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**Youth under the Gun:
Violence, Fear, and Resistance in Urban Guatemala**

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**Youth under the Gun:
Violence, Fear, and Resistance in Urban Guatemala**

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**Youth under the Gun:
Violence, Fear, and Resistance in Urban Guatemala**

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This study examines how violence affects youth in marginalized urban communities, focusing on the experiences of three groups of young people: gang members, activists, and the “*jóvenes encerrados*”, youth who live confined to their homes due to fear. Based on 14 months of ethnographic research in El Mezquital, an extensive marginalized urban area in Guatemala City, I explore the socio-economic conditions that trigger violence in these communities, the responses of young people and the community to violence, and the State’s role in exacerbating violence in impoverished neighborhoods.

In this dissertation I argue that gang members and activists are expressing a deep-seated social discontent against the exclusion, humiliation, and social stigmatization faced by young people in marginalized urban neighborhoods. However, the two groups express their discontent in significantly different ways. Initially, gangs used violence to express their discontent, but they gradually resorted to a perverse game of crime, in complicity with the police, and they distanced themselves from their own communities; in this work I analyze gangs’ process of transformation and the circumstances that led to this change. Activists express their discontent through community art and public protest, but their

demonstrations have limited social impact, since public attention continues to focus on gangs; here I examine activists' motivations, struggles, and obstacles. However, the vast majority of young people live in a state of fear, preferring to keep quiet and withdraw into their homes; here I show how violence, fear, and distrust affect the generation born into postwar Guatemala.

This study illustrates the perverse role of the State in impoverished urban neighborhoods and its responsibility for the escalation of urban violence in Guatemala. On the one hand, the State shuns residents from these neighborhoods and systematically denies them basic services; it criminalizes and abuses young people, even forming social cleansing groups to eliminate gang members. On the other hand, the State fosters crime in these communities and acts as gangs' accomplice in extortions, drug trade, and robberies. As in many other Latin American countries, the Guatemalan State penalizes crime, but simultaneously encourages and benefits from it; the State is complicit in crime.

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Introduction

The first day I visited El Mezquital, an extensive marginalized urban area in southern Guatemala City, the streets were virtually deserted. It was a Saturday in March 2012, and I was accompanied by Elvira and Daniel, two youth activists from El Mezquital who kindly helped me to know the communities. I was interested in conducting ethnographic research in El Mezquital to explore how violence affected youth in Guatemala's urban communities. As we walked through the streets, I asked Elvira, "Why are there so few people out on the streets? Where are the children? Where are the youth?" Without pausing to think it over, she replied, "Some are working, others are in school because they study on the weekends, but most of them are shut in at home." "Youth are shut in at home?" I responded, shocked. I could not believe that the youth of El Mezquital would be confined to their homes on a Saturday morning, instead of out playing and socializing on the streets, as young people usually do in poor neighborhoods and settlements.

As we walked the streets, Elvira and Daniel proudly relayed to me the history of El Mezquital. Their parents settled on these lands in the 1980s, and as children they helped build the homes and make the streets: "We dug ditches, carried sand, hauled pipes and cinderblocks... People worked really hard to set up these communities," they said. I was surprised by the level of urban development in El Mezquital: all the homes were made of cinderblock walls, zinc roofs, and metal doors; some houses were even two or three stories high; and all the streets were paved. On the main streets and avenues were many schools, churches, and businesses; buses, cars, and motorcycles drove by; but the majority of the people lived in small alleyways and on the slopes of ravines.

On the front wall of the El Esfuerzo School appeared the number 18 and the letters SPL (which stands for “Solo Para Locos,” only for crazies); the paint was a bit blurry and rain-damaged, but the symbols were large and clearly visible. On the corner by the school two youth looked at me with attention and distrust. I was curious to walk down the alleyways and on the ravine slopes, and I asked Daniel if we could go further down to see more of the communities. He said, “I have to get permission.” Daniel left us for a minute and made a call on his cell phone; he returned and said, “There’s no problem, we can go down.” I was intrigued by Daniel’s call and asked Elvira in private, “Whom did he call?” and she said, “the guys; here we have to ask permission from the guys to be able to walk around without problems.” Right away I came up with a number of questions, but it was not an appropriate moment to ask them. It was obvious that we were in the territory of the 18th Street Gang.

As we walked through the alleyways, people would peek out of their windows and doors to watch us, discreetly, then slip back inside again. Compared to the main streets, poverty was more apparent on the alleyways, with their run-down homes, buildings made of tin and wood, the scarcity of stores, and the abandoned houses. Elvira and Daniel stopped a couple of times to greet passersby, who looked at me with distrust. Later we returned to the main street and stopped at a store to drink water. Once again I asked Elvira, “Why are the streets so deserted?” She looked at me a bit baffled, as though the answer that I sought was obvious, and said, “Because of fear. Here people are so afraid because of everything that has happened.”

El Mezquital is a group of six marginalized communities: one *colonia* (neighborhood) and five *asentamientos* (shantytowns). *La colonia*, as people call it, is a poor neighborhood that the government created in 1982 for families displaced by the 1976 earthquake. Across from the *la colonia* are five shantytowns that were

formed in 1984 by land takeovers. People call the entire area El Mezquital, though each settlement has its own name. Around 25,000 people live in El Mezquital; the majority are impoverished *ladinos* (mestizos) originally from the countryside who migrated to the capital in the 1970s and 1980s due to the poverty and the State terror during the armed conflict in the northwest of the country; a small minority are indigenous. El Mezquital is located in the midst of other densely populated shantytowns and poor neighborhoods such as El Búcaro, Villa Lobos I and II, La Isla, and Unidos por la Paz, among others. Over 150,000 people live in the area as a whole.

Since the late 1990s, in El Mezquital and neighboring communities, youth gangs, or *maras* as they are known in Guatemala, began to form, inciting great fear in the population. The largest gangs, *La Mara Salvatrucha* and *El Barrios 18* (the 18th Street Gang), operate in almost all the shantytowns and poor neighborhoods of Guatemala City. These gangs started in California and came to Guatemala when the United States government conducted massive deportations of Central Americans in the 1990s. These two gangs are rivals and regularly fight to the death with firearms; they steal and extort from local residents (Cruz 2010, Savenije 2009, Levenson 2013, Zilberg 2011). People fear gang members because they are armed and fearless. Moreover, people do not trust the police force because it is corrupt; many attest that “police officers are the gangs’ accomplices” and that they participate in extortion schemes and youth homicides.

Urban violence in Guatemala began to increase after the signing of the peace accords in 1996. Guatemala City witnessed a rise in homicides and femicides, lynchings, muggings on streets and buses, and extortions of small-scale businesses and bus drivers. In 2013, there were 6,032 homicides in the country, 35% of them in the capital. The vast majority of victims were male (85%), youths between the ages

of 15 and 24 (51%), and almost all the crimes were committed with firearms (89%).¹ The statistics indicate that homicide victims are predominantly poor, urban young men.

People in Guatemala City feel deeply afraid because many of the crimes are horrifying and they feel completely unprotected by the State. People are especially worried about being physically harmed or killed over a robbery or extortion, or even by mistake. People therefore speak of “violence” and not of crime. In general, people use the term violence to refer to the serious crimes that happen on streets and in public spaces, such as homicide, kidnapping, rape, extortion, robbery, etc.

The government blames gangs for almost all the crimes that occur in the capital, and classifies shantytowns and poor neighborhoods as “*zona rojas*” that is, hot spots of crime and violence. However, an unknown number of small criminal groups operate in Guatemala City and commit robbery, extortion, and homicide on a daily basis in all the zones of the capital; and many police officers collaborate with them. The media feeds people’s fears, showcasing sensationalist news and images that depict horrendous crimes, portray gang members as dangerous and bloodthirsty, and criminalize youth from shantytowns and poor urban neighborhoods.

In Guatemala City, as in many other Latin American cities, urban violence predominantly affects youth from shantytowns and poor neighborhoods. Youth from these communities are the primary victims of violence, and are also those who most often join gangs.

¹ Guatemala has the fifth highest homicide rate in Latin America. In 2013, the country-wide homicide rate was 39 per 100,000 inhabitants, and in Guatemala City it was 67. See UNODC (2014) *Global Study on Homicide*. Available at http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF YOUTH

This is an ethnographic study of the youth of El Mezquital, and an analysis of how violence affects youth in Guatemala's urban marginalized communities. In this study I examine the socio-economic conditions that trigger violence in these communities, young people's and communities' responses to violence, and the State's responsibility in exacerbating violence in these neighborhoods. Throughout the study I examine the intrinsic relationship between violence, fear, and resistance.

In this study I focus on the experiences of three groups of youth that I encountered in El Mezquital: gang members, activists, and the "*jovenes encerrados*" (shut-in youth), youth who do not leave home due to fear of violence. For each of these groups, violence has a different meaning, and they respond to it in a different way. Gang members are a small, closed group, practically all male, and wield substantial power in their communities. They use violence to defend against humiliation from those who are stronger and to counter their social exclusion; but they also wield violence as a way to attack enemies, make money, and gain power. Activists, meanwhile, are also relatively few in number; these young people participate in local organizations and artistic groups, and use community arts as a way to protest social exclusion, violence, and social stigmatization. Activists do not believe in violence as a means of protest or social change; on the contrary, they openly oppose violence by gangs and police.

Finally, the shut-in youth, who are the majority of the population, are ruled by fear, distrust, and discouragement. They also face social exclusion and stigmatization but prefer to keep quiet and seek refuge in television, internet, radio, and cell phone use. They practically do not socialize in person with their peers, nor do they belong

to any youth group. In each of these groups of youth, I pay particular attention to young women's experiences and their strategies for coping in an overwhelmingly masculine context of violence.

In this study I explain El Mezquital's socio-economic context, the communities' historical background, people's struggles for local development, the class tensions between *colonia* and shantytown residents, and daily social relationships. I emphasize women's role in community struggles and their strategies for coping with poverty and resisting violence. My analysis of El Mezquital is framed in the larger scenario of Guatemala City and the metropolitan area, where inequality and differences of class, gender, and ethnicity are evident.

In this analysis I focus on two generations of youth in El Mezquital. The first generation was born in the early 1980s at the height of the armed conflict. These youth were the first in their families to be born in the capital; they grew up in huts, without running water, latrines, or electricity. They grew up playing and socializing on the communities' streets and ravines, and the *maras* formed then. The second-generation youth were born after the peace accords were signed in 1996. Compared to the previous generation, these youth were raised in better conditions: they grew up in proper houses with basic services and paved streets. But this generation does not play or socialize on the streets; it is a generation of youth who live confined to their homes out of violence and fear.

My interest in conducting this research began in 2008; I was intrigued to understand why so many youth in urban marginalized communities were dying, why gangs acted so violently against members of their own communities, and why people accepted social cleansing as a way to solve "the gang problem." In fact, the two main questions for my dissertation project were: a) what accounts for the exacerbation of

violence against youth or perpetrated by them in marginalized urban communities in post war Guatemala? And b) why do those communities seem to tolerate the killing of their own youth? At that time I was surprised by the extent of social indifference to social cleansing, Guatemalan newspapers reported dozens of murders of young people every day, but no one questioned those crimes; even human rights organizations seemed to “tolerate” social cleansing. In that time the social movement in Guatemala strongly opposed the brutal murders of women, to the extent of advocating a law against femicide, but no one seemed outraged by the murders of youth from shantytowns and poor neighborhoods.

In the first months of my fieldwork, I witnessed firsthand the profound harm that violence causes in these communities. Youth live in a state of fear, confined to their homes; people do not even trust their own neighbors; and the police play a perverse role in the communities. Many people told me that “back then” there used to be less violence in the communities, that gang members did not attack community members, and that people participated in local organizations. I began to explore into El Mezquital’s history in order to identify the events that changed the situation.

As in any research, my research questions broadened over the course of my fieldwork, and I began to delve more deeply into the roots of violence and fear in El Mezquital. I posed the following questions: Why did gangs change and start attacking members of their own communities? Why did people stop participating in local organizations? Why don’t people organize to solve the problems of violence and security in their communities? What is the State’s responsibility in the exacerbation of violence and fear in these communities? How is violence affecting youth and changing their lifestyles? How do youth and communities respond to violence? In this dissertation I attempt to answer these questions through the oral histories of the

women who founded El Mezquital, my participant-observation with the youth, and an exhaustive review of the relevant literature.

VIOLENCE AND GANGS IN POOR URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Worldwide, a broad body of literature examines the causes of violence in poor urban neighborhoods and the origins of gangs. The main theories originate in sociology and criminology and can basically be divided into three major categories: social structure theories, socialization theories, and critical theories. The classic social structure theories emphasize an analysis of socio-economic inequalities and social exclusion as the source of violence; they essentially contend that gangs and violent groups arise in poor urban neighborhoods due to social disorder, poverty, and social exclusion (Merton 1938, Cohen 1955, Shaw and McKay 1972). However, these theories do not explain why few youth join gangs, when they all share the same socio-economic conditions; nor do they consider young people's free will.

The socialization process theories maintain that gangs arise due to youths' negative relationships and a lack of social control. In poor neighborhoods, youth learn to imitate the violent or criminal behavior of people around them, and their exposure to violence increases the chance that they will reproduce violence (Burgess and Ankers 1966, Bandura 1977, Walsh and Hemmens 2008). The control theory asserts that in poor neighborhoods, institutions of social control, such as family, school, and police, are dysfunctional, and that gangs supplant these institutions' role (Horowitz 1983, Whyte 1993, Spergel 1995, Anderson 1998, Virgil 2002). Included in this category is the subculture perspective, which holds that gangs arise out of poor urban youths' class identification (Cohen 1972, Fischer 1995).

The critical theories argue that gangs are a way for marginalized youth to rebel against mainstream society; gangs are an expression of social discontent against the

racism, poverty, and violence that urban youth suffer. Young people join gangs to defend against the humiliation by those who are stronger, the police abuse, and the social exclusion that they endure daily (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 2002, Rodgers 2006, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Gang members demand respect and aim to participate in society's spaces of power and economic benefits, but society denies them legitimate possibilities to reach these aspirations. Gangs use violence to respond to power, but also to reaffirm their own masculine power (Hagedorn 1998, Baird 2012).

My analysis on gangs in El Mezquital is forged within the critical theories of violence. Certainly, as the social structure theories attest, gang violence is the result of the poverty and social exclusion that youth in urban neighborhoods experience; it is also a learned behavior based on the environment in which young people grow up, as the socialization theories contend. In Guatemala, for example, violence and State corruption influence youths' and citizens' behaviors. The brutality of the State violence against the population during the armed conflict yielded severe consequences for Guatemalan society (Green 1999, Manz 2008, Sanford 2003 and 2008). During the armed conflict the army mercilessly killed thousands of indigenous children, women, elderly, and men "suspected" of collaborating with the guerrillas, going so far as to commit genocide against indigenous peoples in the context of the counter-insurgency war (CEH 1999, REMHI 1998). In this dissertation I aim to demonstrate the influence of the brutality of State violence in the past on gangs' violent behavior in the present.

Gang violence is fundamentally a conscious reaction by poor urban youth against the abuse of power and daily social rejection that they suffer from State and society. This is one of the central arguments of my dissertation. In Guatemala, the first gangs emerged in the 1980s as an expression of social discontent by young

people in the capital's poor neighborhoods and public schools; they did not form as a political project in reaction to the military repression of that period, but rather as a clear demonstration of dissent with the marginalization and authoritarianism that youth endured at the time (Levenson 1988 y 2013). In the 1990s and 2000s, the Mara Salvatrucha, the 18th Street Gang, and other Californian gangs absorbed local gangs and spread their own expansive and combative identity; yet young people in poor neighborhoods joined these gangs for the same reasons that youth did in the 1980s: "so that people would respect them."

Studies on gangs in Central America have examined the causes of gangs' growth, gangs' cultural characteristics, the evolution of gangs to organized crime, and governmental responses in the region. These studies identify, as principal causes for gang formation, the social exclusion of youth in poor neighborhoods, the deportations of gang members from the United States in the 1990s, and the legacy of internal wars in the region (ERIC 2005, Smutt and Miranda 1998, Cruz 2005, Savenije 2009; Levenson 2013). Some authors even argue that gangs are the legacy of a "culture of violence" that originated in the region's wars (Cruz 2005, Collussi 2012), but they do not provide sufficient evidence regarding the links between past political violence and present-day gang violence.

Many studies have contributed in creating an image of the Salvatrucha and 18th Street gangs as "transnational gangs" that operate in complicity with organized crime, stretching from southern United States to Honduras; they depict gangs as hierarchical, highly organized, and extremely violent groups (Aguilar and Carranza 2008, Cruz 2009 and 2010, Wolf 2012, Farah 2013). Governments in the region have used this depiction to justify *mano dura* (heavy-handed, tough-on-crime) policies nationally, and anti-terrorist and anti-immigrant policies regionally, as Zilber (2011) indicates. In my ethnographic work I did not find evidence that gangs operate as

transnational groups; rather, I found that they act with substantial national and local autonomy, and they are not linked to organized crime but to the police.

Studies and news reports about gangs in Central America highlight the criminal activities and fear that gangs generate in their own communities. Whereas in countries such as Belize, Colombia, and Jamaica, gangs protect their communities and operate outside their territories, in Central America they extort and cruelly kill members of their own communities. Studies suggest that the cruelty of Central America's gangs is due to the brutality of its civil wars (Cruz 2005, Farah 2013, Levenson 2013, Wolf 2012), but other authors counter that many gang members were not even born when the wars occurred (Savenije 2009). In my fieldwork I found that gangs learned such practices from the present-day social cleansing groups, and that former soldiers and paramilitaries participated in social cleansing.

State interventions in poor neighborhoods usually aggravate the problems (Holmes and Smith 2008, Wacquant 2008, Olate & Salas-Wright 2010, Auyero, Burbano, and Berti 2014). Police often attempt to impose order by aggressively pursuing gang members, which results in confrontations and tension in the communities; in other cases, the police are corrupt and end up allying with the gangs and criminal groups. The State sees poor neighborhoods as hot spots for crime and gang members as "bad guys", and it uses legal and illegal means to criminalize and sanction gangs. Legally, the State uses the justice system to arrest and punish gang members with long prison sentences; illegally, it uses police brutality, torture, and social cleansing. Negengast (1994) argues that all States create "punishable categories of people" not only to penalize alleged criminals, but also to maintain and reinforce power hierarchies and inequality structures in society. The State constructs discourses to convince citizens that it only punishes the "bad guys," in order to secure people's support and legitimize its power.

In many countries, social cleansing serves to eliminate “undesirable” social groups like homeless people, street children, gays, gang members, and criminals, among others (Schwartz 1995, Ordonez 1996, Sandford 2008, Wilding 2010). The perpetrators are generally people from the same community and members of the police force and military. Social cleansing has been a common practice in many Latin American cities such as in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Guatemala. Often, social cleansing is conducted by death squads dedicated to illegally eliminating political enemies of the State and “undesirable” social groups. Sluka (2000) suggests that death squads’ actions serve State goals of eliminating dissidents and “undesirables” without due process of law, but removed enough from official State agencies to allow State denial. Rarely are members of the death squads punished, and many are also members of official State agencies, such as the police, militia, or army. Targets of death squads are frequently portrayed by the State as “terrorists” or “criminals” but often include anyone that challenges the status quo. Death squad operations generate terror and confusion among the population, stigmatize groups in society, and assert the power of the State and the perpetrators (Feldman 1991, Sluka 2000).

Usually the media justify State-sponsored violence and reinforce stereotypes and social stigmas about the victims, the media usually inflate the sense of fear and insecurity through sensationalist reports that blame youth gangs for most crimes in the region and on some level justify State repression against them. In this sense, Briseno-Leon (1999) argues that increased social fear leads to a growing disposition to carry guns, and to support for the death penalty and social cleansing.

Dominant groups create negative stereotypes to criminalize certain social groups through a process that Bourdieu (1994) calls “symbolic violence.” In symbolic violence, dominant groups impose thought categories and perceptions that are

reproduced unquestioningly, almost automatically. Dominated groups unconsciously replicate these thoughts and stereotypes against their own members, and even convince themselves that such perceptions are correct. In this sense, symbolic violence is more powerful than physical violence, in that it is embedded in people's very thoughts and modes of action, and it legitimizes dominant groups' abuse of power.

In this dissertation, I use Negengast's (1994) concept of "punishable categories of people" to examine how the State and dominant groups build discourses to justify the social cleansing of gang members and alleged criminals; and I use Bourdieu's (1994) concept of "symbolic violence" to examine how the dominated groups internalize and reproduce stereotypes and discourses against their own members. In Guatemala City and El Mezquital, many people repeat the same types of social stigma used by the dominant elite against poor youth; they even call youth activists by the pejorative term for gang members "*mareros*" and criticize impoverished youths' tastes in clothing and music.

In this dissertation I also examine two of people's basic reactions to violence: fear and resistance. Fear is a natural feeling caused by the perception of real or supposed danger, but recently in large cities has increased the fear of crime (Jackson & Gray 2009). The fear of crime is a personal or public sentiment which has different significance and manifestations in each context and culture, and this feeling can spread socially through rumors and sensationalist news published by the media (Robin 2004, Furedi 2005). Joanna Bourke (2007) argues that fear has historically been used as a weapon of domination and social control, the State has used fear as a war strategy and as a mechanism for social control, in many cases the State create false scenarios of insecurity to control citizens. In Guatemala during the armed conflict, terror was a key part of the counter-insurgency strategy (Fall 1992, Figueroa

Ibarra 2011, Green 1999, Grandin 2004, Manz 2004); currently, politicians use insecurity to impose hardline policies, militarize poor neighborhoods, and impose states of emergency in which the population's rights are restricted.

In El Mezquital, fear is a real experience and not a perception created by the media; people feel deeply afraid of the possibility of being hurt or killed on the streets and buses. Youth fear the gang members, the police, and the social cleansing groups. I once asked Erick, a youth activist, how he felt about living in El Mezquital, and he replied, "It's scary to live here; sometimes I wonder if I'm going to be the next one to die." In my fieldwork I found that gang members and police officers learned to use fear as a strategy to make money and wield control in the communities, just as the military did during the armed conflict.

Yet violence and fear also generate resistance. According to Vinthagen and Lilja (2007), resistance is an active response to power by subordinate groups; it is a practice that challenges power and has the possibility to reduce or subvert it. Resistance is conveyed in different ways: it can be expressed in public and confrontational ways such as protests, boycotts, strikes, etc., but it can also be expressed through small and silent everyday acts (Scott 1990). People have the capacity to resist power in a broad sense (Foucault 1978) and can resist specific powers that affect their everyday lives, such as police violence, gang violence, or male violence at home.

People's resistance strategies vary depending on the social context and historical moment; in a context of extreme violence, people generally adopt silent strategies of resistance (Scott 1990). In El Mezquital, local organizations, churches, youth groups, and many women oppose all forms of power that are imposed through violence. In this study I examine activist youths' resistance strategies to oppose police

and gang violence, social exclusion and stigmatization, and women's daily strategies to cope with violence.

THE YOUTH OF GUATEMALA

Guatemala is a country filled with youth: 70% of the population is under 30 years old. Youth aged 15 to 24 represent a third of the overall population; the majority of them are women (56.2%), live in urban areas (53%), and many are indigenous (40%).² The vast majority of youth live in poverty and exclusion; adults generally do not take them seriously or offer them opportunities for participating. Most youth face major obstacles to studying and finding work; the situation is even more challenging for indigenous youth in rural areas due to the deep-seated racism that prevails in the country.

In Guatemala there is practically no difference between "adolescence" and "youth." According to the country's laws, a person is considered an adolescent from the age of 13 to 18 and basically has the same rights as a child.³ Yet this definition does not acknowledge actual situations in the country. For example, in many indigenous communities the concept of adolescence does not exist; between the age of eight and ten, boys start working alongside their parents in agriculture and trade; and girls help their mothers with household chores. For indigenous parents, work is

² The latest population census in Guatemala was conducted in 2002, when the country's population amounted to 11,237,196 inhabitants. Based on projections by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Institute, INE) by 2013 it is estimated that the population had increased to 15,438,384 inhabitants. On population projections in Guatemala, see the National Statistics Institute website: www.ine.gob.gt

³ The rights of children and adolescents are defined in the Law for the Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents, known as the PINA Law (2003). In Guatemala there is no youth law as there is in other Latin American countries like Columbia, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic; but youth groups are promoting a bill in Congress (Initiative 38-96) which proposes two concepts: adolescent youth aged 13 to 18, and youth aged 18 to 30.

a way to share with their children, take care of them, and prepare them for life, although from a western perspective this could be construed as “child abuse.”

In Guatemala few people use the word adolescent. They usually call children *patojos*, and youth they call *muchachos* or *chavos*. People associate adolescence with puberty and as a very short transition period between childhood and adulthood. Adulthood begins when a person takes on adult responsibilities, such as working, procreating, and forming a family; this generally happens at an early age in Guatemala, where many youth begin to work at age 14 and many young women are pregnant at age 16.

