salvador. Figures indicate that crimes in which SALW are used tend to be more violent and result in injury or death. Many children have been seriously injured or killed as a result of stray bullets, yet the weak statistical register of violence means that this number is hard to quantify.⁸¹ Up to 1998, almost 300 PNC agents were killed in the line of duty.⁸² According to existing registers, firearms are used

⁷⁷ UNDP (2003: 125).

⁷⁸ Cruz and Beltran (2000:9).

⁷⁹ Ibid: 40.

⁸⁰ Ibid: 25.

⁸¹ Ibid: 163.

⁸² Ibid: 48.

in about two thirds of murders⁸³ (see Figure 2.1), although more recent estimates of the use of SALW in murders put this figure at about 85 per cent.⁸⁴ SALW are used in an estimated 70 per cent of robberies.⁸⁵

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) holds the SALW registers, whereas the PNC must enforce the law. There have been criticisms of this system, since the PNC have had difficulties in accessing MoD information.⁸⁶ Furthermore, existing gun control legislation contains no stipulation about the number of SALW an individual may possess, so, in theory, a citizen can possess as many SALW as he/she wishes. In terms of munitions, individuals are allowed to import 5 lbs of gunpowder, 500 cases, 500 bullets once a year. In addition, they can import 200 rounds of ammunition, pepper spray, rubber bullets and a bullet proof vest twice a year.⁸⁷

There are no legal sources of production of SALW in El Salvador so the legal market relies entirely on importation. To date, no tax has been levied on SALW imports, although recent fiscal changes aim to add VAT.⁸⁸ In addition, there is widespread smuggling especially in the East of the country, where there are many places without border control. According to the Criminal Investigation Unit (DIC) of the PNC, the numbers of home-made weapons have increased in recent years.⁸⁹ Youth gangs, in particular, use home-made weaponry which are highly dangerous for both the perpetrator of violence and the intended victim.

A series of amnesty laws in recent years have allowed individuals to register arms legally without presenting proof of purchase, allowing many illegal arms to become legal (see Table 4.1). Campaigns for stricter gun laws have been largely unsuccessful. This is in part due to the lack of support from opposition groups and civil society (interview with Miguel Cruz, IUDOP). In addition, the current vice-minister for Public Security and ex director of the PNC, Rodrigo Avila, is also the owner of several gun shops and private security firms, highlighting a conflict of interests. Nevertheless, the UNDP Violence in a Transitional Society Programme together with state and non-state actors is currently drawing up proposals for reforms to the law. They hope to present this for debate before the end of next year.⁹⁰

⁸³ Ibid: 7.

⁸⁴ Interviews with PNC and UNDP.

⁸⁵ UNDP (2003).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

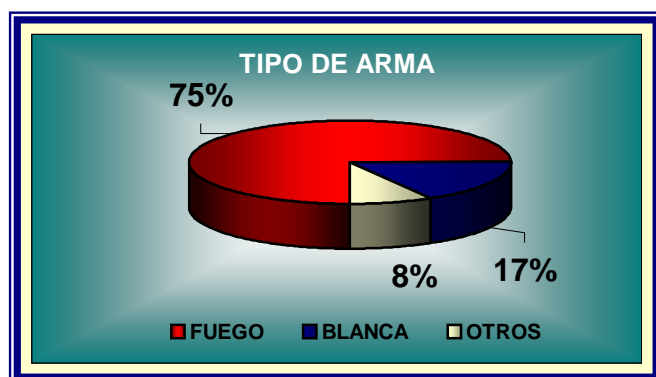
⁸⁷ Ibid: 42.

⁸⁸ Interview UNDP (September, 2004).

⁸⁹ UNDP (2003).

⁹⁰ Interview with UNDP (September, 2004).

Figure 2.2: Percentage of murders carried out by SALW in the last three years⁹¹



(fuego: firearm; blanca: knife; otros: others)

The widespread circulation of arms has increased the lethality of violence. It has also affected citizens' perceptions of security and SALW are widely perceived as necessary for personal protection. A recent survey conducted in the country demonstrates that 81.6 per cent of citizens feel insecure in the centre of their city or village.⁹² The social panic surrounding current levels of criminality in El Salvador creates a situation where many condone, if not openly advocate, the use of violence by the state and the restriction of democratic practices. Cruz cites figures that demonstrate that 55 per cent of Salvadorans would support a *coup d'état* in the face of the perceived anarchy of widespread criminality.⁹³ Violence and criminality are repeatedly cited as major preoccupations for citizens alongside economic insecurity in a series of opinion polls carried out by the Central American University's Polling Institute (IUDOP).