During adolescence (or youth), young people face significant social pressure; they must show that they are no longer children, reaffirm their sexual identity, and take on gendered roles. Men are supposed to show their masculinity by having girlfriends and being sexually active, smoking, drinking alcohol, being strong and aggressive, working, and earning money. Meanwhile, women are supposed to dress flirtatiously, use makeup, have a boyfriend, help with chores, and prepare for motherhood. Moreover, adolescents feel financial pressure, as capitalism incites them to consume material goods and imitate the lifestyle of television and internet personalities, yet does not provide them with opportunities for working or consuming; this makes them feel frustrated.

Worldwide, the concepts of adolescence and youth are relatively recent in history. Until the Nineteenth Century, adolescence was used interchangeably with childhood, which ended at puberty. The first studies on youth initiated at the Chicago School in the 1920s and focused on juvenile violence in poor urban neighborhoods. These studies helped construct two stereotypes about youth from poor neighborhoods that persist to this day in the social imagination: that adolescents are

problematic, rebellious, and at risk; and that youth are criminals, gang members, and dangerous (Graff 1987).

In the second half of the Twentieth Century, capitalism and the media began constructing new representations of adolescence and youth. “Teenagers” began to appear as a social group with their own style and culture, with distinctive clothing, music, dancing, and money. Two antagonistic images of youth arose as well: “the good ones” and “the bad ones,” with each portrayal bearing strong racial and class-based connotations. Recent research on youth emphasizes their differences and inequalities by class, gender, race, and sexuality; many authors even refer to youths in the plural sense to stress that young people are not a sole, homogenous group (Hopenhayn 2007).

In this dissertation I use the term youth in a broad sense; I refer to both adolescents and youth over the age of 18, as the term is understood by the majority of people in El Mezquital and Guatemala.

GUATEMALA CITY

The contrasts between modernity and poverty in Guatemala City are unmistakable: grand buildings, luxurious shopping centers, and fully urbanized streets coexist with precarious shantytowns and impoverished children begging on street corners. Around a million people live in Guatemala City, and over three million reside in the surrounding metropolitan area. Historically, the country’s economic and political elite and middle-class *ladinos* have lived in the capital, but since the second half of the Twentieth Century the number of indigenous people and poor *ladinos* migrating to the capital has grown.

In Guatemala, people use the term *ladinos* to refer to mestizos and indigenous people who speak Spanish and have adopted Hispanic culture; *ladinos* generally have an ambivalent identity and discriminate against indigenous people (Hale 2006). In Guatemala persists a racial hierarchy inherited from the colonial period, dividing people into four groups. First is a small elite of *criollos*, Spanish descendants who wield economic and political power in the country. Secondly, the *ladinos* make up over 50% of the population; middle-class *ladinos* generally live in urban areas, and poor *ladinos* are concentrated in the southern and eastern regions of the country. Third, the indigenous people of Maya origin comprise over 40% of the population and are primarily concentrated in the rural northwestern highlands, where they live in poverty and marginalization. Finally, the *garífunas*, a small group of Afro-descendants, reside along Guatemala's short section of Atlantic Coast; like indigenous people, they live in poverty and face discrimination by *criollos* and *ladinos*.⁴

Criollos and middle-class *ladinos* consider the city to be "their space" and reject indigenous people and impoverished *ladinos* who migrate to the capital. In the 1970s and 1980s, indigenous and ladino migration to the capital increased due to the poverty in the countryside, the 1976 earthquake, and the State terror during the war. This caused rapid and disorderly growth in the capital and led to fierce class-based and racial tensions between capital inhabitants and migrants.

The 1976 earthquake was devastating. Over 23,000 people died, 76,000 were wounded, and more than a million people lost their homes. Guatemala City was almost destroyed. The military government at the time settled thousands of families in provisional camps, granted free lands in areas surrounding the capital, and built

⁴ On the historical formation of *criollos* and powerful groups in Guatemala, see the extraordinary work by Casaus, Marta Elena (2007), *Guatemala: linaje y racismo*. Guatemala: F&G Editores, 3ra Edición. On *ladinos'* identity conflicts and racism, see the ethnographic work by Hale, Charles (2006), *Más que un indio: racial ambivalence and neoliberal multiculturalism in Guatemala*. New Mexico: School of American Research Press.

common neighborhoods for families affected by the earthquake. However, the need for housing surpassed the government's offer, and thousands of families began to move onto vacant lots and settle on the slopes of ravines. After the earthquake, an estimated 125 shantytowns arose in the metropolitan area (Moran 1994).

In addition, the State violence of the armed conflict during the 1980s led thousands of indigenous people to flee from their communities and seek refuge in southern Mexico or migrate to the capital or other cities in Guatemala. The Comisión for Historical Clarification (CEH 1999) estimates that over a million people escape from their communities due to State terror. Many indigenous people who migrated to the capital settled in poor neighborhoods and shantytowns, and they changed their cultural elements (language, clothing, customs) to avoid being persecuted by the army, which considered them to be the guerrillas' social base of support, and to protect themselves from racial discrimination by ladinos in the capital.

Guatemala City's topography is uneven: it includes flat portions, hills, and ravines, and is surrounded by polluted rivers. The city is divided into 22 zones (districts) arranged in a spiral shape emanating from zone 1, where the historic center and the political seat of power are located. In general, the criollo elite and the rich reside in the hills, in exclusive, gated estates; the middle class lives in the level sections, in neighborhoods protected by metal bars and private security guards; and the impoverished indigenous and ladinos live on the sides of ravines, in common neighborhoods and precarious shantytowns.

Currently, there are over 350 shantytowns in the capital and the metropolitan area; the majority of them lack basic services and are located on the slopes of ravines. During the rainy season, many homes located on ravines slide away, and entire

families are buried in collapses and die. Though many shantytowns have improved living conditions now, such as El Mezquital, where people have proper housing, basic services, and paved streets, public opinion continues to portray these settlements as precarious and dangerous places, and they are called “*zonas rojas*” (high-crime zones).

Colonias populares (poor neighborhoods) with precarious services also abound in the capital. Many of these neighborhoods were created by the government in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake, and others were built by companies that offered plots of land at low cost but without basic services. In Guatemala, the term “*colonia*” originally referred to middle-class residential areas that spread in the Twentieth Century as the city grew and modernized. Over time, people began calling new neighborhoods where poor people lived “*colonias populares*.” However, the term *colonia* strongly connotes class and racial superiority because it references the colonial period of Spanish domination.

Criollos and middle-class ladinos in the capital have always opposed land takeovers and have rejected shantytown residents; they call them “*chusma*” (riffraff), “*choleros*” (bumpkins), “*ladrones*” (thieves), and blame them for urban crime and disorder. The State, meanwhile, violently evicts land settlers, denies shantytown residents access to basic services, and criminalizes youth from these communities.

In this dissertation I use the term “marginalized urban communities” to refer to the shantytowns and poor *colonias* in the metropolitan area. I examine the class-based and racial tensions resulting from the land takeovers and disputes over space in the city. I particularly examine the case of El Mezquital, where I encountered substantial class tensions between residents of the *colonia* El Mezquital and settlers of the shantytowns across the way.

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH / METHODOLOGY

My arrival in El Mezquital was not coincidental; Elvira suggested that I conduct this study in her community. Elvira is a youth activist who has worked in violence prevention programs for many years. She is a strong, enthusiastic woman with quite a sense of humor. We met in 2010 during a series of forums in Guatemala City on preventing youth violence, and we stayed in contact afterwards. In early 2012, I told her about my research and mentioned that I was visiting several marginalized communities in Guatemala City, seeking an appropriate site for my research. She suggested I do the study in El Mezquital because at the time the situation was “calm,” that is, there was not too much violence, and because several local organizations could help me. Elvira recommended that I work with the MOJUDVI Network (*Movimiento Juvenil por la Dignificación y la Vida*, Youth Movement for Dignity and Life) which included youth activists and artists from five local participating organizations. Elvira told me, “Don’t work with just one organization; work with all of them. That way you will meet more youth, and it will give you a broader overview of what happens in the communities.” That was a wise piece of advice.

This study is based on 14 months of ethnographic work in El Mezquital in collaboration with the MOJUDVI Network (June 2012 – August 2013). The Network is comprised of CEIBA Group, *Centro de Alcance* (Outreach Center), *Rincón Juvenil* (Youth Corner), Artiis Group, and JOVI (Youth for Life) Group. The first three organizations operate as small centers that provide educational services, job training, and art workshops. Artiis and JOVI are community art groups, and both hold workshops and presentations in theater, dance, stilt-walking, and juggling. MOJUDVI organizes cultural events and political lobbying activities to promote the rights of youth and a “culture of peace” in the communities. MOJUDVI members put me in contact with youth who participate in their constituent organizations, taught me a lot

about the situation in El Mezquital and neighboring communities, and provided me with feedback on my research findings.

I volunteered for over a year with the Ceiba Group and the Outreach Center. Ceiba Group is an NGO that works on violence prevention programs in marginalized communities of Guatemala; in El Mezquital, it runs a small high school, a computer center, and a conflict resolution program. I volunteered in the school, worked as an assistant in the humanities course, and facilitated workshops for high school students on topics of dating and sexuality, gender roles, youth work, and violence. The majority of the high school students are of adult age; many had been expelled from other schools for low academic performance or poor behavior; and some were gang members or had close ties to gangs.

In the afternoons I volunteered at the Outreach Center, a small center that provides free internet service and workshops in computer skills, breakdance, music, English, and academic tutoring for youth. The center operates on the grounds of the Catholic Church but is run independently; many youth who are not Catholic, and even gang members, attend. At the Outreach Center I interacted formally and informally with many youth, and I also met many mothers who work in the Catholic Church's social programs. Additionally, I shared many moments with youth from the Artiis and JOVI groups; I accompanied them to their rehearsals and shows, though I never managed to learn how to stilt walk or to dance like they do.

I faced two major challenges to my fieldwork. First was the young people's distrust. At first, the Ceiba Group students viewed me as "*el profe*" (the teacher) and distrusted me because I came from a university in the United States and on top that because I was a volunteer, instead of working for a paid salary like the other teachers. I spoke with MOJUDVI members about this, and they advised me to "relax" and change

the format of my classes, turn them into more participatory workshops, to use dynamic activities and games, and to facilitate dialogue among students. The change in format worked very well; students began to participate more in the workshops, and our relationship greatly improved. My relationship with youth from the other MOJUDVI organizations was always cordial and trusting, although I later learned that they considered me somewhat serious and formal.

Over time, I met several gang members and former gang members individually; I never spoke with a clique as a whole, partly because I was afraid of the group's reaction. I managed to speak with and share confidentially with four gang members who greatly helped me in understanding gangs. At one point, one of them confronted me and asked me if I was a police officer; he asked me for proof of my affiliation to the University of Texas. I showed him who I was, and after that we were able to speak very honestly.

The second challenge was people's, especially adults', fear. When I attempted to talk with community leaders about gangs, extortion, and the police, they would get nervous and change the subject. Many of them would not even use the word "*marero*," as most Guatemalans call gang members, but rather would refer to them as "*los muchachos*" (the guys). I incidentally realized that local leaders and adults preferred to talk about the past, so I began to inquire about the history of El Mezquital, the communities' origins, the gangs' background, the phase of social cleansing, and the youth organizations' struggles. The women who founded the communities told me the history of El Mezquital and also their own life stories. Through oral history and ethnography, I arrived at a better understanding of the current situation and people's fears.

Over the course of my fieldwork I conducted over 60 in-depth interviews with youth and adults from El Mezquital and neighboring communities; facilitated 14 dialogue-based workshops on the topics of gender, sexuality, education, work, ethnic identity, and violence; and engaged in multiple informal conversations with youth and adults from the communities. Every day I monitored *Nuestro Diario*, one of the most popular newspapers in Guatemala, to examine how the media represents poor urban youth; I did an exhaustive review of the literature on El Mezquital and urban violence in Guatemala; and I recorded my main experiences and observations in my field notebook. In this dissertation I present excerpts from the interviews, workshops, and informal conversations, passages from my experiences and observations, and my personal reflections.

I conducted this research in close collaboration with Elvira and the MOJUDVI youth; they accompanied me and supported me in every phase of the process, from planning the fieldwork to analyzing the results; even part of the conclusions emerged from discussions with them. The key to this research methodology was the constant, sincere, and respectful dialogue with young people from El Mezquital, from whom I learned important life lessons.

Collaborative research is both a methodological approach and a political engaged practice for doing ethnography (Lassiter 2005, Cahill 2007). I believe that rigorous research is not separated from the struggles of social groups for social justice, and I hope the results of this research will contribute to the struggles of MOJUDVID for a better life of the youth. My fieldwork was funded by the SSRC Drugs, Security and Democracy Fellowship 2012-2013.

Structure of the Dissertation

This study is organized into five chapters. In the first four chapters I present the ethnography of El Mezquital youth; I tell the communities' history, the formation and transformation of gangs, the effects of violence on young people, and youth activists' responses to violence. Throughout these four chapters I examine the State's role in violence and its interactions with youth and the communities.

In chapter five I examine the growth and intensification of urban violence in post-war Guatemala, the socio-economic conditions that fuel urban violence in the metropolitan area, the causes of gangs' extreme violence, and the survival and resistance strategies used by youth and marginalized communities to confront violence, fear, and social exclusion.

Throughout this study I highlight the voice of the youth and residents of El Mezquital, particularly the voice of activist youth, the women who founded the communities, and local leaders. I have changed their real names to protect their identity, although I would have liked to have reveal the names of some of them in order to acknowledge their tireless commitment to their communities and their inspiring example of struggle. Elvira's voice is present in every single chapter because she was my main guide during my time in El Mezquital.

Chapter 1

We Built these Communities!

The Struggles of the People of El Mezquital

Behind the Catholic Church in El Mezquital is a mural that holds the historical memory of the communities. In the center of the wall is an image of Friar Luis Rama, an Italian Franciscan priest, walking with an accordion in his hands in the middle of the main street that divides El Mezquital and the shantytowns. *La colonia*, on the right side, is portrayed with formally built cinder-block built houses and paved streets; on the left, the shantytowns are shown with makeshift houses of cardboard and plastic, and dirt roads. In the background, Lake Amatitlán and Pacaya Volcano are on view, and the top of the mural displays the faces of five young people who were killed in the communities. For many community leaders, this mural keeps alive the memory of the first settlers of El Mezquital, who occupied the land in the 1980s and fought hard for local development with the help of Friar Luis Rama; it also commemorates young people who have died by violence.

El Mezquital has a history of over 30 years of organization and struggles for local development. Since the land occupation in 1984, the squatters came together and worked tenaciously to achieve the legalization of the land and obtain basic services such as water, drainage, electricity, health care, and education. Women have played a key role in community struggles and have developed strategies to fight poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and gender violence.

In this chapter I briefly tell the story of El Mezquital, the conditions of poverty in which children and young people have grown up in these communities, and the

struggles of their parents to achieve local development. Then I examine community organizing models and how they changed over time. In the 1980s residents organized in neighborhood committees, in the 1990s they formed cooperatives, and now they work as NGOs. Finally, I examine the problems arising from population growth, the emergence of new shantytowns in the area, and the impact of violence in the communities. In this chapter I highlight the voice of the founding members of El Mezquital, particularly the women, and of the young people who grew up amidst the poverty and the struggles of their parents.

1.1. THE EMERGENCE OF EL MEZQUITAL

On March 27, 1984, Guatemala's newspapers reported that more than a thousand poor families had occupied the land located opposite la colonia El Mezquital in the southern part of Guatemala City and had formed a shantytown called El Éxodo.⁵ Over the following two months hundreds of families continued to arrive, taking over the rest of the land. Four more settlements were formed: El Esfuerzo, Monte de los Olivos, Tres Banderas, and La Esperanza. Approximately 25,000 people, including women and children, settled the area.⁶

Most of the occupants were poor ladinos (mestizos) from the rural areas who migrated to the capital in the late seventies and early eighties due to the poverty in the countryside, the 1976 earthquake, and the violence of the internal armed conflict. Among them were indigenous people from Chimaltenango, El Quiché, Quetzaltenango, and other departments who were fleeing state terror in their

⁵ *El Gráfico*, March 27, 1984, "Campesinos invaden terrenos en la Zona 12 de la capital."

⁶ Several studies and theses have been conducted on El Mezquital that document the communities' origins. Studies of note include those by Quezada (1985), Cabanas A, et al. (2000), and Batres J. et al. (2006); and bachelor's thesis by Hernández (1998), Perdomo (1992), and Ordoñez (2000).

communities. Most were young families, couples in their 20s and 30s with young children, and single mothers.

The occupants had attempted to invade the land on two previous occasions, in 1982 and 1983, but were quickly evicted by the army and the police. It was not until 1984 that they managed to settle permanently across from la colonia El Mezquital. They were poor people looking for a place to live; many of them had been renting rooms in tenements or neighborhoods of the capital where they were rejected because they had many children. Others were living temporarily with friends and family. Many had sought help from the National Housing Bank (BANVI) but never got a response. Poverty and a desperate need for housing forced them into taking over the land.⁷

La colonia El Mezquital, or *la colonia* as people call it, was created in 1982 by the BANVI to help 1,600 poor families affected by the 1976 earthquake.⁸ On one occasion Doña Andrea, originally from Santa Rosa, told me how she came to la colonia:

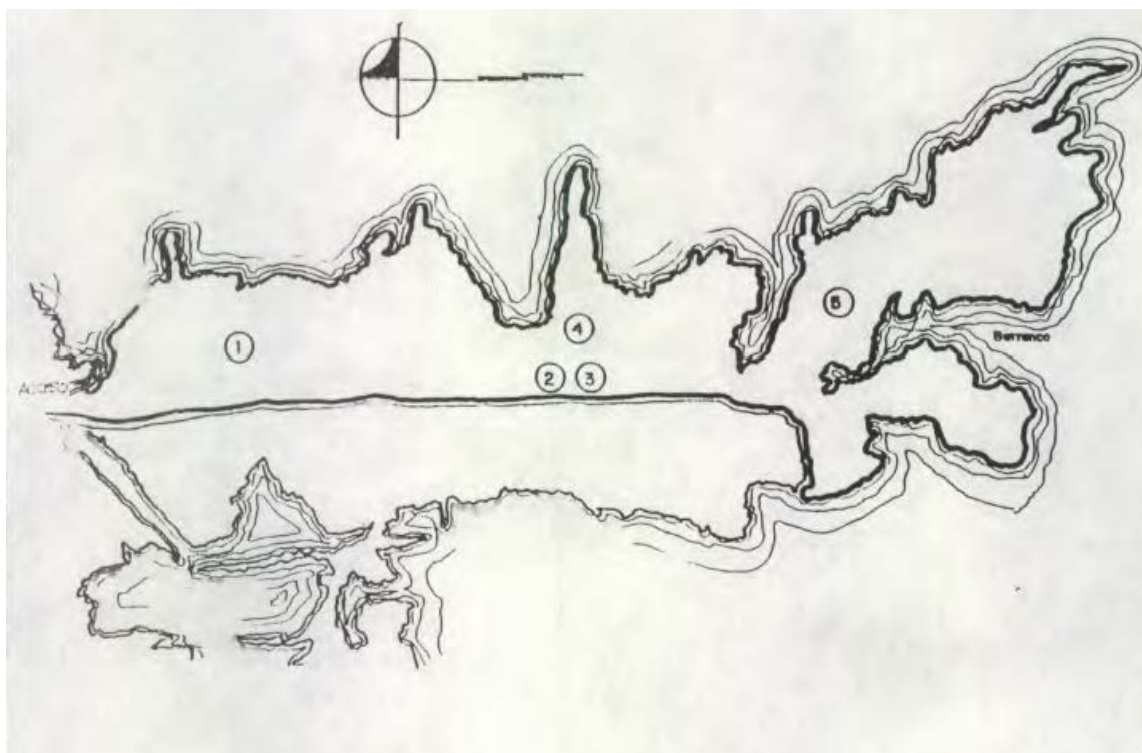
“We lived in a settlement in Zone 5 which was called Cruz del Calvario, near La Chacara. Later, the Army brought us here because BANVI gave us land to live here. When we arrived we only got the lot, there were still no houses. We lived in shacks for a long time until BANVI built the basic structure of the houses. All the houses had water and electricity. I remember we were poor, but we lived happily until the people from the other side arrived...”

⁷ According to the Guatemalan Social Security Institute (IGSS) figures, workers' average wage in 1983 was Q225.00 a month, and the State acknowledged that it was unable to meet the housing needs of people receiving that salary. For seasonal workers, merchants, and the unemployed, it was virtually impossible to access government housing projects (Quezada 1985).

⁸ The National Housing Bank (BANVI) was created in 1973 as part of the development policies of the military government of the time to promote urbanization and housing programs. After the earthquake of 1976, it helped rebuild and granted lots and houses for earthquake victims in the capital and neighboring municipalities. *La colonia* El Mezquital arose as part of these projects. See Morán et al. (1992).

“The people from the other side,” as Doña Andrea calls them, were the occupants of the shantytowns. Since the beginning, the people of *la colonia* rejected the occupants, calling them “*ladrones*” (thieves), “*huevoes*” (lazy people), and “*chusma*” (scum). They refused to give them access to water and electricity, and threatened to burn down their huts. The people from *la colonia* felt superior to the people from the shantytowns because they had obtained their land legally and had proper houses with water and electricity. The people of *la colonia* accused the occupants of usurping their green areas and blamed them for all the ills in the area: the diseases, lack of water, mud, poverty, and violence. Meanwhile, the occupants said that the residents of *la colonia* “were bad people” and made fun of them because “they thought they were rich even though they were poor.” Class tensions between the people from *la colonia* and the shantytowns extended continued over time and still persist, especially among the original settlers.

Figure 1: Map of El Mezquital



The map shows the shantytowns located in front of *la colonia*: 1) El Exodo, 2) Tres Banderas, 3) El Esfuerzo, 4) Monte de los Olivos, and 5) La Esperanza.

People occupied over 50 hectares, but only 25 hectares were habitable because the land was surrounded by deforested ravines and polluted rivers. The land had virtually been abandoned. One part belonged to the State and another part was privately owned.⁹ Doña Dora, one of the first occupants of La Esperanza, told me that the grounds were used as landfills and “to dump dead people”; she told me that when they dug up the land to build houses they found several piles of human bones, and that

⁹ Batres et al. (2006) notes that the landowners supported people in the occupation because they were interested in selling the land to the Government because they the land was not very usable and was devalued.

possibly some of these skeletons belonged to people who disappeared during the armed conflict.¹⁰

The occupants patched together their first houses with cardboard, sheets of plastic, wood, and used aluminum. They used candles and flashlights at night and made small paths to move around. They organized security groups to protect themselves from possible evictions by the police and army, and to guard the community from possible robberies. Each settlement organized its own committee and community board to solve common problems and coordinate activities with the other settlements. Then they created the Asociación de Vecinos de los Asentamientos Unidos de El Mezquital (United Neighborhood Association of El Mezquital Settlements, AVAUME) to fight for the legalization of land.

Women play a key role in the early years. They stood up to the army and police when they tried to evict them. They helped clear the grounds, hauled water, looked after children, cooked, and participated in the construction of the first schools, churches, and clinics. In an interview, Doña Laura, one of the first occupants of La Esperanza, told me how the land occupation happened and what life was like for the squatters in the early years.

D.M. How did you arrive here?

Laura: I lived in La Carolingia, with a sister, and I was a bricklayer mason, that is I helped to build houses for the people who'd lost their houses due to the earthquake, but I used to come here to some meetings organized by the students of the San Carlos

¹⁰ According to the CEH (1999), during the armed conflict around 45,000 people disappeared. Many of the victims were political and social leaders, academics and students, priests and religious leaders, and people suspected of collaborating with the guerrillas. These crimes were committed by groups of military, police, and death squads operating clandestinely in the country. The vast majority of the victims or their bodies are still missing.

University. That's when we organized a land takeover in 1983, but we were evicted, and later we made another attempt, and this time we stayed for good.

The largest takeover took place on March 25th, 1984. I was tipped off that that people would come at night. I came at about three in the morning and people were already squatting on this land, a lot of people. There was no more space. That's when a man said "let's go to the sandpit" and we went down, and there we found space in La Esperanza. I had three small children, and my first shack was made of plastic sheeting.

D.M. Where did the people who occupied the land come from?

Laura: They came from all over, from Zone 6, from La Florida, from La Carolingia, and from the departments. Also, many people came from the towns, from El Quiché, many indigenous people came fleeing from the war in their towns.

D.M. Were there attempts to evict you?

Laura: Yes, many attempts. Once, during the Mejía Victores government, I think, the army came with tanks, but all of us women and children stood out in front to confront the army. That was not good because we put our kids in danger. There were struggles, but thank God nobody got hurt. The army left. Later, during the administration of Vinicio Cerezo, they also tried to evict us. Again the army arrived, but this time other people from the government also came, in order to negotiate, but they didn't succeed. And so, little by little we stayed here.

D.M. How was the relationship with people from *la colonia*?

Laura: In the beginning there were many problems with the people of *la colonia*, they said that we were thieves and would not give us water, because they did have water. We had to go to the Ojo de Agua (river) to carry water. But then trucks

started coming in that sold water. Many children died of epidemics and lack of water. Once we marched to the Presidential Palace and took a child who had died from an illness. I'll never forget the face of President Vinicio Cerezo when we entered the Palace; when he saw the dead child, he said, "Dammit, do not do this to me, take this child away, I'm going to help you, but don't do this to me, take this thing away from here." Later he sent us to speak with people from the municipal office, but it took a long time for them to help us.

Then they brought in water as far as El Éxodo and we had to go all the way up there to fetch water. Later we stole water from EMPAGUA and put a bunch of pipes in the street to draw water. We suffered a lot because of the water situation. Now, thank God, everybody has water in their homes.

D. M. How were the settlements divided?

Laura: Each settlement had its leader. The names of the settlements were chosen by the people and their leaders. We named our settlement La Esperanza ("Hope") because we had the hope that one day they would give us our land. I fought hard for the legalization of land. There were many problems with the measurements because there were people who had a lot land and others only a little. Then we reached an agreement with the government and got 6 x 12 meter lot for everyone. I remember that there were also problems with the government surveyors because they were corrupt, they asked for money from people to give more land to some than to others. I fought a lot with them.

D. M. Did everyone get a piece of land?

Laura: No, not everyone, because there were too many people. The government bought some land in Peronia and Villa Lobos II and took some people there. I did not want to go there because they wanted you to pay and I had no money.

The leaders asked for money, and there were corrupt leaders. I remember that people fought a lot among themselves for the land, because some wanted more than others. I was threatened with axes and machetes to take my spot, but I didn't let them.

In the nineties was the takeover of Villa Lobos II. Friar Luis took all the people who could not fit here anymore, and they occupied Villa Lobos II. Many people who had land here went also to invade there. I went to set aside a little piece of land for my mom. Friar Luis helped a lot of people get a 6 x 12 meter piece of land, because that's what the law said. When Friar Luis took the people with him, he told them: "You are not invading land, you are taking possession of it, because this is something that belongs to you".

Doña Laura, like many people in the shantytowns, remembers with affection and admiration Friar Luis Rama, a Franciscan priest who came to El Mezquital in 1986 and helped people in local development. Friar Luis was a modest and committed man; for many years he lived in the shantytowns together with other Franciscans in a humble wood and tin house. He frequently repeated a phrase that the people remember well: "As long as the people don't have a decent place to live, neither will the Friars."

The first years were very hard for the squatters: they didn't know each other because they came from different places; they were afraid that the government would evict them at any moment. They had no water, they used the ravines as latrines, and they came down with many diseases. There were disputes between neighbors due to overcrowding and over land boundaries.

However, the government did not evict the occupants of El Mezquital, as usually happened in those years. The Guatemalan architect Flavio Quezada (1985) reported in 1984 five squatter communities in the capital and neighboring municipalities, but all occupants were violently evicted by the army and the police. Quezada affirms that the takeover of El Mezquital was the only successful one in those years due to the large number of families who participated in the occupation, the people's organizational capacity, the widespread media coverage, and the apparent "political openness" of the military that year.

In 1984, the government of General Mejía Vítores wanted to project a more socially aware public image since the armed conflict had lowered in intensity. Over the previous years the Army had defeated the guerrillas in the northwest of the country.¹¹ Between 1981 and 1983, the Army had unleashed a scorched earth policy in the conflict areas in the northwest of the country, massacring and destroying entire indigenous communities that it considered the guerrillas' social base. The guerrillas took refuge in the mountains and in the south of Mexico, and thousands of indigenous people fled to Mexico, the capital, and other Guatemalan cities. In 1999, the CEH concluded that in the early 1980s the State committed genocide against indigenous peoples, and that around one million Guatemalans were displaced from their communities due to State terror.¹²

¹¹ Mejía Vítores took office on August 8, 1983 through a coup d'état to replace another dictator, Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983). He was Minister of Defense under Ríos Montt and was named by the military to regain control of the Army and prepare the transfer of political power to civilians.

¹² The CEH concluded that the Army perpetrated a series of massacres, rape, extrajudicial executions, torture, and other crimes against humanity against children, women, men and elderly, among civilians. In 2012, a Guatemalan Court sentenced Efraín Ríos Montt a former military to 80 years in prison for genocide against the Ixil Village, however ten days later the Constitutional Court overturned the verdict arguing errors in judicial proceedings and ordered a retrial at a new court. It is expected that the trial will be repeated at a new court in 2014.

Mejía Vítores came to power in 1983 through a coup d'état against Efraín Ríos Montt. Mejía Vítores was appointed by the military to improve the army's public image and prepare the transition to democracy by giving political power to civilians. In 1984, Mejía Vítores called for elections to form a constituent assembly, which drafted Guatemala's current Constitution. In 1985, the assembly ordered general elections to elect a civilian president and a multiparty legislature. Meanwhile, in conflict zones, the government promoted "the recovery" of indigenous populations displaced by the massacres, and survivors were concentrated in developmental clusters and model villages for "re-education" and control. It also created Civil Defense Patrols (PAC) in almost all villages of the country, forcing thousands of young and adult men to monitor and police their own communities.

The people of El Mezquital organized their communities when the internal armed conflict had not officially ended. In those years, the government looked with suspicion upon any form of social organizing for fear of it being a communist or guerrilla group. In fact, during the government of Mejía Vítores (1983-1985), the army continued to selectively disappear and murder community leaders, students, and activists in the capital and other cities in the country.¹³ Despite this, and at the risk of enduring political persecution, the people of El Mezquital organized to occupy the land and fight for their rights. The government allowed the squatters to stay on the land, but did not provide any basic services, arguing that they were "illegal settlements" and therefore "the people had no rights."

¹³ In 1999, *El Diario Militar* (The Military Diary) was made public; this declassified Army document contained personal data on 183 Guatemalans who disappeared during the Mejía Vítores government between 1983 and 1985. On *El Diario Militar* see the study by Rimola M. and Lopez R. (2009), *La verdad detrás del Diario Militar: Desaparición Forzada en Guatemala 1982-1985*. Guatemala: PNR.

1.2. THE STRUGGLES FOR WATER AND LAND

Once settled, the people began to face serious health problems; many children died of diarrheal and respiratory diseases. Between 1985 and 1986, over 150 children died in a typhoid epidemic.¹⁴ The squatters marched on several occasions to the National Palace to the Presidential Palace in Guatemala City to seek the help of President Vinicio Cerezo (1986-1990), the first civilian president after 15 consecutive years of military rule. These are the marches that Doña Laura refers to when she describes President Cerezo's shock when he saw the protesters of El Mezquital carrying the body of a child who died of typhoid. Doña Dora told me about the anguish of mothers due to the epidemics and lack of water:

“Thank God none of my children died because we drank water from that *shuco* (dirty) river. You cannot imagine the number of flies that were in the communities, as if they were swarms of wasps. That's what the flies were like. They brought many diseases and many children died. It was very hard. Many people left because they could not stand the awful living conditions here.”

I was very surprised when Doña Dora told me that her family and other villagers drank water from the Villa Lobos River because it is a sewage flow. The river is located a kilometer south of El Mezquital and is basically the drainage of domestic and industrial sewage flowing into Lake Amatitlán, which is also contaminated. The river produces foul odors. Many times I watched sadly as men and children from the communities searched the river for stones and other materials to sell.

Gradually communities began to receive help from Guatemalan and international organizations such as the National Residents' Movement (MONAP), the

¹⁴ On living conditions of the first settlers of El Mezquital see the report of Cabanas, Andrés, Emma Grant, Vargas, Paula and Sajbin, Veronica (2000), El Mezquital: “A community's struggle for development.” Environment and Urbanization Vol 12 No. 1 April 2000.

Society for the Integral Development of the Guatemalan Family (SODIFAG), the Catholic Church, Doctors Without Borders, and UNICEF. These organizations began to implement projects in health care, water, latrines, land legalization, and community organizing. For its part, the government created the Inter-institutional Commission for the Care of Precarious Areas (COINAP) to provide basic services in the urban shantytowns that began to multiply throughout the capital. President Vinicio Cerezo began to recognize the rights of the residents of urban shantytowns.

UNICEF contributed significantly to the development of El Mezquital. Between 1986 and 1997, UNICEF implemented the Basic Urban Services Program in El Mezquital, and carried out projects for maternal and child health, water and sanitation, and community organization. In an interview, the UNICEF Program Director from that time told me that the situation of the settlements in the eighties “was like a refugee camp”: people were crowded, with no water and no latrines, and that many children died in his arms from diseases. He says the situation was so precarious and desperate that some ironically referred to El Mezquital as “*el mosquital*” (swarm of flies) due to epidemics caused by flies.¹⁵

In 1987, UNICEF and the Integrated Health Program (PIS) trained a group of female community health promoters, known as Reproinsas (Representatives of the Integrated Health Program). Reproinsas attended to the health emergencies of children and pregnant women. They visited families in their homes, provided first aid services in homes, and referred patients to the hospital. The Reproinsas quickly the trust and respect of the people in the communities and became local leaders.¹⁶

¹⁵ For more details on this UNICEF program in El Mezquital, see the article by Espinosa Lair and Oscar López (1994), UNICEF's urban basic service Programme in Guatemala City. *Environment and Urbanization* Vol. 6 No. 2, October 1994.

¹⁶ The Health Ministry subsequently replicated the model of Reproinsas in other shantytowns in the metropolitan area. In 1992, there were about 350 Reproinsas in 47 urban settlements, women volunteers who collaborated in prevention and health care programs in their communities (Espinosa and Hidalgo 1994).

Desperate for Water

Disease made the people from the shantytown communities desperate enough to steal water from *la colonia*. They broke pipes belonging to the municipal water company (EMPAGUA) and placed clandestine pipes underground to distribute water in the settlements. They also stole electricity from *la colonia*, adding to the conflicts between the residents of the shantytowns and *la colonia*. Many women remember with regret the problems that they faced due to the lack of water. On one occasion, when I asked Doña Elena, a resident of El Esfuerzo, what strikes her most about youth today, she replied: “What strikes me the most is that young people don’t value water. I scold my children all the time because they waste water, they leave the faucets and the shower running too long. My kids say I’m traumatized about water, but we suffered so much for water, and it hurts me that they don’t value it. The young forget that the water runs out.”

In 1987, UNICEF and Doctors without Borders set up the first communal water spouts. But the water was insufficient for the large number of people. Many women told me about the hardship they endured because of the water situation: “We stood in long lines day and night to haul water” (Doña Sandra); “I went with my children to fetch water in buckets to fill jars and barrels; we suffered a lot, because there were a lot of people and not enough water” (Doña Laura).

In 1990, the residents of the shantytowns established the *Cooperativa Integral de Vivienda de La Esperanza y El Esfuerzo* (Integral Housing Cooperative of La Esperanza and El Esfuerzo, COIVEES) to find solutions to the problems of water and housing. La Cooperativa, as people call it, represented a shift in their community organizing model because previously they had only been had community boards of directors. The change was not easy; some community leaders were reluctant to form

a cooperative because they feared losing power in community decisions, and said that La Cooperativa would lend itself to corruption.

With the support of international aid, in 1991 La Cooperativa built the first two wells and the first distribution network for piping water to homes in Esperanza, Monte de los Olivos, Tres Banderas, and El Esfuerzo. Then they built two wells, one in El Éxodo and another in Lomas de Villa Lobos, the latter to distribute water to the residents of Villa Lobos II, where over a thousand families who did not obtain land in El Mezquital had moved.¹⁷ Currently La Cooperativa distributes water at low cost to more than 4,000 households in all of the settlements; the service is high quality and residents have water 24 hours a day. Residents of *la colonia*, on the other hand, continue receiving water from EMPAGUA at a higher cost, and the service is spotty. Ironically, the water situation has reversed, as one of the residents of El Esfuerzo told me: “Now the people of the shantytowns have better water than the people of *la colonia*.”

¹⁷ The first water projects were developed with funding from UNICEF and the government of Switzerland; subsequent projects were funded by the World Bank (2000 Cabanas).

Figure 2: El Mezquital 1992



People get their Land Titles

After many years of struggle, in 1987 the government agreed to legally grant land to each family. The National Reconstruction Committee (CRN) designed the first project to provide a lot measuring 6 by 10 meters to each family, but people did not accept such a small space for a large family.¹⁸ Most families had between eight and ten members. A group of residents, with the support of Friar Luis Rama, organized the “Six by Twelve Group,” a movement to press the government into granting a plot

¹⁸ The National Reconstruction Committee was created after the 1976 earthquake to coordinate the reconstruction process. It was responsible for coordinating the move of earthquake-affected populations from temporary shantytowns to colonias with urbanization and services, such as El Limón, Alameda, La Carolingia, San Juan de Dios, Joyita de San Antonio, Sakerti, Madre Dormida, El Amparo, and others. The CNR was dissolved in 1987, and the government created the Department of Human Settlements and Housing (DAHVI), in order to provide basic services in the precarious shantytowns of the metropolitan area.

of 6 x 12 meters to each family. Finally, the government granted 6 x 12 meters to each family, but the area was overcrowded and some families needed to move. The government offered land at low cost in other newly populated places such as Villa Lobos II, Ciudad Peronia, and Ciudad del Sol. However, few families agreed to move elsewhere because they could not afford the fees.

The land measurement and distribution process caused disputes among residents. Many people did not agree to the location of the land assigned to them, and others did not want to move from the original place that they had occupied. Corruption occurred as well; people say that the technicians with DAHVI, the government institution that measured and granted the land, received money in exchange for awarding residents a larger plot or giving them several lots.

In 1991, the families that did not obtain a plot in El Mezquital began moving into Villa Lobos II, located one kilometer north of El Mezquital. Friar Luis Rama helped people occupy that land. Don Carlos, who participated in this second takeover, explained to me what happened:

“Friar Luis Rama told us that we were not going to squat on the land but rather take over what belonged to us. The army tried to dislodge us, but Friar Luis threw himself down in front of the Army tanks and told them that if they wanted to evict people, they would first have to pass over him. Friar Luis was very brave, and thanks to him we got to stay here (in Villa Lobos II).”

In March 1992, another group of families took over a small area of land close to Villa Lobos II and founded the settlement Villa Lobos III. In that same year the Ocho de Marzo settlement was born on the banks of El Éxodo ravine. Over time, more and more land was taken in the area around El Mezquital.

In 1990, President Cerezo symbolically handed over the land to the people of El Mezquital, although official titles were handed over twelve years later, in 2002, by President Alfonso Portillo. People in the communities remember the many protests and negotiations carried out during the Cerezo administration (1986-1990) to achieve the legalization of land and water services. This was a period of multiple social protests nationwide, despite the fact that the Cerezo government was under military oversight, as the civil war had not ended.

1.3. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

The original squatters remember with pride and a little nostalgia how they worked together to build the first houses, drainage systems, and streets in their communities. In fact, everybody participated in local development: men, women and children. On several different occasions, Daniel and Doña Laura described to me how that process worked:

"Look, here we dug the ditches for drains and streets. I remember my dad would have my brothers and me hauling dirt with shovels and carts. It was nice, though it was hard because we were children" (Daniel).

"You should have seen it: we women looked like masons, we worked like men, we built ditches, we carried earth, we loaded blocks; we did everything to get this community up and running. Thank God, now we live as we had wanted" (Doña Laura).

In 1993, La Cooperativa and UNICEF invited a World Bank (WB) mission to visit El Mezquital and see people's precarious living conditions. After the visit, the WB decided to finance the Urbanization Program of El Mezquital (PROUME), providing more than six million dollars in aid. The PROUME was implemented between 1995

and 1997 in a tripartite arrangement with the participation of the government, the communities, and the international community.¹⁹

With PROUME funding, the streets were paved, street lights installed, and sanitation, drainage, and sewage systems put in place. The program also helped to build homes, distribute water to households, provide health and education programs, and relocate families that had not received plots of land in El Mezquital. PROUME aimed to benefit 2,847 families, but it is unknown exactly how many people benefited from the program.²⁰

According to local leaders, the key to PROUME's success was people's participation in the decision-making process and in the local development tasks. In evaluating PROUME, Bravo (1998) highlights the active role taken by La Cooperativa and local committees on the PROUME Directors' Council, and residents' participation in urbanization work. For Bravo, this method helped strengthen community organization, improve local capacity for managing resources, and engage people in the development of their own communities. However, some neighbors accused La Cooperativa and committee members of corruption and embezzlement in the administration of PROUME.²¹

¹⁹ DHAVI participated on behalf of the government, and served as an intermediary for channeling funds, approved and supervised the projects, and provided technical assistance for urbanization; UNICEF administered the World Bank funds and offered technical assistance to community organizations; La Cooperativa administered the materials and services to implement the projects; and the boards of directors organized the neighbors to do the cleaning work and construction projects.

²⁰ On the results of PROUME, see Sandra Drummond (2005) *Collection and selection of information on land regularization and Informality programs in Guatemala*. ECLAC. Available at <http://www.eclac.org/publicaciones/xml/1/27031/lcw58e.pdf>

²¹ Bravo rates as positive the inter-agency coordination between the government, international donors, and communities to implement PROUME. However, Bravo notes the many delays and limitations due to State bureaucracy and the government's lack of experience in working with communities; the limited technical and financial capacity of La Cooperativa and the community boards of directors to manage and implement the funds; and the fact that many residents did not approve of all of the projects.

In a short period of time El Mezquital was transformed. Father Ricardo told me about the rapid development of the settlements in the nineties:

“I first arrived in El Mezquital in the early nineties. There was so much poverty then: all the people lived in shacks; the streets were dirt and sewage ran at ground level; there were only basic schools, there were no high schools. The friars lived in a wooden hovel. The parish priest was Friar Luis Rama and he was helping people get land in Villa Lobos II because there was no more room for them here. In those years I was impressed by people’s participation and commitment. The church was full of people and youth, it was a living Church. In those years I never heard of deaths, shootings nor *maras* (gangs) in communities, I walked all over the place in peace. In 2008 I returned and was surprised that there no longer were just shacks and dirt roads. People lived in proper houses, and the streets were cobblestone. I was happy to see the prosperity of the communities; but I was very sad to observe the violence, to see youth being killed, people being extorted, and a divided church. The violence had changed everything” (Father Ricardo).

La Cooperativa offered people low-interest loans to build their houses. Others gradually built their houses with personal savings, remittances sent by their relatives in the United States, and bank or personal loans. Still today, the poorest families live on the edges of the communities in precarious homes built with tin, wood, and plastic.

However, what is particularly striking is the lack of parks and recreational areas in El Mezquital, in spite of the thousands of children and youth who live in the communities. Virtually all spaces, including the sides of the ravines, are populated. There are no parks in El Mezquital; and in the whole area there are only two soccer fields, one in El Esfuerzo and another in La Esperanza. In each shantytown there is a

small basketball court, but children and young people do not use them because they are controlled by gangs.

Public transport within El Mezquital has been free since 2007. Before then, there were only the so-called red buses that still run throughout Guatemala City. In 2007, Guatemala City's municipal government created the Transmetro, a rapid transit system that connects the southern section of the city to the historic center, and built the South Terminal Transmetro across from Villa Lobos I, a kilometer away from El Mezquital. The municipality allocated free buses to transport people from El Mezquital and the neighboring communities to the South Terminal station because people opposed paying for such a short distance. In Guatemala City, the cost of a public bus ride is Q1 (US \$ 0.13) because it is subsidized by the central government, but the buses are low-quality and dangerous.

Schools

The Catholic Church and FUNDESCO helped to create the first schools. The first school, El Mezquital I, operated in a small makeshift structure of wood and aluminum; children from *la colonia* and the settlements attended. The first teachers were volunteers from the communities and from outside. Many people remember that the Guatemalan singer Ricardo Arjona was a volunteer teacher the El Mezquital I School. Later, the government built a school building on the corner of 6th Street and 2nd Avenue of El Mezquital.

Elvira attended the El Mezquital I School, and she told me that children carried a bucket to sit on because there were no desks, and that many children didn't even have notebooks. Elvira says that the student body reflected the class differences between the residents of *la colonia* and the settlements, and that there she discovered

for the first time the meaning of social and economic inequality, when she was only eight years old:

“As a child I did not know what it was to be poor. In my house we all slept on the floor, ate beans and tortillas, but I was happy, I played with my brothers and sisters and my friends. I thought everyone lived like that, until I got to school. The girls from *la colonia* said that in their homes they had TVs, refrigerators, and their own beds. Then I started to say that I also had those things, so that they would accept me. But then I realized that it was a lie, because when we went to those girls’ homes, they didn’t have any of that. They’d also been telling lies. When we’d ask, ‘Hey you, where is the TV and the fridge?’ they would say, ‘The thing is, they broke and they’re being fixed,’ but those were lies. They were poor like us” (Elvira).

Gradually each shantytown managed to get its own elementary school built: Monte Los Olivos School (in El Esfuerzo), Fe y Alegría School and Sol Naciente School (in La Esperanza), El Éxodo School (in El Éxodo) and El Mezquital II School (in *la colonia*). During my fieldwork, I visited almost all of these schools and I spoke with several teachers. They described to me the poverty of the children and the families during the early years, and the precarious conditions in which the schools began.

In 1991 Friar Luis Rama created the first middle school, Instituto Juventud Nueva, and in 1994 the first high school, Instituto Myrna Mack, so that the young people of the communities could continue their studies, because at that time there were only elementary schools.²² Friar Luis Rama and local leaders were concerned

²² The Guatemalan education system is divided into four levels: pre-school (one or two years), primary school (six years), junior high (three years), and academic or technical high school (two or three years) This represents a total of thirteen to fourteen years of schooling. However, the average number of years that Guatemalans attend school is four.

because most young people did not study nor work, and were out on the streets without anything to do, and the first *maras* (gangs) started to emerge. A UNICEF report from 1991 states that at that time more than half of the population of the settlements were unemployed or underemployed, the vast majority of them young. In 2006, Franciscan friars changed the name from Instituto Juventud Nueva to Instituto Fray Luis Rama in honor of its founder, who died in 2006 of health problems.

In the eighties and nineties, youth who wanted to study had to attend the public schools in downtown Guatemala City. It was not until 2002 that the government opened the first middle school in El Mezquital (INEBEMEZ), and another in 2008 in La Esperanza (INED). In 2007 Grupo Ceiba opened a free middle and high school in La Esperanza; in 2010 Fe y Alegria School also opened a high school for area youth. These developments have made it possible for more young people, mainly young women, to go on in school.

1.4. WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

In El Mezquital, determined women abound. Besides participating in community struggles, women have fought other battles. They have struggled to raise their children in precarious conditions, confronted the violence and machismo (sexism) of their parents and partners, and learned skills to gain employment. Many women have even had to learn to read and write because they were illiterate, and indigenous women have had to learn to speak Spanish.

The first women's organizations emerged in the latter half of the eighties: *Reproinsas* (1986), *Unidas para Vivir Mejor* (United for a Better Life, UPAVIM) (1988), and the *Asociación de Mujeres Superándonos Juntas* (Association of Women United to Better Ourselves) (1988), which still exist. Doña Ana told me how *Reproinsas* formed:

“Back then, women did not know about health and first aid, and many of us did not even know how to read or write, but UNICEF and Doctors without Borders trained us. We started vaccinating children; we gave them rehydration solution and acetaminophen when they got sick. We taught women how to care for their children and other health measures. Also we gave first aid to the sick; and when someone was very sick we took that person to hospital. At that time, the people were very poor and they cooperated with us” (Doña Ana).

In a study about local development in El Mezquital, Cabanas et al. (2000) notes that Las Reproinsas’s health prevention work was successful and helped make women's leadership visible in the communities. Subsequently some of Las Reproinsas created the *Fundación Esfuerzo y Esperanza* (Effort and Hope Foundation, FUNDAESPRO), a women's organization offering health care, women’s literacy, and care for children in urban settings. In 1990 FUNDAESPRO opened the first community pharmacy in El Mezquital, and in 1997 created the Center for Integral Family Development (CEDIF) in the settlement Monte de los Olivos. The CEDIF, with funds from PROUME, offered free health services and legal advice to people of the community. Volunteers from the University of San Carlos and the Reproinsas participated in the CEDIF. However, CEDIF closed in 2007 due to harassment and extortions by gangs in the area.

Currently only 12 women participate in the Reproinsas Group. They manage a small-scale children’s daycare and a women's literacy project. According to Doña Ana, the work of the Reproinsas declined because of lack of support from the Ministry of Health and the international community, and because “women are forced to leave the communities to work elsewhere, due to poverty.”