3. Social and cultural aspects of armed violence

3.1 Cultural aspects

Given the numbers of SALW in circulation, there exists an obvious social demand to be armed against the threat of violence and crime. SALW are widely perceived and defined as "instruments for security" and not as instruments of aggression. Citizens, therefore, argue that they have the right to be armed⁹⁴: in a UNDP survey, 92 per cent of respondents who possessed SALW said that it was for protection of themselves and their family.⁹⁵ As one resident in a marginal community in the municipality of Soyapango, Greater San Salvador, testifies: "For self-defence... for the protection of my family because everyone knows that, not with bad intentions... and not because of machismo, nor anything like that, for protection, you protect yourself because the authorities do

⁹¹ PNC register.

⁹² IUDOP/FUNDAUNGO (2003:18).

⁹³ Cruz (2003a: 62).

⁹⁴ Cruz and Beltrán (2000: 5).

⁹⁵ UNDP (2003: 133).

not".⁹⁶ His justification for carrying a gun is not only linked to the widespread fear or criminal victimisation, but also to the opinion that the authorities will not offer citizens the necessary protection.

According to the IUDOP/ACTIVA study⁹⁷, 55.4 per cent of respondents did not wish to possess a firearm; 6.3 per cent had one and 38.2 per cent would like to have one. This highlights that close to half of the population either possess or wish to possess a SALW. The study also found that 42.2 per cent of rural respondents in comparison to 35.4 per cent of urban respondents expressed the desire to own a firearm. In terms of income, more poorer respondents expressed the desire to have a SALW; however, this was also the section of the population that had least capacity to buy one. More men than women expressed the wish to possess SALW or have access to one, particularly young men between 18-25 years old. Among this cohort, 55 per cent of respondents either already have access to or wish to have a firearm. This group is most vulnerable to armed violence, registering the highest victimisation rate in terms of homicides. It is also the group most likely to participate in armed violence.⁹⁸ Table 3.2 highlights some of the dominant reactions to firearms among the IUDOP/ACTIVA survey group.

The widespread use of SALW reflects attitudes that privilege violence in other aspects of social interaction. For example, Table 3.3 highlights that 10.3 per cent would approve of an individual killing a rival in the case of infidelity. 55 per cent approve of killing criminals who terrorise communities. Indeed, there have been reported cases of lynching in El Salvador, although these episodes remain isolated and do not reach Guatemalan levels where lynching has become a serious problem.⁹⁹ Twenty one per cent of respondents sustain that they would approve of killing 'undesirables'. In other cities where the same survey was carried out, approbation of such social cleansing practices was significantly lower. In Madrid, for example, 3.7 per cent approved, in Rio de Janeiro - 7.3 per cent and Santiago de Chile, - 6.1 per cent.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Hume (2003: 73-4).

⁹⁷ IUDOP/ACTIVA (1998).

⁹⁸ UNDP (2003: 131-3).

⁹⁹ Moser and Winton (2002).

¹⁰⁰ UNDP (2003: 138).

Table 3.2: Attitudes towards SALW¹⁰¹

Reaction	Agree strongly	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Disagree strongly
To combat crime, it is necessary that citizens are armed	22.5	18.5	1.5	19.9	37.6
The common citizen must be as well armed as a criminal	17.3	18.4	2.7	22.2	39.4
Carrying a firearm gives a person security	22.0	25.3	1.8	19.6	31.3
Having a firearm at home makes it safer	24.9	20.4	1.6	19.1	34.1
I think that carrying a firearm is useful to defend oneself against criminals.	42.2	30.9	1.7	10.4	14.8

There is a certain respect for heavy handed policies in El Salvador, with order considered more important than civil liberties and human rights in the face of high levels of criminality.¹⁰² Some 75 per cent of citizens believe that "human rights favour criminals and therefore you cannot deal with them [criminals]".¹⁰³ Violence in this situation has become both something to fear and a tool with which to address latent social problems, nourishing a situation of widespread and ingrained paranoia, or 'hypervigilance'.¹⁰⁴ The growing prevalence of gated communities and private security guards are testament to citizens' fears. Fear and the perception of chaos have been used as legitimising elements for increased repression and authoritarian measures. "Violence itself is ignored, justified and, sometimes, stimulated by those who see themselves as upstanding and exemplary citizens against those they consider the scum of society".¹⁰⁵ The conceptualisation of SALW as instruments of security is key to this process.