In 1988 a group of women from La Esperanza created the organization *Unidas Para Vivir Mejor* (United for a Better Life, UPAVIM). The project was initiated by Barbara Lorraine, a volunteer from the U.S. who came to the community in the eighties to work on a child nutrition program. As time went on, she encouraged women from La Esperanza to create an organization to provide job training for women and prevent domestic violence. UPAVIM helped many women to study, offered workshops to prevent domestic violence, and created a childcare center and an artisan craft business that provided work for women in their communities.

During the eighties, nearly all of the women were abused and beaten by their parents and partners. In interviews and informal conversations, many women told me that in "the time of the huts" they heard the yells and cries of women being abused by their partners, and children beaten by their parents. Women say that back then men would "drink a lot" and were very violent, and that neither women nor anyone else intervened because these were "marital problems" or "family matters."

Most women were housewives and financially dependent on their partners. Many of them worked as domestic workers, market vendors, or in the *maquilas* or other factories. Also, many women were illiterate or had little schooling, and it was virtually impossible for them to get a job in the formal sector. They were poor women with few job opportunities. In an interview Doña Dora told me what life was like for women in those years, and how UPAVIM helped her change her life:

D.M. How did you join UPAVIM?

Dora: In 1988 a gringa came (Barbara Lorraine) to the community and she invited several women to help her take care of malnourished children and empower women. At first we were afraid of the gringa, because of all the rumors about

the gringos; you know, that they would steal our children or because they brought bad ideas.

I was a very shy and abused woman. I washed people's clothes in order to support my kids because my husband didn't work and he hit me a lot. It was hard for me to decide to join because I had never participated in a group, but I started enjoying it and learned a lot.

D. M. What was the situation for women at that time?

Dora: Before, women believed that we were only good for having children. The men were sexist, alcoholic and beat women. Women did not think about self-improvement. They made us believe that we were worth nothing. We were dependent on the money men gave us... There was a lot of domestic violence, you could hear when men beat women in the huts.

D.M. What was the situation for indigenous women in the community?

Dora: Yes, there were several indigenous women, not many, but I think they also suffered like the rest of women.

D. M. Why do we see so few indigenous women in the community now?

Dora: I think many Indigenous women left the community because they did not adapt and they returned to their villages. I also believe that many women stopped wearing traditional dress because it is very expensive. Children who were born here don't use traditional dress anymore.

D. M. What has your participation in a women's organization meant to you?

Dora: UPAVIM changed my life. I am a new person, a new woman thanks to UPAVIM. I was very shy, I was a battered and illiterate woman. I began to study when I

was 32 years old. I did elementary school, junior high, and high school as an adult. I worked at UPAVIM for many years without getting paid. I would go to class barefoot or wearing sandals, but it didn't matter to me because I wanted to succeed.

At first I was ashamed about studying and about speaking in public because I had been humiliated a lot by my partner. But with UPAVIM I learned that I am able to speak up. Now, women tell me that I'm the best public speaker.

Doña Dora's story illustrates the oppression of women during those years. Many women suffered domestic violence and unemployment, and raised their children in poverty. Today, Doña Dora continues to work at UPAVIM. Her children are grown; some have married and formed their own homes. She dreams of creating a community center for the elderly.

Over time, UPAVIM women built their own four-story building in La Esperanza, which now houses a childcare center, a bakery, and a fair trade craft business. UPAVIM is one of the few community organizations that continue to operate in La Esperanza, despite harassment and extortions by gangs. For local leaders, UPAVIM has survived thanks to the women's social commitment, the respect they have earned from the community, and the organization's economic self-sustainability. UPAVIM supports itself mostly through the craft business which sells its products within and outside of Guatemala; and the organization receives little funding from international donors.

In 1988, FUNDESCO helped a group of women from the Monte de los Olivos to organize the *Asociación de Mujeres Superándonos Juntas* (Association of Women United to Better Ourselves). The Association began offering education and job

training programs for women, courses in sewing, cooking, crafts, literacy and typing, so that women would have a greater chance of finding formal employment or starting their own business. It is estimated that in the 1990s, the association helped over 200 women every year.²³

In 1995 the Association built its own building in Monte de los Olivos with funding from PROUME. Unfortunately, in 2009 the Association closed its doors due to harassment and extortion from the gangs. Several women and their families even left the communities because the gang members were threatening them. Currently the Association building is abandoned.

Gradually women gained greater leadership and recognition in the community. Today many women lead local organizations, and in the churches they head up pastoral work, ministry, and other programs, although most pastors are men. In 2006, the Catholic Church created a Women's Ministry to promote women's rights, and in 2013 it opened a Women's Office to handle cases of domestic violence and violence against women.

Another significant change is the high level of participation by girls and women in the schools. Today, female students are in the majority, while in the eighties and nineties the majority of students were male. I spoke with several teachers about this change, and they attribute it to three factors: first, there are more elementary and secondary schools in the communities, making it easier for girls to study; second, there is now greater social recognition of the rights of girls and women; and thirdly, because parents, especially single mothers, want their daughters to study so that in

²³ On domestic violence and the Women's Association, see the thesis by Ordoñez M. (2000), *La violencia intrafamiliar contra la mujer*, a study conducted with the Asociación de Mujeres Superándonos Juntas. Thesis, Escuela de Trabajo Social, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala.

the future they find better job opportunities and become financially independent. In chapter three I examine in more detail women's involvement in schools.

Indigenous Women

In the previous interview, Doña Dora says that many indigenous people left the communities because they did not adapt to the poor conditions, and that many indigenous people who did stay "*perdieron su traje*" (stopped using their traditional dress, literally "lost their clothing"). I heard this expression many times in El Mezquital, of indigenous people "losing" their dress, to refer to indigenous people's process of adaptation to the dominant ladino culture of the capital. Indigenous women's traditional clothing was the most visible representation of their cultural identity, and when a woman "lost her dress," it meant losing or changing her ethnic identity.

In El Mezquital I spoke with two indigenous women about their arrival in the communities. Doña Juana of K'iche' origin told me that many indigenous people had changed their clothing and customs to hide from the army. They arrived having fled military persecution in their villages. When they got to the capital, they preferred to dress and behave as ladinos to blend in with the local population. Doña Maria, a K'aqchiquel woman, told me that she did not pass her culture on to her children due to the racism in the capital. She said that people made fun of her because she didn't speak Spanish well and she didn't want her children to suffer the same treatment. She also noted that that indigenous dress was very expensive and she was very poor. Doña Maria said, "My kids now complain to me I didn't dress them in indigenous clothing and didn't teach them my native tongue. But I tell them I didn't want them to suffer as I did, because people here were mean to us." She learned to read and write in Spanish with the help of Las Reproinsas.

Once I organized a meeting with a group of women from El Mezquital to talk about the situation of young people in the communities. Doña Juana attended the meeting, but was silent most of the time. However, everything changed when I asked, “Why do you think young people know so little about what happened during the war?” Doña Juana immediately replied, “Because no one has told them what happened. We, the adults, haven’t told our children what the army did to us. We were pressured by the guerrillas and pressured by the army. If you talked with the army, the guerrillas would kill you. If you talked with the guerrillas, the army would kill you. They killed us like *chuchos* (dogs).” All the women lowered their heads and stared at the floor. There was a deep silence in the room, and no one said anything. Then I asked Doña Juana directly, “Doña Juana, why do you think that adults haven’t told their children what happened?” She said, “Out of fear. We are afraid to talk and tell what happened because we are afraid. But now, thank God, indigenous people are speaking up, now they are calling for justice. Look at what is happening to Ríos Montt (standing trial). Indigenous people don’t stay silent anymore.”

This silence of mothers about the war illustrates the persistent fear to talk about country’s recent history. Most adults know that the army committed horrendous crimes against the indigenous peoples and many community leaders in the seventies and eighties, but they are afraid to talk about it in public. People who grew up during the armed conflict still fear the army, and there is a strong social stigma against victims of armed conflict, who are seen as communists or guerrillas.²⁴

As time went on, I found that many men living in El Mezquital had served in the military during the armed conflict: there were former civil patrollers, police officers, even military intelligence officers. For example, Noel de Jesús Beteta lived in El

²⁴ About fear and the social effects of the internal armed conflict, see the ethnographic work by Green L. (1999) *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mezquital; he was a former army sergeant who killed anthropologist Myrna Mack in 1990.²⁵ Many victims who left their communities due to the war also lived in El Mezquital, as did guerrilla sympathizers. People from different places and with different histories ended up together in El Mezquital out of poverty and a need for housing. People avoided speaking publicly about their past and about the war, since they felt fear and mistrust of others.

In El Mezquital most people identify themselves as ladinos or mestizos even though many of them have indigenous physical characteristics and indigenous family names, and have indigenous relatives in the countryside. The people said that there were no ethnic nor racial differences in the communities; on many occasions they told me: “we're all equal here,” “indigenous and ladinos are equal,” “there is no discrimination here.” However, I often heard racist jokes and derogatory remarks against indigenous people. I was surprised that many young people did not know the term “ladino,” preferring to use the term *mestizo* to self-identify.²⁶ In chapter three of this dissertation I examine in more detail the ethnic identity conflicts among young people.

1.5. PEOPLE STOPPED PARTICIPATING / DECLINE OF LOCAL ORGANIZING

In 1997, after PROUME finalized, many people stopped participating in La Cooperativa, the committees, and other local organizations. This situation has continued to the present; currently very few people participate in the local

²⁵ Anthropologist Myrna Mack was murdered by the army in Guatemala City in 1990 because of her research on people who had been internally displaced by the armed conflict. Her sister Helen Mack and her family have fought for many years to achieve justice for this crime. In 1992, Noel Beteta was sentenced to 25 years in prison for the murder.

²⁶ On ladinos' identity see the ethnographic work of Hale C. (2006) *Más que un indio: Racial ambivalence and neoliberal multiculturalism in Guatemala*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research.

organizations, and some don't even know about the organizations. But what happened during this that period? Why did people stop participating in local organizations? Why did people become discouraged?

In a detailed study on participation, organization and leadership in El Mezquital, Batres, Bolaños, and González (2006) identified three factors that weakened local organizations. First was the increase in violence and crime in the communities. Second was distrust of local leaders: people had a sense that there was corruption in La Cooperativa and the committees. Third was individualism: after people obtained their plot of land, home, and basic services, they lost interest in participating in community struggles, and concentrated on personal issues such as work and raising their families.²⁷

With regard to **violence and crime**, Batres et al, collected interviews with residents that illustrate their concerns:

"Attendance at the Women's Association was lowered due to violence. Sometimes when people came here, they get everything stolen from them: their belts, their shoes, even the money for their photocopies."

"Because of crime, people no longer want to participate... There is no security, people are always afraid... People prefer to stay at home and live behind four walls. There is no freedom."

"What hinders people's participation is the fear that they can be harmed, and they think: 'I'd rather stay at home.'"²⁸

²⁷ This is one of the most comprehensive studies on El Mezquital. It includes transcripts of the interviews and focus group discussions with people who participated in the study. The study was led by FUNDESCO.

²⁸ Batres et al. (2006). Interviews, pages 8, 20, 22, and 59.

In my fieldwork I found that the increase in violence and crime in El Mezquital coincided with the arrival of the Mara Salvatrucha, White Fence, and the 18th Street gangs in the late 1990s. These gangs quickly spread in the communities and began to compete in a deadly war in which many youth and people from the neighborhoods died. The clashes between gangs produced a great deal of fear among the residents, who preferred not to leave their homes. In Chapter 2 I examine in detail the gangs' origins and the situation of violence in the communities.

Later on, gangs began stealing and extorting in their own communities; this affected the work of local organizations. For example, in 2007 the CEDIF closed due to extortion and harassment from gangs; doctors and volunteers from the San Carlos University stopped attending CEDIF for fear of crime. In 2010, the Women's Association closed down because gangs began extorting and harassing women; several women even left the communities because they killed one of the Association volunteers. Between 2009 and 2011, many people stopped accessing the medical clinic, daycare center, and other services offered by the Catholic Church for fear of the gangs, because the church is located in Monte de los Olivos, a sector dominated by the 18th Street Gang.

In terms of **the distrust of community leaders**, the study by Batres et al., points out that people do not trust the local leaders and accuse them of being corrupt and having political interests. One of the residents remarked in an interview:

“At the time when the land takeover happened, there was active participation by the majority of people in the community. But after a time, some organizations began to be sold to outside organizations or political parties, and corruption began to arise, and so did violence, as a result of this. These are the

main causes why people's participation is waning, causing some projects to not come to fruition. It also causes divisions among people."²⁹

In several informal conversations, many residents told me that some leaders of La Cooperative and the committees charged illegal fees and that funds were embezzled in the administration of PROUME. However, it would be unfair to generalize and say that all leaders are corrupt or serve the interests of political parties; I met many who are honest and committed leaders. As a result of these criticisms, many honest people do not want to participate in local organizations or take on leadership positions, since they do not want to be labeled as corrupt or linked to political parties.³⁰

People speak poorly about politicians. I repeatedly heard comments like: "Politicians just want *pisto* (money); they don't care about the people"; "politicians are only liars; they just take advantage of people"; "politicians offer everything and don't fulfill anything"; "we don't expect anything from the government; rather we have to figure out ourselves what to do to survive." These perceptions are widespread in Guatemala: 65% of Guatemalans do not trust political parties, and only 20% participate in a political party.³¹

Regarding **individualism**, the first occupants say that people stopped participating in local organizations after they acquired their plot of land and built

²⁹ Batres et al. (2006). Interview 18, page 61.

³⁰ Corruption is a widespread problem in Guatemala. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (2012), Guatemala is one of the ten most corrupt countries in Latin America. The report places Guatemala in position 113 of 176 worldwide. Corruption in State institutions is an entrenched practice; in Guatemalan newspapers and courts, charges of corruption abound against former ministers, heads of institutions, congressional representatives, and police officers.

³¹ On Guatemalans' perceptions of political parties, see the study by Azpuru D., J. Pira, Selligson M. (2012), *Cultura política de la democracia en Guatemala y las Américas: Hacia la igualdad de oportunidades*. Guatemala: ASIES, USAID, Vanderbilt University.

their homes. Their focus turned towards their own personal and family development. An interviewee pointed out:

“People have become individualistic. People have to worry about solving their problems in isolation, and you don’t see support among the people. There are a few people who participate and work for others. This may also be due to consumerism that has been generated in the community, because people care about having material things and have neglected their personal relationships. Now people have basic comforts, but are looking for more... because lifestyles have changed and now people try to have more material goods.”

Additionally, local leaders believe that another factor contributing to the weakening of local organizations was the withdrawal of international donors. In the late 1990s, UNICEF, Doctors without Borders, and the World Bank ended their projects, and most local organizations were dependent on this outside funding. According to Don Paco, a community leader, “local organizations became dependent on international donors” and were not able to develop self-sustaining programs to survive.

Of the first local organizations only Las Reproinsas, UPAVIM, La Cooperativa, and FUNDESCO have managed to survive. Las Reproinsas continue working as volunteers, but find it very difficult to incorporate new women into their organization because people now are not motivated to do volunteer work. Many of the early leaders in the shantytowns continue to work in the local organizations, even though they are tired due to their age, the unfair criticisms of some residents, and the extortion and harassment by gang members.

In El Mezquital’s history we can identify three models of local organizing. During the first stage, in the 1980s, people organized in residents’ committees and boards of directors to occupy the land, organize community life, and pressure the government

to provide basic services. During the second stage, in the 1990s, people created La Cooperativa and formed associations in order to obtain official legal status, request and manage international funds, and implement local development projects. Finally, during the third stage, in the early 2000s, these organizations began to follow the NGO model and work on small-scale, targeted projects that provide services to the community.

In 2002, the government created a new model of local organization, the Consejos de Desarrollo (Development Councils). According to the Development Councils Law (Decree 11-2002), residents of a community should form a community development council (COCODE) to manage municipally funded projects. This model allows the State to have more control over citizens' participation in development projects. However, the people of El Mezquital and other communities in Guatemala do not believe in COCODES; they say that politicians and mayors have used them as a form of patronage and for electoral purposes, that is, that they would only grant project funds to supporters of their political parties or in exchange for people's votes. In 2013 in El Mezquital there were only two COCODES, one in la colonia and another one in the INEBEMEZ School, the latter created by the parents to improve the school building. Most local leaders in the shantytowns resist forming COCODES.

Currently, the local NGOs and the few surviving organizations participate in the Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sociales y Populares (Coordinating Board of Social and Grassroots Organizations, CORPSOP), a coalition of over 30 organizations in the area of El Mezquital, El Búcaro, and Villa Lobos. The CORPSOP represents the interests of local organizations to the municipal government of Villa Nueva and the *Plataforma Humana* (Human Platform), a space for social organizations and NGOs in the

metropolitan area of Guatemala City. CORSOP promotes initiatives to improve public transportation, the economic situation, housing, and safety in communities.³²

Churches

Despite the weakening of local organizations, many people view churches as "safe spaces" to participate and socialize. In El Mezquital there are over 50 evangelical churches of different denominations, a Catholic Church and a Mormon Church.³³ Most churches operate in a chapel building or other space meant for religious services, but others operate in private homes and do not even have a name. The number of members varies in each church, but I observed the greatest participation in the Catholic Church, the Peniel Assembly, the Elim Church, Monte Basan, Rey de Reyes, Visión de Poder, Misión Cristiana El Calvario, Lluvias de Bendición, and Eben-Ezer.

The main building of the Catholic Church is located on El Monte de los Olivos, but because of population growth other small religious centers were opened in El Búcaro, La Esperanza, El Mezquital, El Nuevo Porvenir, and Villa Lobos I. Most members only participate in religious activities and very few participate in social outreach groups. The Catholic Church divides its programs into smaller ministry programs such as those for children, youth, women, social concerns, etc. Many of the

³² On April 23, 2012, when I was in the community, CORSOP held a protest around the CENMA (South Central and Central Wholesale Station) due to the lack of buses in El Mezquital, El Bucaro, Villa Lobos, and neighboring colonias. The municipality offered to increase the number of buses, but the shortage persists and people must wait up to 45 minutes for a bus. *Prensa Libre*, 24 de abril de 2012, "Caos en ruta al pacífico por protesta".

³³ According to the study *Las religiones en tiempos del Papa Francisco* (Latinobarómetro 2013), 47% of Guatemalans are Catholic, 40% Evangelical and the remaining 13% other religions. Pentecostal evangelical churches from the United States mushroomed in Guatemala in the 1980s to counter the revolutionary struggle, as many religious and catechists sympathized with Liberation Theology and guerrilla groups. During the armed conflict, the army accused many priests and catechists of being Communists and killed and persecuted them; during that period, many people converted to evangelism because they considered it to be safer.

women who founded El Mezquital are involved in the social concerns ministry, which is the most active one and the only one that holds activities to benefit the community. The members of the social concerns ministry build houses for poor women, single mothers, widows, and elderly people; they organize free medical campaigns; and throw celebrations for poor children.

Many people use the social services offered by the Catholic Church even if they are not Catholics. The parish runs a small medical clinic, a childcare center, a water purification tank, the Friar Luis Rama School, and the Outreach Center which offers educational and arts programs for children and youth. The services are low cost; some are even free. Many community leaders whom I met in El Mezquital told me that they participated in the Catholic Church in the eighties and nineties; there, they discovered their social conscience and commitment to community.

Evangelical churches, on the other hand, are primarily focused on religious services and social activities for their own members. Very few evangelical churches offer open services to the entire community. Evangelical churches generally hold their worship services at night and on weekends, and most of their members are adults and children. Few youth participate in evangelical churches, even though some of them organize special activities specifically for youth, such as camp-outs, sports competitions, and cultural events.

Many people in the communities think that evangelical churches are a kind of “business” that the ministers use for their own financial benefit. I once brought this up in conversation with an evangelical minister in El Mezquital, and he said: “What happens is that many churches are engaged in preaching material prosperity, but often, this prosperity only reaches the minister... But despite this, people continue to come to church because they need God and because they fear violence.”

Evangelical churches also suffer gang violence and crime. Although gang members generally respect pastors and churches, they do, on occasion, steal from, extort, and threaten churches. In these cases, pastors face the ethical dilemma of paying the extortion or reporting the matter to the police. An evangelical pastor in La Esperanza told me that to prevent extortions, the church provides bags of food to gang members' families, and invites the gangs to participate in soccer tournaments organized by the church. Thus, he says, "We have learned to live with them."

In summary, the vast majority of the residents of El Mezquital do not participate in any organized group, and many people do not even know local organizations. This is partly due to violence and crime in the communities, distrust of local leaders, and individualism; but also to migration and excessive population growth in the area.

In the last 30 years, El Mezquital has become overpopulated. Today there are more than 30 shantytowns and poor neighborhoods around El Mezquital, and more than 150,000 live in the whole area. The largest communities are El Búcaro, Villa Lobos I and II, Brisas de Villa Lobos I, La Independencia, La Union, La Isla, Unidos por la Paz, Patricia de Arzú, Ocho de Marzo, 31 de Enero, el Nuevo Porvenir, Lomas de Villa Lobos, Villa Lobos III, Tierra Santa I and II, El Anexo, and others. Many inhabitants of the new settlements are children and relatives of the first occupants, and people who have migrated from other poor areas of the capital and the countryside.

Figure 3: El Mezquital 2013



The history of El Mezquital an example of what is happening in Guatemala City and the metropolitan area, hills and ravines throughout the metropolitan area are covered with squatter communities. Land takeovers are an ongoing issue. In the metropolitan area there are an estimated 350 settlements where about one million people reside. This means that one out of every three people in the metropolitan area lives in a shantytown or poor *neighborhoods* such as El Mezquital.³⁴ In chapter 5 of this dissertation, I examine in more detail the demographic growth in the metropolitan area of Guatemala City.

³⁴ In 2007, the Municipality of Guatemala recorded 350 settlements in the metropolitan area, 255 of them in the capital. In 2009, the government's Council of Social Cohesion recorded 279 settlements in the capital alone. Morán (2011, page 48).

The history of El Mezquital and many shantytowns and poor neighborhoods began to change radically in the late nineties, when youth gang members of Mara Salvatrucha, the White Fence, the 18th Street Gang, and other Californian gangs started to arrive to Guatemala. Violence and crime began to build and worsen in urban communities and the capital. In the next chapter I examine in detail how the gangs emerged and evolved in El Mezquital, and how violence and fear began to mark the lives of youth and urban communities.

Chapter 2

Maras are in Charge Here!

The Emergence and Transformation of Gangs

“Is anyone here a gang member? Who is a gang member here?” Elvira asked young people participating in violence prevention workshops in El Mezquital. Surprised by the question, the youth looked at one another, but no one answered. After a moment of silence, Elvira said to them, “If there are any gang members here, I want them to know that they have my respect. I respect gang members, but those of the past, because they had a value system. They were like a family; they believed in something and they defended it. The gangs of the past respected and protected their community; they did not extort or kill people in their community.” Suddenly, in one of the workshops, a young man raised his hand and asked Elvira, “Ma’am, if the *gangs* used to be like you say, then why did they change? Why did the *maras* change?” This young man’s question intrigued me and guided a significant part of my research.

In this chapter I examine the history of gangs in El Mezquital: the emergence of the first *maras* in the late 1980s; the arrival and expansion of members of the Salvatrucha, the 18th Street Gang, and the White Fence Gang to communities in the late 1990s; rivalry and confrontations between gangs; and the process of change in the gangs that led to the extortion, control, and killings of people in their own communities. Throughout the chapter I explore the circumstances that caused these changes.

Next I examine the perverse relationship between the police and the gang members. While the government cites citizen security measures, *mano dura* (heavy-

handed, tough-on-crime) policies, and respect for the state of law, many corrupt police officers collaborate with gangs in extortion schemes, drug trafficking, and weapons sales. Furthermore, some police officers participate in social cleansing campaigns that kidnap and cruelly kill gang members and alleged criminals. In this chapter I explore the State's two-fold role as gangs' accomplice and executioner.

Finally, I analyze the tense relationship between gangs and communities as well as the involvement of children and women in gangs. Since 2009, gangs have created a perverse system of control and extortion in their own communities; gang members' relatives and friends participate. This has caused division, fear, and distrust in communities.

In this chapter I highlight the voice of three gang members who helped me understand gangs: El Seco, member of Mara Salvatrucha; El Taz, member of White Fence; and El Chino, member of the 18th Street Gang gang. I met the three of them separately because they belong to rival gangs. I also present the stories of several *chequeos* (aspirants), *paros* (collaborators), and gang members' relatives, as well as the opinion of youth who live alongside and relate on a daily basis to gang members in their communities. This analysis is based on many conversations that I had with gang members in Guatemala, and the main studies on gangs in Central America.

2.1. THE MARAS APPEAR

The first *maras* in El Mezquital emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were formed by youth who got together on street corners to socialize and pass the time; they listened and danced to the breakdance music popular at that time; they competed and fought against similar groups; and they identified with "*el territorio*"

(the territory) in which they lived and met, which could be a street block, a section of the neighborhood, or an entire shantytown.