¹⁰¹ National survey on attitudes, norms and values concerning violence and the use of firearms, cited in UNDP (2003: 138).

¹⁰² Cruz (2000: 518).

¹⁰³ IUDOP/ACTIVA (1998).

¹⁰⁴ UNDP (2003).

¹⁰⁵ Cruz and Beltrán (2000: 5).

Table 3.3: Responses to criminality and violence¹⁰⁶

Response	Approve	Not approve but understand	Neither approve nor understand
Suppose that someone killed someone who had gone off with his/her spouse, you would..	10.3	56.5	33.3
If there is a criminal who terrorises the community and someone kills him/her, you would...	55.0	36.5	8.5
Suppose that someone in your community/ neighbourhood captures a criminal and they come together to lynch him, you would...	40.5	45.6	14.0
Suppose that someone kills someone that raped his/her daughter, you would...	65.5	28.4	6.1
If a group of people began to kill people they saw as 'undesirable', you would...	21.0	41.4	37.6

3.2 Gender identity and armed violence

The practice of hegemonic masculinity was reinforced during the period of conflict.¹⁰⁷ In interviews, ex-combatants spoke at length about the brutalising experience of the military. For example, one former soldier testifies:

They taught us that where we found him [the enemy], we had to eliminate him completely. We had to kill him. They made us develop a temper. I don't know how to say it, terrible, a steely resolve. If I was looking at you I was cursing you. You couldn't keep looking at me in the eye because I would easily dominate you. Those are the instructions that they give you. The training is really hard. You cry there. Men cry during the training because to make men fighters, they need a heavy hand, right, someone that won't feel pity because if you have a soft heart you are not a good soldier. That's what they teach you in the first months. Then when you get out and you meet civilians, they see you differently: your face, your character. Everything has changed. They completely transform you from the man before.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Source: National survey on attitudes, norms and values concerning violence and the use of firearms, cited in UNDP (2003: 142).

¹⁰⁷ Hegemonic masculinity, a term developed by Connell (1987) refers to dominant notions of masculinity that privilege the use of violence by men as an expression of dominance and power.

¹⁰⁸ Hume (2003: 107).

As argued above, the experience of the war equipped many with violence-based skills which they carried with them into the post-war period. Cruz *et al.* highlight that prison inmates who participated in the war are those who tend to be accused of violent crimes such as rape and homicide.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the reproduction of aggressive maleness and armed violence are not confined to the military, nor is it merely a strategy employed during war. Hegemonic forms of masculinities, associated with military structures (known as militarised masculinities), can be seen as common to social relations in times of both war and peace. The process by which men (and women) are socialised inculcates a series of values that award value to traditional notions of manliness. For the participants of a self-help group for men in El Salvador, this included exaggerated sexual prowess and violence against women. Some men said that carrying weapons made them feel more like a man (see Plate 3.1).

Plate 3.1: "Machete and pistol to feel more like a man"¹¹⁰



On specific holidays such as father's day, the national press is filled with advertisements for guns (see Plate 3.2. which addresses this phenomenon). Such gendered discourses have been accepted as normal within Salvadoran society. This does not mean that all citizens accept and reproduce hegemonic masculinity, but that it is seen as an extreme endpoint of the accepted boundaries of male behaviour.¹¹¹ Key to such discourses is the legitimisation of violence in certain circumstances and against certain people. This was discussed above with relation to social attitudes towards violence. It is also important to emphasise that violence is used with great regularity within familial relations. For many young people, violence has been a key element of their socialisation process and continues to be used by them, with increasing lethality, as they grow up. The widespread availability of SALW in this context contributes to the escalation of lethal crimes.

¹⁰⁹ Cruz *et al.* (1999).

¹¹⁰ Hume (2003: 158).

¹¹¹ See Hume (2004).

Plate 3.2: A new toy for daddy: UNDP anti gun advertisement¹¹²



Youth gangs are predominantly made up of young people (particularly young men) from low-income neighbourhoods for whom armed violence has become a way of expressing their identity as well being recognised. Many say that they joined the gang for protection or for a sense of family that they did not feel within their biological family.¹¹³ Young women gangmembers must face added victimisation from within the gang, where they are faced with added and often highly sexualised violence because of their gender identity as women. Sexual violence is used within gangs to "punish" women and some must undergo gang rape as their right of passage into the gang. These women are belittled, for having "chosen" the "easy" option and the violence goes unrecognised.¹¹⁴ An added culture of silence surrounds this particular form of violence and women are afraid to talk about the violence they face.¹¹⁵

These young men and women grew up in a context impregnated with violence in both public and private realms. They have been victims of social, political, economic and personal violence.¹¹⁶ In such a situation, young people have learned to survive by reproducing violence. With reference to youth violence in Latin America generally, Cárdua argues that young people hold a series of beliefs that legitimise the use of violence that heighten their vulnerability to violent situations. "These include believing that violence is right, that it is a type of retribution that works to repair harm to one's self-esteem, removing the traces of insults and offences makes one more inclined to respond violently when provoked".¹¹⁷

¹¹² Downloaded from: www.violenciaelsalvador.org.sv. Accessed 17 October 2004.

¹¹³ Smutt and Miranda (1998).

¹¹⁴ Hume (2004: 69).

¹¹⁵ Interview with member 18 gang (September, 2004).

¹¹⁶ The categorisation of economic, political and social violence has been developed by Moser (2000), Moser and McIlwaine (2000a and b and 2003); Moser and Winton (2002). See Appendix One for definitions. Personal violence is a term used by Galtung (1969).

¹¹⁷ Cárdua (2001: 176).

3.3 Social capital and armed violence

Insecurity and fear that characterised life throughout the years of dictatorship and war have not only left their mark on contemporary social relations, but continue to permeate the daily lives of citizens. Political violence worked between and within communities to disarticulate historic support structures and social networks. Political activity was met with state repression, destroying not only material and institutional resources, but weakening social capital. Alongside this process, however, many community networks emerged and existing groups such as church groups became stronger and more articulated.

Thousands of people were displaced as a result of political conflict, many fleeing to neighbouring Honduras or to the US.¹¹⁸ It is estimated that around one million people were displaced within the region.¹¹⁹ Many more moved to the national capital, San Salvador. The dramatic and unplanned population explosion in the capital put extra pressure on already stretched basic services, including housing and domestic water supplies. Many of the new arrivals faced difficulty in finding work and did not have access to community, familial and social structures in the city. From 1950 – 1992, the population of San Salvador increased by 420 per cent.¹²⁰ Illegal settlements mushroomed throughout Greater San Salvador and by 1992/3, almost 27 per cent of the city's population lived in illegal settlements.¹²¹ Qualitative research carried out in Greater San Salvador indicates that both the presence of intelligence structures (ORDEN) and an influx of new residents fostered a climate of mistrust between neighbours. Added to this, local level corruption, the politicisation of community structures by both the left and the right and existing social conflicts further eroded social capital. Interestingly, one group of residents in the district of El Boulevar associated the increase in mistrust and violence with the emergence of the youth gang in the community.¹²² The erosion of historic networks during the war, that had up to that point served to suppress violence, allowed spaces for new violence to emerge, thus contributing further to the climate of fear and insecurity.

Post-war violence in El Salvador has exacerbated existing social cleavages. Fear and mistrust work together to undermine social capital in many ways and create a vicious circle for the reproduction of violence. The disintegration of social networks further reinforces existing fragmentation and public spaces for collective action have reduced. Communities' capacity to deal with conflict is limited and violence has become part of everyday neighbourhood interaction. For example, squabbles between neighbours often result in physical fights and weapons (knives, pistols etc) can be used. Drunken fights are

¹¹⁸ An estimated 1.5 million Salvadorans live in the US. Since the war, migration to the 'north' has continued and the Salvadoran economy has come to rely heavily on remittances, which are calculated to be about 13.2 per cent of GDP.

¹¹⁹ Ardón (1998).

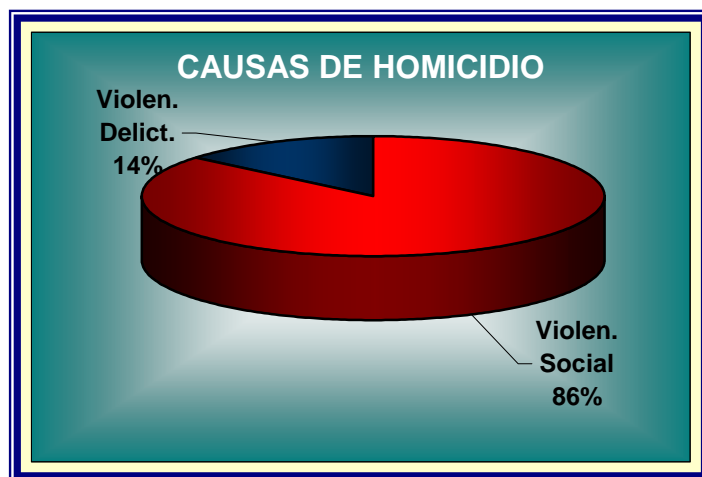
¹²⁰ This was due to both the industrialisation of San Salvador which attracted large numbers of migrants from rural areas who came to the capital in search of work and groups fleeing from political violence in rural areas (see Dunkerley, 1993).