The first groups formed in *la colonia* and were identified by the name of the street where they met, for example, *la mara de Los de la Cuarta* (The Fourth Street Gang), *Los de la Sexta* (The Sixth Street Gang), or *Los de la Décima* (The Tenth Street Gang); or they had a distinguishing name or nickname, such as *Los Cobras de la Octava* (The Eighth Street Cobras), *Los Títeres de la Séptima* (The Seventh Street Puppets), and *Los Burgueses de la Novena* (The Ninth-Street Bourgeois).³⁵ *Maras* also started forming in the shantytowns: in El Éxodo the gangs *Los Charcos* (The Puddles), *Los Pantanos* (The Swamps), and *Los Fantasmas* (The Ghosts) emerged; in La Esperanza, *Los del Sector A* (The A Section Guys) and *Los del Sector B* (The B Section Guys) appeared first, and later on, *Los Pica Piedras* (The Flintstones) and *Los Machetes* (The Machetes). Some of the gang names reflected class distinctions between *la colonia* and the shantytowns, like *Los Burgueses de la Noventa* (The Bourgeois of the Nineties) and *Los Charcos* (The Puddles) in El Éxodo, the latter referring to the mud and the stagnant water that pooled in the shantytowns after rainfalls. Other names demonstrate the influence that North American action movies have had on youth, such as *La Mara de Los Cobras* (The Cobras Gang), named after the 1986 Sylvester Stallone action film.

The *maras* were formed by youth who grew up amidst poverty and marginalization in their communities; as children, many of them saw and helped their parents struggle for access to land, water, and local development. Many were of the first generation in their families to be born in the capital; their parents had migrated

³⁵The neighborhood known as La Colonia El Mezquital is divided into 11 streets and 8 avenues which are actually narrow pedestrian lanes (or alleyways) inaccessible to vehicles. The main street is Second Avenue which divides *la colonia* from the shantytowns. Second Avenue continues north to Colonia Villa Lobo I, to the bus terminal for the Transmetro (city bus line) and Pacific Highway routes; to the south it extends to the shantytowns of La Esperanza and El Búcaro.

to Guatemala City in the late 1970s and early 1980s because of rural poverty, the 1976 earthquake, or State terror during the armed conflict.

Santiago, a 32-year-old member of *la mara de Los Cobras* (The Cobras Gang), described his group's activities to me:

“In *Los Cobras* there were 20 or 25 of us guys, all men, because it was unusual for a girl to join. We'd get together to share and to learn how to fight. Back then our idol was Bruce Lee, and we liked chains, nunchucks, and bats. I had a set of nunchucks, the in thing at that time, you know what I mean. When there was a fight against an opposing *mará*, like *Los Pantanos* or *Los Charcos*, the fights were one-on-one fistfights. The *mará* trained us for hand-to-hand combat; weapons were not used back then.”

Santiago told me that he joined the *mará* out of curiosity and to pass the time because “there was nothing to do;” his parents worked outside the community, and he and his siblings stayed home alone. Santiago told me that many of the *Los Cobras* parents “worked by stealing” downtown and that their children also learned how to steal.

Thirty-year-old El Taz belonged to the *mará de Los de la Cuarta* (The Fourth-Street Gang). He told me that he preferred to be in the gang rather than at home because his parents argued and fought often: “My father dealt with everything by hitting, and I didn't want to see any more fights or *vergazos* (beatings) in my house... I didn't want to be punished at school; I'd rather be *chingando* (having fun) with the *mará* on the streets.” He related to me that at that time parents and teachers would beat children and youth “to discipline them.” At school, teachers physically punished students: they would force them to stand in direct sunlight for hours at a time, to kneel on corn grains, or to carry a wooden stool on their stomach; or they would hit them on the fingers with wooden rulers.

Confrontations between *maras* began at the *toques* (parties), school festivals, and sporting tournaments. Youth fought to earn prestige and to demonstrate who was better in fights, at dance contests, and in sports competitions; they used fights, moreover, to show off their masculinity to the girls. They usually fought with their fists, with clubs, rocks, or chains; infrequently, they used blades or machetes. Class conflicts between the *maras* of la colonia and the shantytowns were evident in these fights.

Many of these youth studied in public middle schools or high schools in the city; there they came into contact with larger *maras* of the time, such as *La Mara 33* and *La Mara Five*, and they began to imitate their style. Elvira told me that at the time several members of *La Mara 33* and *La Mara Five* would come to *toques* (parties) in the communities. Over time, members of the *maras* began to drink alcohol and smoke marijuana. Some dropped out of school or left work and began stealing outside the communities, generally downtown or in the vicinity of the San Carlos University, located five kilometers to the north of El Mezquital. El Taz says that the *maras* began stealing to survive: “First, we asked for bread, *aguas* (soft drinks), and food at the stores, and later we began to steal. We were poor *chavos* (young guys).”

In the 1990s, hundreds of youth continued joining the *maras* and formed new *maras* in the shantytowns and poor neighborhoods of the metropolitan area. *Maras* began to appear in the municipalities near the capital, such as Mixco, Villa Nueva, Amatitlán, and Palin; and in the departments of Chimaltenango, Escuintla, and Sacatepéquez. According to what residents of these areas have told me, *maras* there had characteristics and dynamics similar to what I found in El Mezquital. However, the dynamics of *maras* and marginal communities began to change drastically towards the late 1990s, when members of gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha, the 18th Street Gang, La White Fence, La North Hollywood, La Mexican Mafia, and other

California-based gangs began to arrive in Guatemala. These gang members arrived in Central America due to the massive deportations that the United States government launched in the late 1990s.³⁶

2.2. LA MS AND LA 18 ARRIVE IN THE COMMUNITIES

The first big change to the *maras* happened between 1996 and 2000. During that time, gang members from the Mara Salvatrucha, or La MS as people called it in Guatemala, the 18th Street Gang, or La 18, and the White Fence Gang arrived in El Mezquital. These gang members arrived at different times and in different ways: some were directly deported from the United States and had family members living in the communities; others were gang members from other marginal neighborhoods who moved to El Mezquital; and others were gang members who purposely came into the communities to *levantar el barrio* (organize the gang). Within a short time, these gangs expanded throughout El Mezquital and other marginal communities in the metropolitan area of Guatemala City.

The 18th Street Gang and the Mara Salvatrucha emerged in downtown Los Angeles, California, in the Pico Unión area, a poor neighborhood densely populated by Latin American immigrants. The 18th Street Gang formed in the 1970s and was primarily made up of Mexican and Chicano youth, although in the 1980s Central American immigrants who arrived in California to escape the regional armed conflicts

³⁶Regarding the deportations of Central Americans and gang members during that time, see the ethnographic study by Zilberg (2011), *Space of Detention: the Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. Duke: Duke University Press. Zilberg demonstrates that starting in 1996, the federal government and the Los Angeles Police Department implemented a series of policies and actions to deport thousands of resident and naturalized Central Americans who had criminal records, including cases of minor misdemeanors, thus irresponsibly transporting to Central America the problem of gangs and criminality, a phenomenon that had initiated in the United States and that they could not resolve. Between 1992 and 1996, the United States deported 7,276 Guatemalans; between 1998 and 2002, meanwhile, it deported 39,669, many of whom were gang members or individuals with a criminal record.

joined the gang as well. Salvadoran and other Central American youth started the Mara Salvatrucha in the 1980s in order to defend themselves from harassment by local gang members and in particular to defend themselves against 18th Street Gang; since then, the two groups maintain a rivalry to the death (Virgil 2002, Zilberg 2011). The White Fence Gang, meanwhile, began in the 1930s in the Boyle Heights area of East L.A. and was made up of Latinos who faced racism from other area gangs. Many Central American youth who moved to that area joined the White Fence (Moore and Virgil 1987).

Many children and youth of El Mezquital were attracted by the *cholo* style and the defiant attitude of the gang members: they wore loose clothing, short hair, tennis shoes, and tattoos; they used words in English, had their own signs and symbols, and listened to rap music. The new gang members spoke of the *pandilla* as a large family and a neighborhood without borders. Many members of the *maras* began to join these new *gangs* and to imitate the *cholo* style.

El Taz, who was part of the *mara de La Cuarta* (Fourth Street Gang), told me how the White Fence members came to the communities and how his group joined that gang:

“A Nicaraguan guy who came from the U.S. showed up here. He’s the one who showed us what *cholo* style was like. We started listening to rap music, and also Sandinista music because the guy was Nicaraguan.³⁷ We liked his style because we barely had shoes to wear, and he had nice *chivas* (things); he had nice sneakers, loose pants, and he had *buena casaca* (a way with words); he was really *tumbado* (well-dressed). The Nicaraguan guy left, but he left three guys in charge, who were brothers. They got tattoos and were the first *ranfleros* (leaders).”

³⁷ It struck me as curious that the first White Fence member in El Mezquital was Nicaraguan, because in the 1980s the majority of Nicaraguans migrated to Costa Rica or Florida in the United States, not to California as did the majority of Salvadorans and Guatemalans. I was also surprised that this particular gang member transmitted his political vision through Sandinista music.

There are two different versions regarding the arrival of La MS in El Mezquital. Some say that the members of *la mara de La Décima* were the first to join La MS, and that the first clique was formed by a Salvadoran gang member who moved to *la colonia*. Yet others affirm that the first La MS clique was founded by the brother of the *ranflero* of the Los Coronados Locos Salvatruchas (CLS) clique from the Colonia Ciudad del Sol in Villa Nueva, located on the other side of the ravine from El Mezquital.

In terms of the arrival of La 18, many attest that the first ones to *brincarse* (join) La 18 were *Los Charcos*; they say that a member of *Los Charcos* joined La 18 while he was in jail and left jail with the mission to *levantar el barrio* (organize the gang) in El Mezquital. La 18 quickly expanded to all the shantytowns: El Esfuerzo, Tres Banderas, Monte de Los Olivos, and Sector B of La Esperanza.³⁸

Within a short time frame, El Mezquital divided into two large territories: La WF and La MS located on the side of *la colonia* and Sector A of La Esperanza, and La 18 located in the shantytowns, from El Éxodo to Sector B of La Esperanza. The gangs were separated by the main street, the same street that divides *la colonia* from the shantytowns. La WF and La MS created an alliance to counter La 18, which was larger in membership and territory.

The new gangs absorbed the local *maras*; the *maras* became cliques of *La MS*, *La WF*, and *La 18*.³⁹ However, the process of change and integration into the new *gangs* was not smooth or automatic. Some *maras* voluntarily joined or formed alliances with the new *gangs*; others were pressured and forced into joining; yet others

³⁸ Regarding the beginnings of *gangs* in El Mezquital, see the journalistic piece by Plaza Pública from May 20, 2013: *Sísifo en El Mezquital: La ilusoria conquista del Gobierno ante las pandillas*.

³⁹ This process was similar in the poor neighborhoods of San Salvador, as demonstrated in studies by Smutt and Miranda (1998), Cruz (2005), and Savenije (2009).

resisted integration and disappeared. Santiago, for instance, states that many members of *Los Cobras* did not join the La MS or La 18: “Many guys didn’t like the *cholos’ rollo* (style) and preferred to get on with their lives; some stayed in school or looked for a job, and others got married.” At that time, participating in a *mara* was not a life-long commitment; youth could leave *maras* without repercussions.

Youth began to imitate the style of the new gangs. They stopped wearing close-fitting clothing like the *breakeros* and started wearing loose clothing like the *cholos*. Gang members started getting tattoos; painting walls with the symbols of La MS, La WF, and La 18; using nicknames in English; listening to rap music by performers like Big Boy, Vico C, and Silver Hill; and recruiting other youth to join their *pandilla*. El Taz says that the 1993 North American movie *Blood in, Blood Out* impressed gang members of that time period and they started to copy the clothing styles, speech, and behavior of the film characters.

Tomas, a youth activist from El Mezquital, witnessed the changes in the *gangs* during that period, and he shared his impressions of that process with me:

“When La MS and La 18 arrived, community identity was lost. Youth replaced their community identity with gang identity. Guys stopped saying ‘I’m from Sector A or Sector B,’ they no longer said ‘I’m from Éxodo or *la colonia*.’ Instead, they started to say ‘I’m La 18’ or ‘I’m MS’... Something that surprised me a lot was when some of my buddies, that I’d played with and grown up with, *me pelaron un cuete* (trained a weapon on me) and robbed me. I said to them, ‘calm down *muchá* (guys), hey, we’re friends,’ and they said, ‘it’s not about friends here; here La 18 is in charge, so *rola el billete y los tenis* (hand over the money and sneakers).’ The guys in the *maras* no longer respected anything or anybody” (Tomas)

Gradually, the *pandilla* members became alienated from the communities. Many stopped living with their families and began living with one another in rental housings or spaces that they took over by force. This living situation reinforced group

identity but distanced them from the communities. People started being afraid of the gang members; they stopped talking to them and stopped going to the places where gang members met. Some gang members began sexually assaulting girls in the communities and harassing children and youth.

In the following years, many children and youth joined the *gangs*. Gangs basically offered them three things: respect, protection, and resources. The protection was not only physical but also emotional; it made them feel part of the group. Certain phrases were often repeated during the recruitment process, such as: “If you’re with us, no one will touch you”; “With us, you won’t lack anything; you’ll have *trama* (food), *chante* (housing), *chivas* (things), and *varas* (money).” La MS used the concept of family as a metaphor to represent group unity and solidarity: “the *mara* is a family.” La 18 used the concept of *barrio* (neighborhood) to reference their class origins and gang unity everywhere: “we are from the *barrio*,” “everything for the *barrio*,” “I live for my mom and die for my *barrio*.”

Territory and gang rivalry

Gang members in El Mezquital are not entirely sure how the rivalry between La MS and La 18 developed in Los Angeles, but they clearly express deep hatred towards the opposing gang and a great desire to control their territory. They articulate their hatred towards their rivals through slogans recited by all gang members. For example, a common chant by La MS is: “La MS *para* (confronts), kills, and controls the fucking *chavalas* (term used to insult La 18 members)”; while La 18 members say: “La 18 kills, *rifa* (fights), and controls the *mierdas secas*” (literally, dried-up shits, using the initials MS).

Gang members started fighting to the death; youth who had grown up in the communities together started killing one another. In the late 1990s and early 2000s,

confrontations featured knives, machetes, and homemade, makeshift weapons that they fashioned themselves. Gangs entered into a wartime mentality and logic: they established rules, communication codes, information and surveillance systems; they allied with other gangs; they acquired weapons and mounted operatives to attack their enemies. It was a power struggle to expel enemies and take over their territories, but it was also a fight for honor and revenge. When a gang killed a member of an opposing gang, members avenged the death of their friend by killing a member of the rival gang or their family. This unleashed a chain of tragic deaths throughout the communities.

To gang members, territory represented a space of belonging and power. Territory was the place where they were born, where they operated and sought refuge; their mission was to “protect” this space. Gang members protected the territory from enemy incursions and attacks and from police operatives; to this end, they monitored the entranceways into the communities, the streets, and public spaces. Territory functioned as hideout, operations center, and combat zone.

Figure 4: Gangs Graffiti



Gangs hold an idealized notion of neighborhood and territory; they attest that everyone is part of one large neighborhood and a territory without borders, “territory” referring to any place occupied by members of the same gang.⁴⁰ However, in practice not all cliques recognize or automatically accept gang members from other communities or countries, as demonstrated by Zilberg (2011). She discovered in her ethnographic work that La MS members in Los Angeles did not immediately accept gang members from El Salvador who migrated to the United States; rather, they required them to start their gang membership from scratch and adapt to local norms.

Gang members feel relatively secure within their own territories but are afraid to move in enemy or neutral territory. In El Mezquital, gang members are practically entrenched in their territory; they live on alert and barely leave the communities for

⁴⁰On the concept of territoriality among gangs, see Gutiérrez L. (2012). Geografía de violencia y exclusión: Pandillas encarceladas en Honduras. *Latin American Research Review*, Volume 47, Number 2, 2012, pp. 167-179.

fear of enemy attacks and police harassment. Gang members act out of paranoia, constantly on the alert and on the defensive.

I once asked El Taz to join me in going to the *Centro de Alcance* (Outreach Center) to pick up some materials for an art workshop. Right away he said, “Ugh, I can’t go there. If I go in there I’ll be killed. It’s not my territory.” The Outreach Center is located in territory dominated by La 18. El Taz told me that a few years previously, La 18 gang members fired at his younger brother on his way out of the Catholic Church in that part of town. His brother did not belong to a gang, but the fact that he was the brother of a gang member was reason enough to attack him.

The territorial divisions between gangs have also divided communities. People from *la colonia* would not walk through the shantytowns because they are La 18’s territory. I often invited youth from *la colonia* to Outreach Center activities, but they said they could not attend because it was located within La 18 territory and for that reason was dangerous. Mothers worry when their children take part in activities outside of their section of town and prefer to accompany them personally, especially their daughters.⁴¹ Yet not all areas are dominated by gangs. People generally walk in relative peace through the main streets, the market, the health care center, and the CENMA bus terminal.

Inter-gang conflicts started becoming more violent as of 2000, when La MS and La WF allied to oppose La 18.⁴² Gang members would enter opposing gangs’ territory

⁴¹ In Chapter II I relate a conversation I had with Friar German, one of the priests from the El Mezquital parish, in which he said that many people, particularly youth, stopped attending church services because the building was located in an area dominated by gangs, so people preferred to participate in religious activities in their own section or to go to churches outside of the communities.

⁴² La MS is capable of forming alliances with other gangs in different circumstances and at different times. In jails in California and other parts of the United States, it allied with La Mexican Mafia to protect against attacks by stronger gangs. It is even rumored that MS took on the number 13, corresponding to the letter M

to kill their enemies. Gangs turned the streets into battlefields, and many people died or were wounded in the shoot-outs. People stopped going out onto the streets for fear of armed confrontations. Gang members from La 18 often entered *la colonia* to attack members of La MS and La WF; el Taz told me that La WF initially had over 150 members but that attacks reduced its numbers to such an extent that barely 20 survived.

The problem worsened when gang members acquired automatic weapons and high-caliber rifles. Several gang members and community members told me that the police sold the first weapons to the gangs. Police sold the *ranfleros* illegal weapons that they had confiscated in police operations and that they had not officially reported or turned in. Gangs also started to steal rifles and other firearms from private security personnel; they would usually raid vehicles that delivered goods in the communities, and they would steal the security guard's weapon. Additionally, they began to trade weapons with gang members from other cliques and marginal neighborhoods.

El Seco, member of La MS, related to me in an informal conversation about the fights between gangs at that time and how they acquired weapons. Following is an excerpt from that conversation.

D.M. Why did you join the mara?

El Seco: I joined because I thought that people would respect me, that they wouldn't humiliate me anymore. I thought that I wouldn't be the same shithead kid that I used to be. I saw my cousins who were in the mara, and I wanted to be like them. They (the gang members) told me to join, and I liked it.

D.M. What did you have to do to join? Did you take a beating?

in the alphabet, as part of its alliance with La Mexican Mafia. In other neighborhoods of Guatemala, it formed alliances with los breakeros (BKS), La Mara 33, and local gangs to counter La 18.

El Seco: Simón (yes), me verguearon (I was beaten) for 13 seconds, but they didn't do it too hard because they knew me already and lots of my cousins were already in the mara.

D.M. Were there women in the mara? What did they have to do to join?

El Seco: Simón (yes), there were a bunch of girls, ten or so. They were also beaten for 13 seconds, just like the guys, but they were hit by other girls.

D.M. What activities did you do in the mara?

El Seco: Well, since I was a boy, you know, the others had me volar lente (keep watch), because back then it was important to defend the territory. We'd take turns looking after the neighborhood, so that no chavala (member of La 18 gang) could come onto our territory. We'd also go over to the chavalas' territory to kill them, get them out of there, and expand the mara's territory.

D.M. How would you expand your territory?

El Seco: The mara would enter the chavalas' territory and kill them. When the remaining members saw that there weren't many of them left, they would leave, and our mara would take over their territory. When we'd win territory, some of our members would go live there to have a presence there and start pulling in other guys to the mara. That's how the mara grew.

D.M. What activities did the women do?

El Seco: The girls almost never got involved in the vergueos (confrontations). They'd do the paro, just keeping watch or passing on information.

D.M. Why did women join the mara?

El Seco: Well, lots of girls like danger, you know, just like men. And other girls would fall in love with gang members, they like bad boys, and guys in the gang would be their boyfriends.

D.M. Did you have weapons? How did you get hold of them?

El Seco: At first I didn't know how the guys got weapons. One time a tira (Policeman) came up to me and asked for my ranflero (leader). I told him I didn't know what he was talking about. The tira came back at nighttime and I found him cotorreando (talking) to the ranflero. I came over because it was my obligation to defend the ranflero, but he told me to calm down, that there was no pedo (problem), that the tira was a cuate (friend). Later he gave me 100 varas (100 quetzales) and told me

that he knew that I hadn't said anything. Then they stayed out talking, but I saw that the tira gave him a couple of cuetes (pistols).

D.M. Did the police always get you your weapons?

El Seco: I don't know, you know, that whole deal was handled by the sholones (Bosses), but I know that the police has always been bought out. Here in Guatemala, every policeman has his price and toda la mara (everyone) knows it.

Throughout my many conversations with El Seco, he repeatedly used the word humiliation: "I joined (the gang) because I thought people would respect me, that they wouldn't humiliate me anymore"; "I don't let anyone humiliate me"; "if people think they can humiliate the gang, they're wrong." His face revealed pain and rage when he mentioned humiliation. His parents separated when he was nine years old. His mother took sole care of him and his three siblings, and they endured many economic and emotional problems: "my mom was always depressed," he told me. "She didn't know what to do. We had nothing to eat. And when my dad left us, we all missed a year in school." When he was a child, peers made fun of him because he always wore the same clothes and he was very weak physically. He felt shame and anger for his inability to defend himself.

He joined the *mara* to earn respect and put an end to the humiliation. Respect is a fundamental consideration for all gang members, as it is for anyone; it is a basic gesture of social acceptance and recognition. Gang members heavily insist upon respect and are deeply upset when someone fails to respect them. Other excluded (and humiliated) social groups display a similar demand for respect and social acceptance, as Guilligan (2003) demonstrates in her psychiatric work with prisoners in United States jails, as does Bourgois in his ethnography *In Search of Respect* (1995) about distributors and consumers of drugs in Harlem, New York.

In the early years, initiation rituals to gain entry into the gang were similar between La MS and La 18. Aspirants had to receive a beating from the gang members for 13 or 18 seconds depending on the gang. The same rite applied to men and women; women who joined the gang were beaten by other women, never by men. The IUDOP study (2011) about female gang members in El Salvador suggests that women were also offered gang membership by having sexual intercourse with all the gang members. However, I uncovered no evidence of this in my ethnographic work. El Seco told me that it would be impossible, since after such an act, “no one (in the gang) would respect the girl.” He said that a woman could join the gang if she was a gang member’s *jaina* (girlfriend). In some cases, depending on the particular clique, the initiation ritual also involved getting tattooed with gang symbols and taking on a nickname to distinguish the person within the group.

In my fieldwork, I found that during that period youth continued joining La MS, La 18, La WF, and other gangs for the same reasons that youth had in the 1980s and 1990s: to escape from authoritarianism, domestic violence, poverty, and social exclusion, while seeking out peer groups that offered them a sense of identity and belonging. However, the gangs had drastically changed: they were more organized and more violent, and they offered three clear things to youth: protection, resources, and respect. In exchange, youth had to show loyalty and obedience to the gang.

2.3. EXTORTION BEGINS

The second big change to the *gangs* occurred between 2002 and 2004, when the gangs started extorting people. At first they requested drinks and food from store owners; later, they asked bus drivers for money; eventually they began demanding a fixed amount from shop owners, bus drivers, and local merchants. Gangs turned to extortion because their membership had grown; many of their members no longer depended economically on their parents and lived in gang housing; they needed

money for weapons to fight their enemies, to help incarcerated members, and, in some cases, to consume alcohol and drugs.

El Seco says that La MS members began robberies and extortion outside the communities, but due to police persecution and attacks by La 18, they often could not leave the communities and began to extort from buses and local businesses. However, not all gang members were in agreement; he affirms that there was a high level of tension in his clique over this issue:

“When I started off in the *mara*, there was no extortion; but I played the fool when the *ranflero* started telling us ‘go get the *renta* (extortion), and if the son of a bitch doesn’t pay up, kill him.’ We didn’t want to do it because the *mara* wasn’t for killing. We were in it to protect the neighborhood, not to *pisarlo* (damage it), but the *ranfleros* went crazy when they saw that there was money everywhere; they got ambitious. The worst of it was that if you ignored (the *ranflero*), *te daban pa abajo* (they killed you).”

Apparently, each clique locally made the decision about extortion in the communities; it was not a La MS policy across the board. For instance, in several parts of zones 6 and 18, I found that La MS did not extort in its own communities but rather did it elsewhere; in these communities, there was less tension, and residents even protected gang members from the police and the army.