¹²¹ Zsachebitz (1999), cited in Savenije and Andrade Eeckhoff (2003: 65).

¹²² Hume (2004: 64).

aggravated by the use of SALW, as are traffic incidents. Figures from the PNC, estimate that 86 per cent of murders are caused by "social violence", such as family disputes, fights between neighbours etc and 14 per cent are down to "criminal violence"¹²³ (see Figure 3.1)..

Figure 3.1: Causes of Murders¹²⁴



Mobility is severely hampered. According to the PNC, one of the most feared places for citizens is on public transport or on the way from home to the bus stop. Savenije and Andrade Eekhoff note how both men and women limit their movements and try to change their routes to avoid potential danger.¹²⁵ Participation in local community politics is hampered, both because of existing political conflicts within neighbourhoods and the fear of leaving the house in the evening. In a community in Soyapango, meetings had to be held outside the community because of death threats issued to the community directive by neighbours.¹²⁶ Table 3.4 highlights some of the main responses to criminality. It is interesting to note that more respondents acquire firearms (29.4 per cent) than seek to organise neighbours in community protection and development initiatives (28.8 per cent).

¹²³ PNC registers.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Savenije and Andrade Eekhoff (2003).

¹²⁶ Hume (2003: 116).

Table 3.4: Behaviour of residents due to fear of crime in Soyapango¹²⁷

Responses to violence/crime	Percentage of respondents
Limit shopping	61.5
Limit recreation	60.9
Close Business	19.0
Live in closed areas	61.2
Acquire guns	29.4
Move neighbourhood	41.5
Organise neighbours	28.8

In rural areas, access to basic services is tied up with notions of insecurity. Levels of insecurity affect community priorities. For example, one community in the western department of Ahuachapan prioritised paving the road, so that the police could enter the community and so that residents could run in cases of robbery without falling in the potholes or sliding in the mud.¹²⁸ In another community in Metapan, women have been attacked and sexually assaulted at night when going to fetch water. Farmers and agro-export businesses are victims of repeated robbery of cattle and crops. Small-scale crime has a particularly acute effect on subsistence producers, especially those who are paying back loans who are left without sustenance and income. Families are reluctant to leave their property unattended which further limits social mobility. Often it is women who stay at home to protect the home, thus inhibiting female participation in local political/developmental processes.¹²⁹

The existence of youth gangs - perverse social capital - in communities heightens levels of insecurity. Residents not only live in constant fear of reprisals from rival gangs - which, for example, can result in shoot-outs in the community - but also from the gang members themselves. In Soyapango, residents spoke about a "war tax" that the gang has enforced on small businesses. Gangs have been responsible for attacking neighbours, burglary and muggings. Indeed, some families have had to flee communities for fear of gangs. Government initiatives to repress gang members have met with popular support.

4. The political economy of violence

As stated previously, SALW are not legally made in El Salvador. The importation market is, therefore, significant. From 1994-2001, 72,107 SALW were legally imported into El Salvador. This does not include munitions, nor does it include the numbers of illegal arms that are in circulation. As mentioned previously, a series of amnesty laws allowed citizens to register SALW without presenting proof of origin: 58.65 per cent of registered

¹²⁷ Adapted from IUDOP/FUNDAUNGO (2003: 22).

¹²⁸ MAM (2000).

¹²⁹ Van Acker (2000).

SALW are not imported, raising questions about the extent of the illegal firearms market.¹³⁰

Table 4.1: Origins of SALW¹³¹

Year	Number of SALW imported by businesses	Number of SALW registered	% of SALW not imported
1994	994	10921	90.9
1995	3258	49627	93.44
1996	9680	22242	59.63
1997	13180	20807	36.66
1998	15298	19043	19.67
1999	13852	18280	24.22
2000	9991	15405	35.14
2001	5854	16353	64.2
Total	72107	172678	58.65

Violence has become an important industry within El Salvador, ranging from petty criminality where SALW are increasingly used, to well-articulated criminal gangs working throughout the region. Apart from these illegal activities, as mentioned above, the growth of private security firms has been notable, reflecting a lack of confidence in the state apparatus. The control and regulation of these agencies is lax, particularly with reference to their control and possession of arms. According to Godnick, the police in El Salvador estimate that on a national level, around 25 per cent of confiscated weapons are taken from private security agents. He states that increasingly private security agents are implicated in criminal activities including armed assault and arms trafficking.¹³²

5. The impact of armed violence on poverty

5.1 Micro level

5.1.1 Household and livelihood levels

Everyday life is shaped by violence. Within the household, levels of violence against women and children are high. An estimated 57 per cent of Salvadoran women suffer physical violence at the hands of their partners.¹³³ In 2003, 238 women were killed by their spouses. No systematic study has been done on violence within the home; however,

¹³⁰ UNDP (2003: 82).

¹³¹ Adapted from UNDP (2003: 82).

¹³² Godnick (2002: 13).

¹³³ Amaya Cóbar and Palmieri (2000: 75).

figures from IUDOP/ACTIVA demonstrate that 80 per cent of adult respondents were physically abused as children.¹³⁴ Further, research done on youth gangs suggests that one of the major motivations for young people to join gangs is to seek solidarity and a sense of family. Smutt and Miranda identify high levels of violence suffered by gang members during childhood.¹³⁵ In a *machista* society, women headed households often feel threatened without a man present for protection, although data suggest that young men are most vulnerable to violence in the public realm.

Residents from marginal communities with a reputation for violence often face discrimination when looking for work. There are high levels of school desertion, especially among members of gangs, thus affecting livelihood opportunities from an early age. Gang members have few (legal) income-generating opportunities. More and more *jainas* (female members) are turning to prostitution (interview with member of 18 gang), exposing them to STIs and HIV, as well as increased physical and sexual violence.

Poor communities have less access to public security agents. There is an uneven distribution of police officers, with more security agents deployed in higher income areas.¹³⁶ Moreover, given their vulnerability, the poor are more likely to feel the material costs of violence, through loss of earnings and/or patrimony. In addition, violence adversely affects mobility, as discussed above. Restricted mobility negatively affects participation in community activities; it can also restrict access to public services such as communal water supplies, public latrines and public transport.

5.2 Macro level

Armed violence has very serious implications for the economy. Figures from 1997 demonstrate that violence cost El Salvador almost one quarter of its annual GDP, thus removing resources from other key areas for public developmental spending, such as education and health care. This figure is higher than Colombia which is currently in the midst of war. The effect on service provision is immense. The health service, which is already inadequate is further stretched, to deal with injuries and fatalities from armed violence. Cruz *et al.* estimate that a light injury incurs medical costs of about US\$343 per person. Using an estimate of 78,726 injuries per annum they calculate medical costs resulting from armed violence to be about US\$27, 003, 018 per annum.¹³⁷ Few rehabilitation centres exist for individuals who have been injured as a result of armed violence. In the immediate aftermath of the war, some centres were set up by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and ex-combatants for those who had been maimed by the war to encourage rehabilitation and income-generating activities. However; these were already insufficient for the numbers injured by political violence.

¹³⁴ IUDOP/ACTIVA (1998).

¹³⁵ Smutt and Miranda (1998).

¹³⁶ Aguilar, Amaya Cobar, and Martínez (2001).

¹³⁷ Cruz *et al.* (1998: 19-20).

Private investment in security is sizeable. Although no detailed investigation into the costs of private security has been undertaken to date, Cruz *et al.* estimate that the public spend around US\$7,207,202 per annum. Poorer sections of society are unable to invest in private security, given their immediate survival needs. Budgetary investments for public security are also sizeable, although some types of crime/armed violence detection/prevention are better resourced than others. This was discussed previously with reference to kidnapping, which is a crime that affects higher income groups. Furthermore, higher income groups have better access to public security (justice system and police), as noted above.¹³⁸ Figures from 1996, highlight that the public security budget was US\$280 953 780, or 16 per cent of the annual national budget. This includes the police, judiciary and prison system, attorney general's office and Human rights ombudsman.¹³⁹

Table 5.1: Economic costs of social violence in six Latin American countries (expressed as % of 1997 GDP)¹⁴⁰