In terms of La 18, El Chino told me that those who started extorting in the communities were the gang members who sought refuge in El Mezquital: “Here a *maje* (guy) came to hide. We took him in and he screwed it all up for us. He was the one who started asking for money in the shops and houses on behalf of the gang. He had nothing to lose because he wasn’t from here, but he ended up getting the community to be against us.” It is common practice for gang members to mobilize between communities, seeking refuge temporarily in other communities to hide from the police or from their enemies, but they need prior authorization from local *ranfleros*.

A couple of times I ran across gang members who were not from the community, and they viewed me with great distrust.

El Taz says that many of La WF members started to steal and extort in the communities because they began smoking crack. La 18 and La MS, on the other hand, forbade their members to do crack because of the drug's destructive effects; they only allowed them to use alcohol, marijuana, and eventually cocaine. Gangs consider a young person who smokes crack to be more vulnerable in general to being attacked by adversaries or arrested by the police and informing on the group; thus, members who do crack are generally punished.

Gangs began depending economically on extortion. Whereas in countries like Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica, and the United States, gangs engage in drug trafficking and sales, in Guatemala gangs' main business is the extortion of small businesses, buses, product haulers, and local residents. People feel that the worst part is that the gang members extort their own neighbors; people feel afraid and angry. Ms. Laura once said to me, "I don't understand why the *muchachos* (guys) are doing this to us. After all, we saw them grow up; we are poor just like them. I don't understand why they extort poor people."

Once I asked El Taz why gangs extorted their own communities, and he replied, "My face falls in shame to see what gangs do these days." He said that gangs have gone to such an extreme out of their desperation to survive and due to the *ranfleros'* ambitions. Gangs discovered that extortion provided a way to make money that was easy and less dangerous than theft. Extorted money was used to cover gang costs, support family economies, purchase weapons, help imprisoned gang members, and bribe police officers.

Meanwhile, it is nearly impossible for gang members to get jobs. People reject them immediately when they notice their tattoos, clothing styles, speech, and behavior. El Seco, for instance, has suffered trying to find a job; even though he has changed the way he dresses, removed his piercings, hides his tattoos, and acts like “a normal guy,” he is denied work everywhere he looks. Gang members do not aspire to formal work because most of them have police and criminal records.

Though many people in Guatemala think that gangs make significant amounts of money through extortion, the gang members that I met in the communities live modestly. This was confirmed to me by the head of the Anti-Extortion Prosecuting Unit at the *Ministerio Público* (Public Prosecutor’s Office); he told me in an interview that in their searches of gang members’ houses, they have been surprised by the poverty of their living conditions. Generally, he noted, they had to investigate and arrest gang members’ wives, poor women with many children.

The meaning of territory changed when gangs started extorting their communities. Territory stopped being just a space of belonging and refuge, and became a business route. Gangs began to blackmail people, offering protection for their businesses and families in exchange for a weekly or monthly fee. People accepted the blackmail because the gangs were armed and willing to kill. The gangs’ rule was to kill anyone who did not pay the extortion fee.

The situation worsened when the gangs acquired more sophisticated weapons; with the extortion funds they began to buy weapons from arms traffickers. Gangs needed weapons to fight their enemies and to commit crime. According to official data, in Guatemala in 2004 there were 22,419 legally registered weapons; in 2009, that number rose to 393,996; and in 2013 there were 465,146 registered weapons.

However, it is estimated that there are over a million illegal weapons in the country.⁴³ It is easy to acquire a firearm illegally in Guatemala; on average, a pistol costs between Q1,000 and Q2,000.

Orders Come from the Inside / Gang Members in Jail

In Guatemala practically all gang members have been incarcerated at least once in their lives. For gang members, being in jail, or *estar jalado* as they call it, evokes pride, not shame. In prison are the *ranfleros* (leaders), *los veteranos* (old-time gang members), and *los engasados* (brave gang members). In prison are “those who have given their all for the neighborhood,” as they say. This does not mean that gang members like being imprisoned; on the contrary, they endure deplorable conditions in jail: overcrowding, limited access to water and toilets, poor food, no health care services or medicines; they are mistreated and humiliated by prison guards and other prisoners; and their visits by family and friends are restricted.⁴⁴

In 2002, gangs pledged a pact of non-aggression in jails. La MS and La 18 agreed to respect one another while in jail even when gang war continued in the streets. It was a similar pact to the one that exists in California jails, in which gangs in the southern part of the state join together to defend against the northern gangs. However, in 2005, La MS broke the pact: on August 15, La MS organized simultaneous attacks in several different jails to kill La 18 members in an event known as “el

⁴³ According to a study by the CICIG (2009), 91.75% of weapons are in civilian hands, and 8.25% in State hands; 56% of weapons are in the Department of Guatemala; 98% are owned by men; and 80% of homicides in the country are committed with firearms. On firearms circulation in Guatemala, see the study by IEPADES (2013) *Control de armas de fuego en Guatemala*. Guatemala: IEPADES.

⁴⁴ Regarding inmates' conditions in jails, see the report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, 2011), *Informe sobre los derechos humanos de las personas privadas de libertad en las Américas*; and the report by ICCPG (2006), *Las condiciones en las cárceles de Guatemala*. Accessible at <http://www.iccpg.org.gt/descargas/>

rompimiento del sur” (the southern break). Thirty-six gang members died in the raids; some had their throats slit; and many were wounded. Gang fights ensued in the following months in adult prisons and minors’ detention centers. Out on the streets, La 18 struck in vengeance, hunting down and killing La MS members in the capital and neighboring municipalities.⁴⁵

After the southern break, the government placed La MS and La 18 members in separate jails to avoid further conflicts. La 18 members were imprisoned in Sector 11 of the Zone 18 Detention Center and in the maximum security prison of Fraijanes I; and La MS members were imprisoned in the El Boquerón Prison in Santa Rosa; though small groups from both gangs are present in other jails. Gang members were isolated from the rest of the inmates, who are known as *paisas*, because *paisas* reject the gang members, and several bloody fights have happened between gang members and *paisas*.⁴⁶

When I visited the Pavon Prison, a jail located in south-east Guatemala City with over 1,500 inmates, I observed gang members’ terrible conditions. More than 25 men were held in a cell that measured approximately six meters square; they ate, slept, and eliminated their bodily wastes in the same space. They had no chance to walk or to participate in prison activities. Their faces revealed a look of desperation, and they would shout out to visitors, begging for a coin to buy a bit of water or a cigarette. I cannot forget these harrowing images of desperate human beings pleading for pity and help.

⁴⁵ On the southern break, see the report by the El Faro digital newspaper, November 12, 2012: *El día de la traición*. The report is based on a series of interviews with gang members who participated in the August 2005 massacre in the jails. Available at <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201211/cronicas/10145/>. See also the description provided by Levenson (2013) in *Adiós Nino: The Gangs of Guatemala City and The Politics of Death*, pages 115 – 117.

⁴⁶ See report by El Faro, November 12, 2012: *El día de la traición*. Prensa Libre, December 26, 2002. *Catorce reos muertos en motín de Pavoncito*. Prensa Libre, February 12, 2003, *Motín en Preventivo de la Zona 18, matan a uno de los asesinos del Obispo Juan Gerardi*.

Nonetheless, gang members do not abandon their *camaradas* (comrades) in jail; rather, they respect, obey, and help them. *Ranfleros* maintain their leadership role in jail and assign substitutes out on the streets; they communicate back and forth by cell phones, which they obtain by bribing prison guards, and through the women who visit them in jail, who pass along information and instructions to gang members in the street. While certain other social groups, like the military, police, religious leaders, or drug traffickers, disregard their fellow members who are in jail, gang members stay loyal and show solidarity to one another.

Gang members who are “insiders” (inmates) are informed and in control over what happens on the streets; they generally use bribery and threats to control happenings outside jail walls. For instance, when a member does not follow instructions, they threaten to kill him or they warn him that when he gets to jail they will beat or kill him there. According to El Seco, “insiders” threaten “outsiders” with phrases like: “We’re waiting for you here, asshole,” “Once you’re in here, you won’t get away with it,” “I’m going to have you killed, you son of a bitch.” Gang members within the jails obey orders because they know that they are susceptible to leaving jail at any time and that the *ranfleros* are capable of killing them.

In jail gang members strengthen their group identity, share information, and plan crimes. Numerous judicial investigations have ascertained that imprisoned gang members order murders, extortion, and robberies. In 2013 the government attested that 60% of extortion cases were led by gang members in prisons.⁴⁷

Moreover, due to the isolation and mistreatment that they endure, many gang members accrue increased rage and a desire for vengeance while in jail. A common

⁴⁷ Prensa Libre, December 19, 2013, *Pandilleros extorsionan desde la cárcel*.

sentiment among gang members is “jail doesn’t eat you up, but it makes you crazy”; this is borne out every time a *ranflero* leaves jail. El Seco says that when *ranfleros* and other gang members leave jail, “*salen más engasados*” (they come out more violent and enraged), and that everyone is afraid of them.

2.4. PANDILLERO VISTO, PANDILLERO MUERTO / SOCIAL CLEANSING

Between 2005 and 2008 people lived moments of terror in El Mezquital, people were tired of the extortion and gang fights, and they believed that the government could not solve the problem, so some residents decided to collaborate with the police in *grupos de limpieza social* (social cleansing groups) to kill off gang members and alleged criminals.

Social cleansing was not new in El Mezquital, in the previous years the police had implemented the *Plan Escoba* (Sweep-up Plan), a secret policy for eliminating gang members and criminals in the metropolitan area. Between 2002 and 2004, groups of police officers killed gang members who participated in rehabilitation programs financed by USAID. Police identified the youth involved in such programs, and later kidnapped and killed them mercilessly. Consequently, many gang members stopped participating in rehabilitation programs and began to distrust and distance themselves from local NGOs and international donor agencies.⁴⁸

But social cleansing began to be more intense between 2005 and 2008, when member of the community started to participate in the killing of youth. The situation was worst in *La Esperanza*, where the dismembered corpses of youth began to appear

⁴⁸Regarding social cleansing during this time period, see the report by the ICCPG (2004), *Transparentando el Plan Escoba: Análisis de la Estrategia Política con relación a las pandillas juveniles de Guatemala*; and the report by Samayoa et al (2006), *Ejecuciones de jóvenes estigmatizados en Guatemala*.

on the streets, in full view, with messages like “This is what’s going to happen to all *mareros* (gang members)” or “You know it: gangbanger spotted, gangbanger dead.” Elvira recalls those days as ones of terror; dismembered bodies had never before been seen on the shantytown streets.⁴⁹

One of the crimes that impacted the communities the most was the dismemberment of a gang member called *El Delfín*. His hands were found hanging from the bus station on El Mezquital’s main street with a sign that read “this was done to you because you’re a gangbanger”; his torso was found on a street of La Esperanza, and the rest of his body on the streets of El Búcaro. Similar crimes were committed against other young gang members. Corpses appeared in vacant lots of El Búcaro and on the banks of the Villa Lobos River, a kilometer away from El Mezquital.

Among those who engaged in social cleansing were community members who had served in the military during the armed conflict and police officers who operated clandestinely. These groups believed that the easiest solution to end extortion and violence in the communities was by killing gang members. A resident of *La Esperanza* told me that he was invited to participate in social cleansing, but he did not accept: “They asked me if I wanted to help out in killing *mareros* (gang members), but I said no, that I didn’t have the *huevos* (courage) to kill anyone.”

Many people say that those responsible for social cleansing were “*los de particular*”, undercover police officers and *los sicarios* (assassins for hire). *Los de particular*, as people call them, are police officers in criminal investigative units. El Seco told me that *los de particular* killed two of his cousins and two members of his

⁴⁹ See the report by Ginger Thomson: *Guatemala bleeds in vise of gangs and vengeance*. New York Times, January 1, 2006. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/international/01guatemala.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

clique in 2008, and that their bodies showed up, tortured and dead, in downtown Guatemala City.

According to El Seco, *los de particular* generally used vehicles without license plates. They would seek out youth in their homes and on the streets, kidnap them, torture them, and then kill them. They usually dumped their bodies on the streets, in full view, or in the vicinity of the Villa Lobos River in El Búcaro. Many say that El Búcaro at that time turned into a “dump for the dead.”

The *sicarios*, meanwhile, were paid assassins, hired by businesspeople and community members to kill gang members and criminals. There is evidence that many of these hitmen were soldiers and police officers who in postwar times engaged in “the business of killing.” Dewever-Plana’s (2012) extraordinary photo-journalist work presents the testimony of a hitman tasked with killing gang members:

“When I was thirteen years old, I met a distant relative, an army officer. When the armed conflict ended, he had to find a way to earn a living, and what he knew how to do best was killing. So he started his own business: a travel agency aimed at sending people, by request, to the land beyond. I was fascinated to be with him because he was always armed. At that age I bought my first pistol from some corrupt police officers who did that as a side business. If you have money, they (the police) couldn’t care less about selling a firearm to a *patojo* (child or adolescent). The military officer gradually passed along his ideology to me, and the day came when he offered me a job as a hitman. I started working for him and made a lot of money. We had lots of white-collar clients who would hire us to kill indigenous leaders, human rights people, labor organizers, journalists... In 2000, everything started to change. Gangs kept getting more violent. Governments and politicians saw in them the perfect scapegoat to hide the dirty businesses that many of them were involved in, like organized crime, drug trafficking, kidnapping, trafficking of women, child snatching, etc. For every gang member I killed, I was paid around ten thousand quetzales... Later on I decided to work on my own, with a very valuable specialization, the killing of gang members. Regular people would hire me, people who owned shops, warehouses, businesses, who were fed up with paying extortion” (pages 158-159).

As this testimony demonstrates, murder-by-hire turned into a business after the signing of the peace accords. Assassins for hire often travel by motorcycle, cover their faces with ski masks, and use high-caliber weapons to kill victims, then escape easily without being recognized. They are experts in killing, and rarely do police catch them; gang members therefore assert that the hitmen are police officers or their collaborators.

Gangs in El Mezquital responded to social cleansing by similarly killing residents who collaborated with the police. The situation worsened; gangs started to exact revenge and distrust the community. El Taz says that previously gangs had never dismembered anyone but that they learned this practice from the social cleansing groups.

One of the first victims of the gangs' revenge was Ana, the daughter of a resident involved in social cleansing. Ana's body turned up, dismembered, on the banks of the Villalobos River. This was later followed by murders of other residents who collaborated with the police. People were quickly terrified and stopped collaborating with the social cleansing groups and the police. Social cleansing declined during Alvaro Colón's administration (2008 – 2012) but did not disappear entirely. Groups of police officers continued to illegally kill gang members and alleged criminals "to reduce crime statistics in the country."

Social cleansing is a practice inherited from the armed conflict. During the war, death squads engaged in torturing, kidnapping, and killing "alleged" guerrillas and communists. Among the better known death squads were the *Mano Blanca* (White Hand), the *Nueva Organización Anticomunista* (New Anti-Communist Organization, NOA), and the *Consejo Anticomunista de Guatemala* (Guatemalan Anti-Communist

Council, CADEG), which were comprised of anti-communist military members, police officers, and civilians who operated clandestinely. Death squads generally kidnapped, tortured, and killed their victims, and dumped the dead bodies on the streets to induce terror in the population. They often published their threats through press releases, pamphlets, and lists placed on the streets.⁵⁰

During the post-conflict period the police continued replicating the practice of social cleansing against social groups considered "undesirable" such as street children, sex workers, homosexuals, gang members and criminals; and these crimes has been documented by human rights reports.⁵¹ In chapter five of this dissertation I examine in more detail the social cleansing in Guatemala City, and how the state constructs discourses to justify such crimes.

A particularly perverse aspect of social cleansing is the participation of community members in crimes against their own neighbors. In El Mezquital, it is known that the residents who participated in social cleansing were soldiers, police officers, or civil patrollers during the armed conflict who replicated the criminal patterns of wartime death squads. The aim of social cleansing was to drastically punish gang members and generate fear in the communities. But gangs learned to replicate the cruelty of social cleansing groups to take revenge on their enemies, and learned to use torture and dismemberment to create terror among the population.

⁵⁰ In a 1997 press interview, Mario Sandoval Alarcón, anti-communist leader and head of the political party *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Movement, MLN), said that death squads formed "to fight the guerrillas on the same terms, during a dirty war that was governed by military codes." Sandoval affirmed that these groups "were military disguised as civilians, though there were also organizations that operated parallel to the army, supported by the MLN." *El Periódico*, April 20, 1997. For additional details on death squads, see the reports *Guatemala Memoria del Silencio* (CEH 1999), and *Guatemala Nunca Más* (ODHAG 1998).

⁵¹ See the report by PDH (2006), *Las Características de las Muertes Violentas en el País*; and the Report by UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston on summary or arbitrary extra-judicial executions in Guatemala (2007).

⁵¹ Prensa Libre, March 23, 2012: "Exfuncionaria capturada por crímenes".

2.5. WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN GANGS

After the intense period of social cleansing, gangs further distanced themselves from the communities and began distrusting everyone. They were scared that people would inform on them to the police or that neighbors would organize once again to kill them. For that reason, gangs established a stricter system of information and surveillance in the communities that remains in force to date. As El Seco explained to me: “they (gang members) are afraid that people *se les voltee* (might betray them); that’s why they *andan sobres* (are on alert).”

Gangs changed some of their rules, strategies, and cultural elements so that the police and the people would not recognize them. They stopped using baggy clothing, abandoned the *cholo* look and started wearing close-fitting clothes like other youth in the communities; they stopped getting tattoos in visible areas like the face, arms, and neck; they stopped painting their symbols on the walls; and they began to travel by taxi and motorcycle rather than bus. In other words, they started acting like other community youth to avoid being identified by the police or the people, “to not *echar color* (be noticed),” as they say.

They also changed the requirements for joining the group; they started being more selective and discerning with their new candidates, whom they called *chequeos*. Aspirants need to pass a series of tests in order to be allowed into the gang. For example, they have to monitor the neighborhood, collect extortion monies, kill a member of a rival gang, kill someone who fails to pay the extortion fee, or kill a gang informer. A *chequeo*, usually a young man between 12 and 16 years old, who meets all the requirements is admitted into the group.

Gangs developed a network for information-gathering and monitoring that they call *paros* (collaborators); women and children, mostly their relatives and friends, are

involved. In general, *paros* keep watch on key public places such as the main streets, markets, entrances to schools and institutes, churches, businesses, and sports grounds. Their mission is to listen and observe ongoing in the communities as well as police and army movements and to inform local *ranflejos* or those in prison.

Women are *paros*

Gangs have always been dominated by men, and few women participate. Gang members say that “in the past” there used to be more *homegirls* in the cliques, but as gangs became more violent, fewer women have joined. However, there are many women around the gang: mothers, sisters, partners, girlfriends, and friends who collaborate with them.

The IUDOP (2010) study with female gang members in the jails of El Salvador reveals that many women joined gangs to escape poverty and family abandonment, sexual violence and beatings at home, and they sought respect and adventure. Usually a gang member invited them into the group, or they became a member’s *jaina* (girlfriend). Women in gangs performed traditional female roles like cooking, washing laundry, and caring for the sick; but in addition they were charged with passing information, transporting weapons and drugs, visiting prisoners, investigating, and monitoring. The study shows that girls and women who joined gangs ended up reliving the exclusion and violence that they had suffered at home, since gangs are male-dominated groups that replicate the same patterns of *machismo* (sexism) characteristic of Salvadoran society.

El Seco says that women have always collaborated with gangs by monitoring and transferring information, weapons, and drugs. Women recently began collecting extortion money, investigating possible candidates for extortion, and depositing funds from extortion into bank accounts. According to him, some women join gangs

because, just like men, they are drawn to adventure and danger: “they are daring girls.” Others, he says, are attracted to gang members: “they like bad boys.”

In conversations, many mothers in El Mezquital told me that they believe that young women are drawn to gangs because they seek affection and protection: when they are abused or molested by stepfathers or other adult relatives at home, they easily fall in love with and trust men who offer them protection and a chance to escape their current situation.

Gang members hold idealized images of their mothers. Even when they have a poor relationship with her; they speak often of her and many even have a tattoo on their body of their mother’s name or face. Paradoxically, many people blame mothers for children’s and youth’s gang participation; mothers are criticized for not taking care of or disciplining their children; and gang members’ mothers are blamed for protecting them and taking part in their activities: people say that they are “*alcahuetas* (pimp)” mothers. Gang members’ mothers often store weapons, pass information, and collaborate in extortion schemes because they feel pressured by their children to do so.

In romantic relationships, gang members often hit their girlfriends and female partners; sometimes they pressure them to collaborate in their activities, thus placing them at greater risk. The past four years have seen a striking increase in the number of arrests and trials of women for participating in extortion or for carrying drugs and money to gang members in jail. The IUDOP (2010) study demonstrates that female gang members suffer violence from their partners but do not press charges against them out of a fear that the gang will retaliate. Moreover, gang members who are imprisoned demand that their partners stay faithful to them, and they use gang members on the streets to monitor women for compliance.

In Guatemala, gangs are blamed for killing women cruelly and for committing *femicide*. Yet judicial investigations show that gangs are responsible for only a portion of women's violent deaths. Contrary to popular belief, gang members do not kill irrationally or arbitrarily; to them, killing is a justifiable sanction to punish members for serious offenses, to defend themselves or exact revenge on their enemies, or to punish someone for failing to comply with an agreement. For example, gang members generally kill a woman for betraying the group or breaking an internal rule; if they want to send a message to their members that they will not tolerate such a breach, then they kill her mercilessly. This is compounded by the deep-seated *machismo* (sexism) that pervades the gangs. On this topic, El Seco noted: "if the gang were killing women off like crazy, this would be a cemetery. The gang is not crazy; they know why they kill a girl, and the girls they kill are usually connected to the gang, they're not girls off the street."

Another example involves the killings of bus drivers for failing to pay extortion fees. Gangs feel that these homicides are justified when drivers do not comply with the rule of paying the extortion, and they seek to send a warning to other drivers to ensure that they pay up. This logic allows *ranfleros* a certain degree of control within the gang and frightens people; for the rest of society, these crimes are unacceptable and unjustifiable.

For gangs, killing has become a way to solve internal problems, to make money, and to wield power, and they have created rules and a discourse to justify their crimes. Gangs justify these crimes through expressions like "he betrayed us," "he ratted on us," "he was with the other gang," "it was him or me," "*planchó* (he messed up)." According to their logic and regulations, killing makes sense. The same phenomenon occurs with other violent social groups. For example, during the

internal armed conflict, the military created justifications to kill the civilian population, reciting phrases like “they are enemies of the fatherland,” “they’re guerrillas,” “they’re communists,” “they want to overthrow the government.”

Disturbingly, no one within the gangs questions these practices and discourse. Those close to the gangs are afraid of talking about this with them; parents, teachers, friends, and community leaders do not talk with gang members. Gangs are closed groups; within them, members reinforce the hatred and fear that translate into violence. Gang members often make precipitous decisions out of despair and group pressure.

Many believe that gangs kill women in “satanic rites” and that they offer women’s lives to the *Santa Muerte* (Saint of Death) or to *San Simon*. However, I never observed such extreme behavior. Certainly, many members of the 18th Street Gang venerate *Santa Muerte*, and members of the Mara Salvatrucha believe in *San Simon*. *San Simon* is the ladino version of *Maximon*, who is a saint-like figure that indigenous people of Guatemala venerate and ask for guidance. *San Simon* is very popular among merchants, sex workers, and criminals, and they offers him alcohol, money, and tobacco. Gang members pray to *San Simon* for economic, romantic, and personal favors; and also they turn to witches for protection against evil.

On October 28, 2012, I visited the *San Simon* temple in San Andrés Itzapa, Chimaltenango, to observe his saint’s day celebration. The site was packed with indigenous people and ladinos, and the party was impressive, with music groups, dancing, food, plenty of alcohol, and sales stalls. Numerous wizards offered cleansing rites to eliminate bad vibes and rituals to request favors and protection. Next to the *San Simon* temple, a luncheon was provided to the authorities of the San Andrés municipality and Chimaltenango and to chiefs of police, who also attended the event

in order to leave offerings for the saint. Offerings consisted of cash, alcohol, flowers, and candles.⁵² San Simon is a Guatemalan figure of indigenous origin; I never detected that gang members in El Salvador or Honduras engaged in comparable worship.

Children and *Chequeos*

Many children and youth in the communities admire gang members and hope to join a gang. Gangs call group aspirants *chequeos*; they are usually children aged 12 to 16. *Chequeos* must pass a series of tests in order to enter the group: they have to keep watch over the territory, collect extortion money, transport weapons or drugs, and kill an enemy gang member or someone who did not pay the extortion fee. Gangs seek to ensure that *chequeos* be loyal, brave, and capable of joining the group.