	Brazil	Colombia	El Salvador	Mexico	Peru	Venezuela
Health losses	1.9	5.0	4.3	1.3	1.5	0.3
Material losses	3.6	8.4	5.1	4.9	2.0	9.0
Intangibles	3.4	6.9	11.5	3.3	1.0	2.2
Transfers	1.6	4.4	4.0	2.8	0.6	0.3
Total	10.5	24.7	24.9	12.3	5.1	11.8

6. Overall impact on poverty

Moser has indicated that it is important to distinguish between the structural causes of violence and trigger risk factors.¹⁴¹ Research has indicated that violence increases in situations of increased economic vulnerability,¹⁴² in situations of extreme inequality¹⁴³ and where social and economic exclusion are prevalent.¹⁴⁴ The high levels of SALW possession increases the lethality of violence and for poor people, losing a family member may signify an important loss of income either through death or time off work due to injury (as well as having to pay for the costs of burial, hospitals etc.). Nevertheless, it is difficult to draw any direct causal relationship between armed violence, SALW and poverty although there are important linkages between them. In

¹³⁸ Ibid: 25.

¹³⁹ Ibid: 25-6.

¹⁴⁰ Londoño (1998), cited in www.violenciaelsalvador.org.sv. Accessed 13 August, 2003.

¹⁴¹ Moser (2004: 7).

¹⁴² Cruz *et al.* (1999), citing Fajnzylber (1998).

¹⁴³ See, for example, Hojman (2002).

¹⁴⁴ Savenije and Andrade-Eeckhoff (2003).

urban areas, cramped and overcrowded housing and limited access to basic services put increased pressures on communities. There are few spaces in Salvadoran society that are free from violence/threat. It is important to emphasise that poverty does not cause violence and not all poor people are violent. In situations where poverty and inequality overlap, armed violence is employed as an option by some people.

Indeed, figures from El Salvador highlight that the poorest departments of the country (for example, Morazan and Chalatenago) demonstrate the lowest homicide rates, with the highest occurrences in San Salvador, La Libertad and the western regions of Sonsonate and Santa Ana (see Table 2.1), where there is a wide gap between rich and poor. This points to the necessity of analysing levels of inequality as well as poverty when addressing issues of armed violence.

7. Implications for aid programming

International development assistance programmes in El Salvador have been reduced significantly in recent years. Immediately following the Peace Accords and natural disasters, an influx of development/humanitarian programmes was noted. El Salvador is a lower middle income country with a GDP of US\$2,147 (in 2001). The UN programmes and INGOs, which had a huge presence in the immediate post-war period have been downsized considerably with many NGOs leaving the country altogether.

Recent World Bank and Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) policies have targeted the issue of violence. Both the World Bank and the IDB are members of an *Interagency Coalition on Violence Reduction in the Americas* along with UNESCO, PAHO, OAS and the CDC. The Coalition campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of violence prevention and control, as well as supporting research and gathering reliable data on violence data and building and disseminating knowledge about effective strategies for violence reduction. Several studies have been commissioned, for example:

- Studies on arms funded by the World Bank and the UNDP.¹⁴⁵
- Costs and consequences of violence¹⁴⁶.
- Violence in the Central American region.¹⁴⁷
- Social exclusion and violence.¹⁴⁸
- Youth gangs.¹⁴⁹

Programmes are needed to tackle existing problems of violence, but also to prevent the continuity of the problem.

¹⁴⁵ For example, Cruz and Beltran (2000) and UNDP (2003).

¹⁴⁶ For example: Cruz *et al.* (1998) funded by IDB.

¹⁴⁷ For example: Moser and Winton (2002) funded by DFID via ODI.

¹⁴⁸ For example: Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff (2003), funded by SIDA via the UNDP Violence in a Transitional Society Programme.

¹⁴⁹ Smutt and Miranda (1998) funded by UNDP, IUDOP/Homies Unidos (1998), funded by Radda Barmen; Concha Eastman and Santacruz Giralt (2001) funded by PAHO.

Investment in strengthening the rule of law by international donors has been significant most especially in the immediate post-war era, where institutional support was key. For example, the IDB supported judicial reforms, training for the new police force was offered by a number of countries including Britain, Ireland, Spain and the US. Continued investment in the public security apparatus is necessary both to enhance the effectiveness of state bodies and to restore public confidence in the rule of law.

One of the major UNDP initiatives is the Violence in a Transitional Society Programme which specifically addresses areas of SALW usage as well as other forms and manifestations of violence. Among its activities are: the Angels of Peace campaign to educate young children on the dangers of firearms; a prevention programme in the micro-region of northern San Salvador working with young people; research on different expressions of violence; and facilitation of working groups to present reforms to the SALW law. Legal reforms and the implementation of stricter gun control is urgent. So too are educational programmes on the dangers of SALW. As expressed above, SALW are often conceptualised as "instruments of security" and, although some educational work has been done, this is an urgent area for future action (See Plates 3.1 and 7.1).

Furthermore, although El Salvador is now characterised as a middle-income country, poverty is still a major problem and if the GINI index is used, El Salvador is one of the most unequal countries in the world. One of the major problems facing young people, particularly young men, is the lack of work opportunities. Programmes to offer vocational training, as well as the promotion of cultural and educational activities are necessary to provide alternatives for young people.

Planning and infrastructure are also important areas of intervention. In situations of deep insecurity, the positioning of and access to public services become key. The location of basic services, such as communal water taps and the provision of lighting in public places is consequential, so too is access to secure public transport.

8. Conclusions

This paper has addressed the problem of armed violence in El Salvador, paying some attention to the linkages between armed violence and poverty, emphasising the interrelation between the two, but careful not to imply any direct causal relationship. El Salvador is a post-war country and it is important not to underestimate the extreme repercussions that over a decade of armed political conflict have had on the development of society, affecting levels of tolerance and inculcating a certain social respect for authoritarian measures. Sustained armed violence has also had a highly negative impact on the country's economic and social development, hampering investment and exacerbating the quality of life of its citizens. Violence in the post-war era cannot be analysed in isolation from its historical dimensions. This violence, like the more overtly political violence of previous decades, does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, structural and associated factors combine in the post-war era to shape the current phenomenon. Historical factors, such as extreme social and economic inequality and political polarisation are exacerbated by weak institutional capacity (especially in the field of

public security), and the erosion of social networks as a result of years of political conflict. Furthermore, a lack of social and economic alternatives for young people contribute to a situation where continued fear and insecurity still mark everyday life for many citizens. This situation is further aggravated by the widespread circulation of SALW in society, which contributes directly to a rise in lethal violence.

Plate 7.1 What do guns do? They kill (UNDP disarmament campaign)¹⁵⁰



¹⁵⁰ Downloaded from www.violenciaelsalvador.org.sv 17 October 2004.

Appendix 1: categories of armed violence¹⁵¹

Category	Definition	Manifestation
Political	The commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, to obtain or maintain political power.	Guerrilla conflict; paramilitary conflict; political assassinations; armed conflict between political parties; rape and sexual abuse as a political act, forced pregnancy/sterilization
Economic	The commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, for economic gain or to obtain or maintain economic power.	Street crime; carjacking; robbery/theft; drug trafficking; kidnapping; assaults, including rape occurring during economic crimes.
Social	The commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, for social gain or to obtain or maintain social power.	Interpersonal violence such as spouse and child abuse; sexual assault of women and children; arguments that get out of control.

¹⁵¹ Adapted from Moser (2000).

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Internet Resources

Organisation	URL
El Diario de Hoy, El Salvador	www.elsalvador.com
IDHUCA Human Rights Institute - Central American University	www.uca.edu.sv/idhuca
Inter American Development Bank	www.iadb.org
IUDOP The Central American University Polling Institute	www.uca.edu.sv/iudop
<i>La Prensa Gráfica</i> , El Salvador	www.laprensa.com.sv
Pan American Health Organization	www.paho.org
PNC El Salvador National Civil Police	www.pncelsalvador.gob.sv
UNDP (El Salvador) Violence in a Country in Transition Programme	www.violenciaelsalvador.org.sv
World Bank	www.worldbank.org

Interviews in El Salvador

Name	Organisation	Date
1 Asencio, Isabel	Women's movement	29 September 2004
2 Carabillido, Armando	UNDP	27 September 2004
3 Cotto, Augusto	PNC	28 September 2004
4 Cruz, Miguel	IUDOP	24 September 2004
5 Lara, Carlos	University of El Salvador	20 September 2004
6 Linares, Claudia	Homies Unidos	21 September 2004
7 Parada, Aquiles (and other heads of division)	FGR	17 September 2004
8 Ramirez Mejia, Hugo	PNC	18 September 2004
9 Savenije, Wim	FLACSO	29 September 2004

In addition, I carried out various interviews with members of *Mara 18* for my own work, one of which I cite in the text, without giving her name.