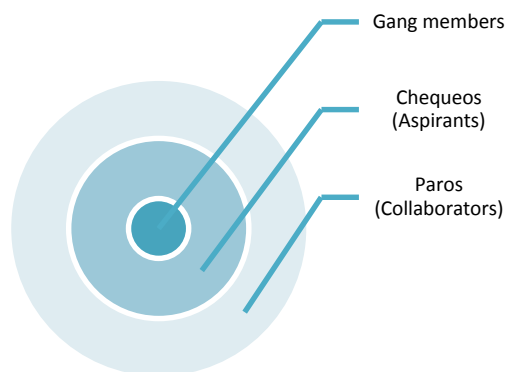
Gangs prefer to recruit children between the ages of 12 and 16 because they are more apt to adapt to the group. Children younger than 12 tend to make many mistakes and are more likely to tell their parents everything. Those older than 18 are more aware of the dangers and marginalization that gang members suffer, and are less willing to take on such risks. Gangs usually approach adolescents to invite them into the group, offering them protection, money, weapons, and adventure; some youth join voluntarily, but others are forced into it because the gang threatens to kill their family if they do not join.

In general, the *chequeos* and the *paros* are in charge of monitoring the communities. They mix in with the general populace, *sin echar color* (go undetected), and they are everywhere: on streets, schools, ball courts, markets, and bus stops.

⁵² On the devotion to Maximón in Guatemala, see the works by Chicas Rendón O. (2003), *The Maximón Deity: Indigenous Santería in Guatemala*, N.Y. Eban Editions; and Pieper, J. (2002) *Guatemala's Folk Saints: Maximón/San Simon, Rey Pascual, Judas, Lucifer, and Others*, Los Angeles: Pieper and Associates Inc.

Their responsibility is to inform the local *ranfleros* and those in jail about what is happening in the communities. The following graph illustrates how cliques are organized:

Graph 1: Clique Structure



Some cliques require children to commit murder by hire, taking advantage of the fact that 12-year-old minors cannot be judicially charged, that is, they are not held criminally responsible; and 13- to 18-year-olds can only receive a maximum 6-year prison sentence for murder. People in Guatemala call minors who kill on request “child hitmen,” and clearly there is a huge social commotion around children’s participation in homicides. Conservative groups, meanwhile, have promptly proposed legal reforms that would allow children to be tried as adults.

Gangs have significant influence among children and youth. Some children and youth admire gang members, while others reject them and blame them for the violence in the communities. I was intrigued that many youth imitate gang speech and style to display power towards others; they use expressions like “I’ve got *paro* (friendship) with the gang” or “I’m going to call my gang buddies,” and some even

copy gang body language to incite fear in others. Examples of the influence of gang language on youth culture are the terms *mara* (group), *paro* (favor), and *varas* (money), which are popular among youth in Guatemala City.

On the other hand, many youth admire *narcos* (drug traffickers) and not gang members. The *narcos'* image is present in youth's imagination through local drug distributors, media news, movies, and Columbian soap operas.⁵³ Movies and soap operas portray *narcos* as models of power, bravery, wealth, and sexuality, who are surrounded by beautiful women, firearms, luxury cars, and much money. Several youth said to me casually, "I'd like to be a *narco*" but not a gang member. Undoubtedly this relates to an idealization inspired by soap operas, but youth are also attracted to the *narco* image due to their lack of economic opportunities or models of other lifestyles. In chapter three I examine in greater detail the "*marerito* (gang) style" and "*narco* style" that many youth admire and follow.

Gangs are small but powerful groups. In El Mezquital, an area of 25,000 people, I identified five cliques, with about 20 members in each, totaling 100 gang members, which amounts to 0.4% of the population. In 2012, the government estimated that there were 12,000 gang members in Guatemala; with 15 million inhabitants, this represented 0.08% of the total national population. How is it possible that such a small group of youth holds so much power that it poses a danger to the country's security and stability? To El Seco, the answer is simple: gang members do not act alone; they have the support of the police and community members; in addition, he says, "many people live off of extortion and live off of the gangs' image."

⁵³ Columbian soap operas involving drug trafficking are very popular in Guatemala, such as *El cartel de los sapos*, *Las muñecas de la mafia*, *Sin tetas no hay paraíso*, *Pablo Escobar el patrón del mal*, and others.

Relationship between Gangs and Police

Gangs have always had a conflictive relationship with the police. According to gang members, there are three types of police officer: *los paros* (police who collaborate with the gang), *los basura* (those who investigate, prosecute, and monitor them), and *los de particular* (police who kill them). They have learned to negotiate with, evade, and confront the different types of police officers; they know that police can be allies and enemies at the same time.

El Taz told me that police have always been the gang's accomplices: "The police has always been bought off; we bought them off yesterday, we're still buying them off today, and they'll always be bought off," he remarked to me. El Seco also confirmed this several times: "You know that here in Guatemala all police officers have a price. La MS has *paros* (collaborators) in the police and that's why the *sholones* (leaders) never fall (get put in jail); the police catch the *chequeos* and *patojitos* (kids) who have nothing to do with it." They attest that the police contacts and corruption operate at every level, that high-ranking officers and police agents are involved. Cliques generally negotiate with the heads of the district headquarters and local police stations in the sectors where they operate.

The Police Station in El Mezquital was created in 1990 and is located on the main street, in territory dominated by La MS and La WF. A small station comprised of 10 officers in charge of all the communities' security, it depends hierarchically on Headquarters Number 14, located along the city's *anillo periférico* (peripheral highway). However, police chiefs from headquarters only rarely supervise local stations, which allows police officers to commit corruption, abuse, and arbitrary actions.

El Chino told me that La 18 “does not work” with the police and that only La MS deals with the police. When I asked El Chino if the Police Station has always been in its current location, he answered, “Yes, the police has always been in the same place, on the side of *la colonia* and La MS.” La 18 view the police as their enemy because of its links to La MS and La WF; this makes sense according to the logic of war in which the friends of one’s enemies’ are also one’s enemies.

La MS is a more organized and strategic gang, with the ability to forge alliances and make deals with other groups. Its “business” relationship with the police is historic. During the aforementioned conversation with El Seco, he attested that he saw a police chief sell weapons to the *ranflero* of his clique in early 2000. Some residents told me that at that time it was common to see members of La MS and La WF go in and out of the El Mezquital Police Station. People are moreover convinced that the police currently receives a portion of gangs’ extortion monies.

La 18, meanwhile, has a more fraught relationship with the police which has occasionally erupted into shootouts. In 2004, gang members fired gunshot into the police station to avenge a search that the police had conducted at one of La 18’s drug sales sites in El Éxodo. In 2009, they once again got into a shootout against police officers attempting to search another drug distribution site and to arrest members of the SPL clique; two officers died in the confrontation. In March 2013, while I was in the community, gang members attacked two police officers who were guarding businesses on 23rd Street of Villa Lobos I, the busiest business street in the area. They wounded one of the officers and several bystanders who were walking nearby. When I asked El Chino what had happened, he said, “I don’t know. I think the guys up there (from La Isla shantytown) did it. But sometimes it’s necessary to do that to show the

police that we're not afraid of them." This incident occurred when the communities were militarized and groups of soldiers and police patrolled the area.

In 2012, President Otto Pérez launched a "*mano dura*" (heavy-handed, tough on crime) policy against the gangs, creating Task Forces in marginal urban communities. On November 5, 2012, the President arrived in El Mezquital to institute the Kaminal Task Force, comprised of 100 police officers and 200 soldiers. The Task Force was installed in the community meeting hall of *la colonia*. Since then, police and soldiers patrol El Mezquital, but they do not go into the alleyways, where gangs operate and the majority of the people live; nor do they patrol at nighttime. Despite their presence, security has not improved; murder, robbery, and extortion continue in the communities.

Practically everyone in El Mezquital pays extortion fees. Merchants pay a set rate; to cover this expense, they increase the price on their goods, and the people end up paying the extortion costs. For example, in El Mezquital's shops and market, products are more expensive than in other parts of the capital. A youth in El Mezquital once told me in an ironic tone, "Here we all pay double taxes: we pay tax to the government and another tax to the gang." Nevertheless, due to fear, people do not denounce extortion or inform on the gangs; they fear repercussions from the gangs and do not trust the police or the army. They attest that the police "are corrupt" and the soldiers "are *masacres*" (very violent) and do not inspire confidence. People do not talk to the police or the army because they are afraid that gang members will see them.

Figure 5: Task Force in El Mezquital



Source: Plaza Pública

In the course of my fieldwork in El Mezquital, I asked many people how the problem of gang violence could be solved. One resident remarked, “The issue isn’t just what we do with the gangs, but what we do with the police.” On a different occasion, a youth commented, “The thing is that neither the gangs nor the police want to change. They don’t want to lose their power or their money.” In Guatemala, as in other parts of Latin America, crime does not just boil down to a battle between police and robbers. Rather, it entails a more complex internal battle between a few honorable and honest public officials who believe in the state of law, and criminal groups with great political and economic power that control the State. I explore this problem in greater detail in chapter five.

In summary, in El Mezquital I found four factors that led to changes within gangs, and marked the separation between gangs and their communities. The first is the influence of a North American gang model; the arrival of La MS, La 18, and La WF in the communities impacted local *maras* and youth. These *gangs* imparted a new identity and organizing model, a desire for territorial expansion, and most grievously, a rivalry to the death against opposing gangs. The second factor is police corruption, as the police facilitated access to firearms, participated in the drug trade and extortion, and modeled how to be corrupt. Third is the need for money: gangs discovered that extortion provided an easy way to make money to survive, purchase weapons, and buy off the police. Finally, the fourth factor is the social cleansing campaign: feeling attacked by the police and the community, gangs defended themselves by killing with the same cruelty with which their own members were being killed. These factors also help to explain the extreme gang violence, gang members learned to use violence to defend themselves from the humiliations and attacks from the State, their enemies, and members of their own communities.

Chapter 3

Youth Stuck at Home

Fear and Distrust in the Communities

“In our communities we can’t play or walk freely out of fear that we’ll get shot, mugged, or beaten,” remarked Alex, an 18-year-old student from the Ceiba Group High School, while participating in a violence prevention workshop. The rest of the students attending the workshop listened attentively and nodded in agreement to his words. The vast majority of youth in El Mezquital, especially women, live essentially shut-in in their homes out of fear of crime and violence on the streets. Youth do not play or socialize on the streets, use the ball courts, go out at night, go to parties, or participate in community organizations. The situation is more difficult for young women; their parents do not let them leave home out of a fear of sexual harassment, and when a girl does go out, an adult usually accompanies her.

Violence and fear affect practically the entire generation born after 1996. Youth who were born and grew up in the 1980s and 1990s played and socialized in the streets and ravines of El Mezquital. In fact, this facilitated the formation of *maras* during that time; but youth born after the 1996 Peace Accords grew up confined in their homes and afraid to go out onto the streets. Currently youth only socialize with peers at school, work, and church, spaces that are not free of violence either.

In this chapter I examine how violence and fear are affecting and changing youths’ lives in El Mezquital and urban marginal communities, as well as the strategies that youth and communities have developed to survive. I highlight in this chapter the perceptions and experiences of the children and adolescents whom I call

“shut-in youth” because they spend almost all day inside their houses. People call them the “good youth” because they are not involved in gangs, crime, or drugs; but they do not participate in any social group or community organization either. The “shut-in youth” constitute the vast majority of youth in El Mezquital and Guatemala City.

This chapter is primarily based on my fieldwork with youth in the Ceiba Group High School and the Outreach Center of El Mezquital, where I volunteered for over a year. At Ceiba Group I worked as a teacher assistant and at the Outreach Center I taught a free-standing English class. In both settings I shared formally and informally with many youth and organized numerous workshops with them to talk about gender roles, dating and sexuality, domestic violence, youth violence, education, and youth employment. In this chapter I present excerpts of my conversations with them and discussions from the workshops, as well as my field observations and reflections.

3.1. IT’S SCARY TO GO OUT TO THE STREETS

In El Mezquital, people’s fear and distrust are readily perceptible. Most youth are afraid to walk on the streets, ride buses, or shop at the market or local stores; and many feel afraid in their own homes. While doing fieldwork, I also often felt afraid when I walked along the shantytown alleyways, rode buses, or drove my car to visit friends at night.

One afternoon while walking with Elvira on a side street of the *Tres Banderas* shantytown, we came across a group of gang members whom we did not know, some of whom were armed, and they looked us, challengingly, right in the eyes. When Elvira saw them, she got scared and said, “Come on, let’s go say hi to El Chino” who lived nearby. I quickly realized that it was a strategy to show them that we knew

someone in the area. We walked to El Chino's house in a natural manner even though both of us were scared. When we got to the house, El Chino's wife María opened the door and told us that he was not home. Elvira said something quietly to María that I could not hear. Then María walked us to the main street, while the gang members kept watching us in an intimidating way. When we got to the main street, María told us that one of the gang members in the group had just left jail and that the others were hiding temporarily in the community, but that all of the neighbors were nervous because they did not know them.

Youths' and people's fear is based on personal experiences of violence, incidents that they have witnessed, and stories that they have heard from relatives and friends. Many youth grew up seeing horrendous crimes in the communities; they have seen mutilated and tortured bodies left on the streets and the ravines, scenes similar to what their parents had seen during the armed conflict in the 1980s. Twenty-year-old Walter told me that when he was ten years old, he saw a man dismember a couple:

"I was playing in the street, when a man showed up with a machete and cut off a man's head and killed a woman. She was pregnant and he almost dismembered her. I hid and the man didn't see me. Otherwise I think he would have killed me. When I got home I couldn't talk, my mom hit me because I was out of it. Finally I could cry and I told my mom what happened. My mom scolded me and after that she wouldn't let me play in the street" (Walter).

Many youth have lost family members and friends through violent acts. Once I asked students at the Ceiba Group how many of them had lost relatives or friends from violence, and 60% raised their hands. In fact, while I was a Ceiba Group volunteer, two students were murdered. The first, a 16-year-old, was attacked by gunfire by two youth at the street corner by his house in September 2012. The second was a 15-year-old girl whose body turned up dismembered by the banks of the Villa

Lobos River, in El Búcaro, in December 2012. I tried talking to the families of these two youth, but they said that they did not want to talk about it and that they preferred to leave it “in God’s hands.” They clearly felt deep fear and distrust.

These were not the only crimes committed against Ceiba Group students. Many teachers and students remember Alan’s death in 2009: at the age of 17, he was killed in gunfire by gang members from Villa Lobos II in the entranceway to the Ceiba Group. No one knows for sure the motives behind these crimes. Some said that they were cases of personal revenge, others cited disputes between gangs, and others said that the gangs mistook the victims for other people.

Many youth are afraid because violence has impacted them directly. David, a 22-year-old, took a bullet in his left leg during a confrontation between gang members and police on 23rd Street of Villa Lobos I in March 2013 while he was helping his mother sell shoes on that street. When I visited David at Guatemala City’s Roosevelt Hospital, his mother told me what had happened:

“We sell shoes at 23rd (Street), and the guys (gang members) had already gotten word out to us that they didn’t want to see anyone on the street after 9 at night. We were gathering up our merchandise, when we saw a little car drive by shooting the police that were on guard there. We took off running and crouched down, and that’s when they shot my son in the leg. They shot one of the police officers also and he got taken away by the ambulance, who knows if he died. The other police officer was spared because he hid in the beauty salon... There (on 23rd Street), we are taking a risk all the time, but what can we do, since we need to work.”

David’s mother told me that two months earlier, one of her other children had also been attacked with gunfire on the same street, and that he was still healing from the bullet wounds on his legs. Twenty-Third Street is the main commercial area in

Villa Lobos I and is the access road to El Mezquital. Gangs extort practically all the merchants in that area, and when someone does not pay or files a complaint with the police, gangs usually shoot at the store or kill the merchant.

People also fear muggings on streets and buses. In El Mezquital and Guatemala City, robberies of cell phones, money, and belongings are common on streets and buses; they are more severe when someone resists being mugged, as the criminals beat or kill them. In general, youth feel enraged and impotent about the muggings. Many of them have little money and go to great sacrifice to buy a cell phone.

Violence and fear lead youth to spend a lot of time at home. While at home, youth spend hours watching television, listening to radio, talking on the phone, or sending text messages on their cell phones. Some even have internet service and videogames at home. Youth are “entertained” by these new technologies and socialize little with peers in person. As a result, they talk a lot about movies, television programs, music, videogames, cell phones, fashion, etc. The new technologies entertain youth, but they also cause a great deal of frustration because youth cannot consume or live like TV and internet personalities.

Elvira told me that many parents go to great sacrifice to provide their children with cable television, videogames, and cell phones so that they do not go out to the streets. Parents feel troubled when their children are out on the streets; they worry about them being victims of violence or of joining a gang. Elvira related to me recently that she had purchased a Wii console for her nine-year-old child: “I know that it’s not the best thing for my child, and Pedro (her partner) and I talked it over, but it is very dangerous for children to play on the street, and I don’t want anything to happen to my child. I prefer that he play at home.”

Figure 6: Children Playing at Home



At home youth reproduce the traditional gender roles in Guatemalan society. Women are in charge of household chores and taking care of their younger siblings, while men watch television, listen to the radio, or talk on the phone. This creates tension in many homes, as girls demand that their brothers help out in household chores, but their mothers and fathers do not support them, insisting that they serve their brothers “because they are men.”

In a workshop with students from Ceiba Group, I spoke with youth about gender roles in their homes. One of the girls, visibly upset, said, “In my house I have to wash the clothes, clean, cook, and serve food to my father and brothers, because my mother says that they are men and need to be served. But that is not fair because they have hands and can serve themselves (their own food). We women are not the males’ *choleras* (servants), but my mom is on their side.” This reflects the tension between

daughters and mothers over women's roles in the home. Daughters know their rights and demand equal treatment and equal responsibilities in the home, but mothers resist change and insist on maintaining women's subordination to men.

Meanwhile, spending so much time at home causes many tensions and family conflicts. Alicia, who is 18 years old, told me that she was fed up with being at home: "In my house we fight over everything, over the TV remote control, over the dirty dishes, because there's not enough money, because my dad came home *bolo* (inebriated), over everything. My mom sometimes hits me because she doesn't let me have a boyfriend or go to the streets. The truth is, I don't like living at home." Alicia told me that the situation at her cousins' and friends' houses was similar; family relationships were tense and there was violence in many homes.

Domestic violence is a long-standing and widespread problem in El Mezquital and Guatemala. Many of the women who founded the communities in the 1980s told me that back then it was common for men to beat women and that parents beat children "to discipline them." However, this situation currently appears to be changing. In an anonymous survey, I asked Ceiba Group students if they had been beaten by their parents more than once, and only 40% answered "yes"; moreover, all of the youth said that they were against domestic violence.

In a workshop on domestic violence, one student shared with the group his experience with domestic violence and his desire to change: "My father used to hit me a lot when I was a *chavito* (kid), and he'd also hit my mom and my siblings, but I do not want to be like him. I am not going to hit my children or my wife. I don't want to be like my dad and I don't want my children to grow up like I did, either." Many students at the workshop said that parents "have no right" to beat their children, nor men to beat women, and they referenced human rights and children's and women's

rights. Urban youth in Guatemala know their rights because since the 1990s there has been broad-based dissemination of human rights and children's and women's rights in schools, local NGOs, and some churches.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, many parents and teachers are opposed to human rights and children's rights, stating that it is better "to discipline" children through beatings and punishments. In my fieldwork, I heard many parents and teachers blame human rights and children's rights for youth violence and gang violence. When I talking with one of the Ceiba Group teachers about this topic, he said to me, "Human rights only came to *joder todo* (screw everything up); it is human rights' fault that *maras* appeared.... Now, people can't discipline children or students because the kids can complain on them to the human rights people... In the past there didn't used to be so much crime because parents disciplined us with belt beatings, but everything got screwed up by human rights."

In Guatemala many people have a distorted idea about human rights: they believe that human rights only serve "to protect criminals." The State and the media have spread the notion that human rights groups focus on defending criminals, since they do, in fact, regularly denounce police brutality, violations in the criminal justice system, and prisoners' inhumane living conditions, and they oppose the death penalty. Irked by human rights groups' complaints, the State disparages their reports and promotes the idea among the population that human rights defenders are "communists" who "defend criminals."⁵⁵ This discourse has resonated in society

⁵⁴ The human rights discourse began to spread in Guatemala after the 1985 Constitution, and the promotion of women's and children's rights began in the 1990s. Guatemala ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990.

⁵⁵ After the signing of the peace accords in 1996, many threats, attacks, and murders have been committed against human rights defenders. These crimes have been widely reported and condemned by national and international entities. The most recent example is the 2013 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Guatemala, available at [http://www.ohchr.org.gt/documentos/informes/InformeAnual2013\(esp\).pdf](http://www.ohchr.org.gt/documentos/informes/InformeAnual2013(esp).pdf)

because people feel so desperate about the constant crime and impunity that it is hard for them to accept that human rights groups denounce the abuses committed against criminals.

Meanwhile, many men, particularly those who are especially authoritarian and aggressive, think that human rights are an obstacle to “disciplining” their children and beating women. Recently in Guatemala, the number of complaints filed and criminal penalties applied have increased against parents who beat their children, men who beat women, and family members who sexually abuse girls. These men also spread the idea among the population that human rights encourages “debauchery” among children and women.

In sum, youth do not like to lead confined lives, shut-in at home, but they are afraid of violence on the streets and do not find safe spaces to interact with peers. Moreover, houses in El Mezquital are small (6 x 12 meters), with an average of 6 people living in the space, and tension and family conflicts abound. As anywhere in the world, youth want to play, hang out, and socialize with peers on streets and in public spaces, but they practically do not leave home out of a fear of violence or because their parents do not allow them to do so.

3.2. I DON'T WANT TO STAY IN SCHOOL

Currently in El Mezquital most of high school students are women. This is a recent change in the Guatemalan education system because just ten years ago most of high school students were men. Several teachers in El Mezquital think that this change is due to the recognition of women's rights, that there are more schools in the communities, and that many male students are dropping out of school.

In El Mezquital, as many other marginalized urban communities in Guatemala, many young men leave school because they suffer harassment from gangs and school violence (bullying). While I was working at Ceiba Group, two students left school: the first, because a gang was pressuring him to join, and he did not want to, so his parents sent him to live with relatives in Mazatenango. The second young man left because a group of students beat him for going out with a girl that one of them liked.

Gang members were present inside and outside the school. The Ceiba Group School is located on territory dominated by the clique *Solo para Locos* (Only for Crazies, SPL) of the 18th Street Gang in the shantytown Monte de los Olivos. Students would come from nearby communities, but they were afraid of the gangs in the area. In fact, many youth did not attend the free programs that Ceiba Group offered, out of fear from La 18 gang members. Within the school, several students were *paros* (collaborators), *chequeos* (gang aspirants), or gang member's relatives, and they often took advantage of their position to intimidate and abuse their classmates and teachers.

José, a 17-year-old student, was a *paro* with the SPL clique; he often missed class or arrived at school late. Once, Señó (Ms.) Lucy, the School Coordinator, called him out for coming late and did not allow him into school. José got very angry and said to her, "You're not in charge here, you're here because we let you. We're not going to let this lie. You'll pay for this, you old *cerota* (piece of shit)." At noon, José was in front of school, together with three gang members, waiting for Ms. Lucy. The teachers at the school got nervous and feared that the youth would attack Ms. Lucy. The teachers discussed whether it was advisable to call the police; they feared an armed confrontation between the gang and the police, or that the gang members would leave and then return later to exact vengeance on Ms. Lucy and the teachers. In the end, they decided not to call the police in order to avoid possible retaliation from the gang,

and they left the building together to walk Ms. Lucy to the CENMA bus station. The gang members watched them walk by with a challenging and intimidating attitude, but did not do anything to them.

Over the following days there was a lot of tension in the school. José started coming on time to class, but he was very angry with Ms. Lucy; he looked at her with a challenging attitude and told his classmates that he would exact revenge on her. A couple of times stones were thrown against the school building, breaking windows, and a group of three gang member generally walked past the school at the start and the end of the school day. Ms. Lucy felt very afraid, and two weeks later she resigned.

José's classmates confronted him. They met in the classroom and a young woman told him firmly, "Look, José, we're tired of you threatening us and messing with the teachers. We've lost several teachers already because of you. We don't want you to keep bothering the teachers. Let us study in peace." José was surprised and very upset; he answered, "I couldn't care less what you say. If you keep bugging me, I will stomp on you all." Another young woman said firmly, "We don't like you, all you do is threaten. You've been telling me since seventh grade that you're going to kill me, but you've never done anything to me. You think you're so great for being a gang member, but you're nothing, you're just all talk." José left the classroom very upset, shouting, "Fuck you all." Afterwards, José stopped coming to school for several days, and when he returned to class, he was calmer and stopped bothering his classmates and teachers.

At school, several students behaved like "*mareritos*" (little *mareros*/gang members); that is, they imitated gang members' speech and behavior and bragged about having *paro* (contact) with gang members as a strategy for defending themselves or intimidating their classmates, but in practice the gangs did not support

them. I spoke about this with El Chino, gang member with La 18, and he said that lots of *patojos* (kids) exaggerate, because gang members do not get involved in personal problems, unless it is something serious or something that affects the group. Moreover, he told me that when gang members find out that someone talks or acts on behalf of the gang, "*le paran el carro,*" that is, they threaten or beat the person.

The situation was similar in the other schools of El Mezquital. La 18 members kept watch around the grounds of INEBEMEZ, INED, the Fray Luis Rama School, and the Faith and Joy School, and some students were *chequeos* and *paros* with the gangs. In general, gang members harass students who come from other communities, they harass women, and they try to recruit youth to join the group or collaborate with them. In many schools a tense calm is felt.

A couple of times I accompanied Elvira to the *Escuela Fe y Alegría* (Faith and Joy School) located in La Esperanza. She gave violence prevention workshops to high school students because the teachers did not dare talk to students about violence or gangs. In the entrance to the school, I saw gang members monitoring the area, and inside the school some students watched me intently and with distrust. Elvira told me that between 2009 and 2011 there were confrontations between La MS and La 18 gangs at the school.

Another recent problem at schools is harassment and school violence (bullying). The more aggressive and physically strong students harass, humiliate, and even hit students who are more timid and weak. The bullied students generally isolate themselves or befriend other bullied youth. Bullying is a growing problem in Guatemala, as in other parts of the world. The Gálvez (2011) study shows that 34% of the students in Guatemala City have endured school harassment or aggression at

least once in their lives and that bullying most often takes the form of insults, nicknames, and acts of aggression against the most timid and weak youth.

In addition, in Guatemala City confrontations between public school students are common. Often, students from one school confront students from a rival school, and they attack one another with sticks, stones, knives, and even firearms. These fights started during sports and cultural competitions in the 1980s, when the first *maras* arose in the capital. However, the fights progressively turned into territorial disputes between students who sympathized with the La 18 and La MS gangs. The battle has spread to women's schools, like Belén, Inca, and María Luisa Lanusa, where gang members also want to wield control.⁵⁶

In 2009, the government created the Safe Schools Program to prevent school violence; police constantly patrol around schools and offer violence prevention workshops to students. This Program also operates in El Mezquital, but it has little impact; first, because students do not trust the police, and second, because the gangs' system of monitoring and control is more effective than the police's.

Overall, a tense atmosphere is palpable in the schools, and many students, both male and female, are distrustful and on the defensive. These are some of my first impressions and reflections about students' aggressiveness, as I recorded in my field notes.

I am surprised by the students' aggressiveness. They constantly use swear words, they offend their classmates, they don't pay attention in class, and they call their teachers by nicknames. I'm shocked to hear women say swears, push and threaten their classmates; they are always on the defensive. I worry about

⁵⁶ See the report *Guerra de Estudiantes*, *El Periódico* June 26, 2011. Available at <http://elperiodico.com.gt/es/20110626//197329>

the timid students; some of them barely talk to anyone and seem disconnected from what is going on around them. The students are not interested in learning; they are unmotivated. Why? How can I motivate them?

Professor Hugo says that students repeat what they live in their homes; their parents use swear words and are violent. He told me that once, when he walked a student home, he heard the mother insult him: "You're home, you piece of shit boy, hurry up, go get tortillas so that your brothers and sisters se arden (can eat). Quit playing stupid, asshole." When the mother saw Professor Hugo, she was ashamed and apologized to him. She told him that she treated her son poorly because he reminded her of his father, who left her years ago. Professor Hugo says that he has seen mothers beat their children when they do not go to school or they sneak out.

The students' aggressive behavior concerns me. I want to get to know them and earn their trust, but I am afraid that they might not respect me. I need to find a safe way to approach them; I need to overcome my own fears; I need to understand how these youth live (Field notes, August 3, 2012).

Many young people use aggressiveness as a strategy to defend and protect themselves. When they feel intimidated or threatened by someone stronger, they behave like "mareritos": that is, they imitate gang members' language, gestures, tone of voice, and even twist their mouth when they speak. Young people imitate the verbal and physical aggressiveness of the stronger groups to protect themselves.

The second reason why young men left school is poverty. Their parents require them to work and support the family economy, because they are men and the older brothers in the family. These youth face many barriers to obtaining formal work; companies discriminated against them for not having much schooling or work experience, and they rejected them for living in a "zona roja" (red zone). They generally held temporary and poorly paid jobs; they work as assistants to mechanics, masons, or carpenters; they watch or wash cars on streets; or they sell goods on the

streets or buses. Later in this chapter I examine the obstacles that youth face in getting jobs.

The third reason for school drop-out is lack of motivation. Many youth do not see any benefit to education. Roberto, a 19-year-old who often attended the Outreach Center, told me, "I only studied until ninth grade because I didn't like school, the teachers were very boring... Plus, why should I study if there's no work? Look at my cousins, all my cousins studied and even went to the U (university) and they don't have work, they can't find work. *No sale* (it's not worth it) to go to school."

At the Ceiba Group, many youth told me that they were only in school because they "needed a paper" (diploma) to get a job. When I asked youth what motivated them to study, they would make comments like "I'm in school because I need a piece of paper to get a job," "I'm in school to be able to go to the U (university)," and "I study because my parents want me to." Some women expressed an interest in studying for self-esteem and personal growth, to avoid suffering the oppression that their mothers experienced. However, the majority of the students knew that they had little chance of graduating from college or obtaining a good job; they knew that with a high school diploma they could only aspire to a minimum-wage job, and therefore they did not put much effort into learning.

This problem is not unique to the Ceiba Group students. In Guatemala, youth are not motivated to study because the teaching and learning methods are traditional and boring, and there are no work opportunities. For that reason, Ceiba Group tries to apply a more participatory teaching method to encourage students' critical thinking, and it also provides technical job training.

High school and university education in Guatemala are limited. Only 23.4% of youth in the country make it to high school, and 5.1% to university. In El Mezquital, very few youth attend college, even though the San Carlos University is public and free of charge, and its central campus is located approximately 5 kilometers from the communities.

3.3. ALL YOUTH ARE NOT THE SAME

In Grupo Ceiba, as many other high schools in Guatemala, students reproduce the same inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality as in Guatemalan society as a whole. These inequalities are clearly observed in the criteria they use to choose friends, in their vocabulary and their stereotypes. Women in general make friends with other women, and men with men; there are few co-ed groups. Within their groups of friends, women and men reinforce their identity and gender roles. In general, women talk about fashion, soap operas, music, and boyfriends, and criticize other women; they put on nail polish, makeup, look at fashion magazines, and eat together. Meanwhile, men talk about cell phones, videogames, action movies, cars, alcohol, girlfriends, and sex; most men play football, pursue girls, make heavy jokes, and are aggressive.

Women feel more secure in the classrooms; they actively participate in class discussions and workshops, and at recess they socialized and eat together in the classrooms. However, women are afraid to walk alone in the hallways, the patio, and the streets, because these are spaces dominated by men. They usually go with another woman when they go to the bathroom or the store, and when they enter and leave school, they avoid walking alone in public spaces. Some women imitate masculine ways of talking and behaving to prevent men from bothering or harassing them.

Many women avoid forming friendship groups with men out of fear of social criticism or that men would not respect them. In El Mezquital, people criticize women if they spend a lot of time with groups of men; they call them *facilonas* (easy), *rolonas* (shifty), or *putas* (whores) and accuse them of “not inspiring respect” and of being girlfriends to all men or having intercourse with them. However, I never observed that men in co-ed groups showed a lack of respect to women, nor was there promiscuity; rather, there was great friendship and respect between them.

In terms of class differences, many youth replicate the class stratifications of Guatemalan society and repeat the same pejorative terms that the dominant classes use to disparage the poor. For instance, youth from *la colonia* and youth with a relatively higher economic standing (those who lived in two- or three-story houses, the children of merchants or professionals, the well-dressed youth, etc.) call the poorer students *choleros* and *mucos*, terms identified with popular culture and reggaeton music and generally considered vulgar and aggressive. These epithets are very offensive and are used by the upper and middle classes in Guatemala City to refer to servants and the poorest members of society.

On the other hand, youth use the terms *fresitas* or *burguesitos* to refer to youth who have or claimed to have a higher economic standing, those who act like middle-class youth, followed pop culture, and behaved well. They generally call *fresitas* or *burguesitos* to those who live in better economic conditions, “the guys with good *chivas* (material things),” as they say. These terms come from the words *fresa* (strawberry) and *burgués* (bourgeois), but youth use the diminutive forms *fresita* and *burguesito* in an ironic way to ridicule the youth who boast of being rich when in reality they are poor.

Some youth form friendship groups through class affinity: youth from *la colonia* and those with a higher economic standing form their own groups, and youth from the shantytowns or those who are the poorest form their own groups. These groups in general do not interrelate, and despite their class tense relationships, there are no confrontations between the *fresitas* and the *mucos*. The *fresitas* behave like a class apart; at recess they stay in the classrooms or the hallways socializing among themselves, while the *mucos* practically dominate the public spaces, occupy the hallways and the patio, as well as the streets at the start and the end of the school day.

So what are we? / Ladino and Indigenous Youth

Youth generally feel uncomfortable talking about their ethnic origins. In Ceiba Group many students have indigenous physical features and last names but did not identify as indigenous. Many of them are the children of indigenous parents who had migrated to the capital because of poverty and the violence of the armed conflict in the 1970s and 1980s, but they themselves were born and grew up in the capital, in an atmosphere dominated by ladinos. Their parents did not pass on their language, clothing, or customs, and this caused in them a profound identity conflict. The students with indigenous features and last names do not form their own group; rather, they join other groups, but students associate them with the *mucos*, with the poorest.

Together with the students, I visited the exhibit *Por qué estamos como estamos* (*Why we are the way we are*), an interactive museum that presents the history of racism and inequality in Guatemala. At the start of the exhibit, the youth had to answer a brief survey about their ethnic identity, indicating if they considered themselves indigenous, ladinos (mestizos, “mixed”), or Afro-descendants. While filling out the survey, one young woman asked me, “Professor, so what are we?” The rest of the group waited attentively for my response because they likewise felt

confused about their ethnic identity. Some of them had never heard the word ladino before. I suggested that they complete the survey after viewing the exhibit so that they could form their own opinion.

The exhibit presented the origin of the Mayas prior to the Spanish conquest, the process of colonization, the mestizaje (mixing of peoples), the construction of the ladino subject, and the current situation of indigenous peoples in Guatemala. At the end of the exhibit, the young woman remained confused about her ethnic identity, saying to me, “According to what we saw, we are ladinos, but I do not like that word. I think that we are mestizos, because we have an indigenous part and a ladina part.”

Ladinos’ identity conflict is not unique to the youth in El Mezquital. In his ethnographic work in Chimaltenango, anthropologist Charles Hale (2006) examines ladinos’ racial ambivalence and their desire to “be more than an Indian” and to rise in the Guatemalan racial hierarchy. He explains that racial ambivalence refers to the desire to affirm both a newly embraced ethos of equality and continued privileges of racial dominance. In El Mezquital, many youth express the ladino desire for equality, but at the same time they discriminate indigenous people.

In a conversation with Maria, a social activist who works with youth from urban marginal communities in Guatemala City, she told me that it was very difficult for youth and people in these communities to accept their indigenous origins due to the deep racism that pervades the capital:

“We designed a project for indigenous youth in urban marginal neighborhoods, but we realized that youth in these communities do not recognize themselves as indigenous due to discrimination. In these communities, people have learned to deny certain things to not be discriminated against, that’s why they deny their poverty and their ethnic identity. Oftentimes the parents (indigenous) do not pass their culture down to their children, to protect them,

so that they do not suffer what they lived through... Many people say that they are ladinos so that they won't be discriminated against. Ladinos don't know who they are, but they do know who they don't want to be: ladinos don't want to be indigenous" (Maria).

Many youth of indigenous background who were born or grew up in the capital face a profound identity crisis. They often try to hide their ethnic origins to avoid discrimination. For instance, Raúl, who is 20 years old, told me that when he was a child he felt ashamed when his mother would bring him to school because he didn't want his classmates to know that his mother "*era de corte*" (wore the traditional Maya skirt, i.e. was indigenous). His mother is of Kakchiquel origin and migrated to the capital because of the violence of the armed conflict in the 1980s. Raúl grew up as a ladino child in El Mezquital, but his mother's indigenous roots cause him confusion about his ethnic identity.

The Ceiba Group students repeated prejudicial and racist attitudes against indigenous people. For example, they would make fun of their classmates' indigenous surnames and would call them by their surname rather than their given name, to constantly remind them of their indigenous background, while they would call ladinos by their given names. When a student would push someone roughly or take away someone's things without permission, others would chide, "don't be an Indian." In addition, they would often tell jokes about Rigoberta Menchú and Rosalina Tuyuc, and they would make fun of indigenous people who did not speak Spanish well.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Racism is a historical problem entrenched in Guatemalan society and has been extensively studied by North American anthropologists such as Richard Adams (1990, 1992) Carol Smith (1990, 1999), Diane Nelson (1999, 2009), and Charles Hale (2004, 2007) and Guatemalan anthropologists such as Demetrio Cojti (1989, 1994, 1999), Irma Alicia Velásquez (2004, 2008), Aura Cumes (2004, 2007), among others.

The students told me that they had never before talked about their ethnic identity or about racism in Guatemala, and they felt very grateful for the visit to the exhibit *Why we are the way we are* and for the ensuing debate that we had on these themes. In general, the topic of race is taboo in Guatemala's schools: teachers do not talk about it, and primary and secondary school textbooks merely highlight the glorious past of the Maya civilization prior to the Spanish arrival, but they virtually do not explain the oppression against indigenous people in the colonial period nor present-day racism.

Furthermore, students basically do not know what happened during the armed conflict. When I spoke with them about this, one student asked, "Professor, you mean there was a war in Guatemala?" The students were surprised and incensed when they found out about the massacres and atrocities that the army committed against indigenous people, and they were interested in learning more about the causes of the armed conflict. History textbooks do not offer students enough information on the armed conflict, either, because the State never officially recognized the report by the Historical Clarification Commission (Truth Commission) nor the genocide and the atrocities that the army committed against the civilian population.

Finally, regarding sexual identity, few students openly acknowledge their sexual orientation because there is still much homophobia. Students often make jokes and discriminate against men who act effeminately, whom they call *huecos*, *morros*, *maricas*, or *raros*, and women who behave in a masculine way are called *machonas* or *marimachas*. Effeminate men generally relate to women's groups or to the *fresitas*, with whom they feel more accepted; and masculine women relate to groups of women and groups of men.

However, in their discourse, youth recognize that currently there is greater tolerance for gays and that youth are increasingly coming “out of the closet.” During a workshop on dating and sexuality, practically all the students said that they approved of same-sex relationships, and stated that “we all have the same rights.” Yet informally and in daily relationships, they make jokes about gays and discriminate against them.

In sum, youth from urban marginal neighborhoods use criteria of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in choosing their friendships, though they also choose based on personal affinity. Within groups of friends, youth reaffirm their identity and social roles, and replicate prejudices against “other” youth which often derive from their peers’ discriminatory practices. Different groups often get together to do homework or play in sports competitions, but in general youth prefer to be with those who think and act like themselves.

Language and Stereotypes

Divisions and inequalities among students are reflected in their language, as youth use pejorative terms to describe and discriminate against “others.” In the following chart I present some of the terms that youth use to mark inequalities among themselves.

Table 1: Epithets by Class, Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality

Epithets by Class	Rich	Burguesito, fresita, caquero, princeso, hijo de papi y mami
	Poor	Muco, cholero, shumo, recha
Epithets by Gender	Male	Chavo, varón, macho
	Female	Chava, culito, guisa, traída, regalada, rolona, puta
Epithets by Ethnicity	Ladino	Ladino, mestizo, normal
	Indigenous	Indio, indito, chintrix, quixito, chino
Epithets by Sexuality	Heterosexual	Macho, hombre, mujer
	Homosexual	Gay, hueco, marica, morro, raro, lesbiana, marimacha.

These epithets are charged with prejudice and discrimination against the most vulnerable groups: poor, women, indigenous, and gays. Students generally used these epithets when they were with friends or trusted people, and rarely would they say them in public events. They usually used them to criticize or mock a person or group, as in, for instance, “that girl is a *rolona*,” “those guys are *mucos*,” “don’t be an *indio*,” “that guy is a *morro*.”

Some of these epithets were used in the 1980s and 1990s, and youth learned them from their parents, teachers, and social media. Several times I heard teachers use these epithets openly in classrooms to refer to women, indigenous people, and gays. Moreover, on Facebook and other social chat networks I saw even more offensive epithets used against these groups.

However, some of these epithets are new as of this generation, for example, the adjectives *recha* (rejected), *culito* (young woman), *chino* (indigenous), and *morro* (gay man). The epithet *recha* is highly offensive, and youth use it to refer to excluded kids who are not accepted by the dominant groups, because they are shy, poor, gay, or indigenous.

In summary, youth from urban marginal communities, either consciously or subconsciously, are reproducing among themselves the stereotypes and discrimination used by dominant groups towards lower groups, and in this way they perpetuate the status quo and a system of social stratification that oppresses the weakest.

3.4. I CAN'T GET WORK

In El Mezquital, as in the rest of Guatemala, youth live in a state of perpetual anxiety over the lack of work. In general, youth do not talk about poverty because they are ashamed to admit that they are poor, but there are two comments that they repeat constantly: "I have no money" and "I can't get work."

Youth face many difficulties to finding work. Youth who do not finish high school work in the informal economy, as vendors in the markets and streets; as assistants to masons, mechanics, and carpenters; as drivers and *brochas* (bus driver assistants); by watching and washing cars, etc.; they earn less than the minimum wage, which in Guatemala is Q2,280.34 (US\$ 296) per month. Youth who finished high school, meanwhile, can aspire to mid-level jobs, working as secretaries, waiters, accountants, operators, etc., and earning minimum wage or a bit higher.⁵⁸

In the course of my fieldwork, many youth asked me to help them find jobs. For example, Mario, an 18-year-old who lived with his mother and three younger siblings,

⁵⁸ In 2013, the minimum wage in Guatemala was Q2,280.34 (US\$296) per month, while the Basic Food Basket (CBA) for a family of five cost Q2,922.30 (US\$379) and the Basic Living Basket (CBV), which includes food, clothing, housing, education, health care, transportation, and various goods and services, cost Q5,332.66 (US\$692). Thus, more than two members of each family must work, and it is customary for parents to require the oldest son to work in order to contribute to the family economy and to "finish raising his younger siblings."

told me that he stopped going to school when he was 14 in order to work and help his mother. At his young age he had already had five different jobs: hauler in a warehouse, trash collector, *brocha*, vendor at the market, and janitor at a barbershop. Mario told me that he urgently needed work because his mother was pressuring him a lot.

Luis was 22 years old, had not been working for four months, and was feeling desperate. Luis once approached me at the Outreach Center and said to me, “Do you know of any job? The thing is, my mom is pressuring me to work, but I can’t find *chance* (a job). I ask you, if you know of anything, please let me know, anything, I really need to work.” Luis lived with his wife and two children in his mother’s house because he could not rent a house for his family, and his mother helped take care of the children while his wife worked. His wife worked as a server at a fast food restaurant, but the money that she earned was not enough to cover the children’s and family’s expenses. Luis told me that he had looked for work in more than 15 places and had not found anything.

Youth face many obstacles to obtaining formal employment. Companies require them to meet a series of legal qualifications, to submit police and criminal records and health certificates. Youth have to spend about Q 200 every six months to keep their documents up to date, and generally do not have the money to do so; I often heard youth say, “I have to get my paperwork and I don’t even have enough money for bus fare.”

Many companies investigate applicants, give them polygraph tests and even search them physically to check that they do not have tattoos. They require applicants to have work experience, even though they are very young, and they force them to work for over 40 hours a week for minimum wage. They often discriminate

against them and deny them work because they live in a “red zone” and employers assume that they are gang members or delinquents. Meanwhile, it is literally impossible for gang members or youth with a police or criminal record to apply for a formal job.

In Guatemala only 25% of youth have formal employment, and the remaining 75% work in the informal economy or are unemployed. This attests to the precarious labor situation in the country, and explains youths’ lack of interest in schooling.

Robberies and *Trases*

When young people cannot find work, they are forced to engage in illicit activities to make money and survive. Many of them decide to steal cell phones, wallets, necklaces, or goods on the streets or in the markets. In El Mezquital, people call these youth “*ladroncitos* (little thieves)” because they do not belong to a gang or to organized crime. The *ladroncitos* generally steal outside communities, but when they encounter an opportunity they rob within the communities as well. For example, Elvira told me that a group of youth who live near her house stole her cousin’s cell phone and wallet when he came to visit her. Many youth also told me that they are constantly being mugged on the communities’ streets and as a result they prefer not to leave their houses.

The small-scale thieves generally keep their actions secret from the gangs, because the gangs do not allow other criminal groups to operate in their territories. Many young people steal out of desperation and do it only when they urgently need money; once they get a job, they stop stealing. However, many youth engage on a more long-term basis in stealing, which they call *hacer cache*.

Another way of making money is by *hacer transes*. Youth use the term *hacer transes* to refer to a wide variety of activities or deals that bring in money quickly. Examples include buying a stolen item and selling it at a higher price, or asking for a loan from a relative or friend dishonestly. *Hacer un transe* can also mean a scam; for instance, I once learned that a group of youth in El Mezquital were selling fake cell phones on the streets of downtown Guatemala City: they would offer people a high-quality cell phone, and when someone bought it, they would place a bar of soap inside the box instead of the phone. Another group of youth would sell bottled water with tap water from the faucets in their homes, presenting it as purified water.

Hacer transes is a widespread practice in Guatemala and is not exclusive to young people. In El Mezquital, many say that politicians and police officers do *transes* or that they are *transeros*, that is, that they are corrupt and carry out illegal deals. This practice is replicated in many people's daily lives: workers do *transes* at work, for instance, by stealing items or materials from their workplace to then sell; or they overcharge at stores and businesses. Although people know that this is not right, they accept and justify it by noting that salaries are very low and the cost of living is so high. Many people say, "The money isn't enough to buy anything, and you have to figure out what to do about it."

Finally, some youth end up collaborating with gangs or with groups of extortionists and drug dealers. Gangs offer money in exchange for safeguarding their territory, collecting extortion monies, or transporting weapons and drugs; while drug dealers offer money in exchange for selling or transporting drugs from one place to another.

In my fieldwork, I could tell that youth do not like to steal or commit crime, but they are desperate over the lack of work and they need money. Luis once told me

with much pain and anger, “When you try to do things the right way, you don’t get any breaks, and what’s left to do? Only steal... I’m not going to let my children starve to death, it pains me to hear them cry from hunger... Sometimes I don’t even have enough money to get milk for my kids. What am I going to do? I have to figure out what I can do to feed my children.”

In sum, young people have scant employment and economic opportunities. Some youth work in the formal or informal economy; many are unemployed; and others feel pressured to commit crime. In El Mezquital, very few youth have the chance of migrating to the United States because they do not have enough money or social support. The majority of children and youth who migrate to the United States come from rural villages and communities where their families sell properties or take out loans to pay the fees to the *coyotes* (border-crossing guides), and they have family members or friends in the United States who support them there. In El Mezquital and other impoverished urban communities, parents are very poor and do not have support to send their children to the United States. Immigration is not an option for these youth. According to a UNICEF report (2011), only 19% of undocumented Guatemalan immigrants in the U.S. are from the Department of Guatemala, but the report does not specify if they are from poor or middle class neighborhoods.

3.5. YOU GET USED TO VIOLENCE

One day, in the middle of a workshop with high schools students from Ceiba Group, a group of seventh graders (between 13 and 16 years old) asked me if they could address the group. I said yes; at first I thought that they were raising funds for a party or school activity, because they were carrying collection jars with money in them. A boy took the floor and said, “You all, we came to ask you to pitch in because one of our classmates in seventh grade was killed yesterday. He was that guy’s

brother [pointing to one of the young men in the group] and we need money to bury him.” The announcement surprised me; I had not expected the news, nor the natural way with which the adolescents delivered it.

My shock was even greater when I saw the indifference of the high school students; as the adolescents walked around the classroom asking for coins, the majority chatted, did their homework, checked their cell phones, or used the time to go to the bathroom; barely two or three of them gave them a coin. The adolescents thanked me and left the room. I could not tear my eyes away from the sad face of the victim’s brother, a 13-year-old boy.

Later I asked the high school students how they felt about the news and what they thought about the deaths of youths in the community. Their comments did not fail to surprise me. Following I summarize the major points from the group conversation:

D.M. How do you feel about the news of the death of that young man?

Group: For sure he was mixed up in something.
Surely it was a gang problem.
That guy was a little weird, who knows what he did.
Only God knows what happened.

D.M. What does it mean to be mixed up in something? What do you mean by that?

Group: That he was involved in drugs or gangs.
That he went around stealing.

D.M. Do you think that being involved in drugs or gangs is enough of a reason to kill someone?

Group: Well, when someone gets involved in those things, they know what might happen to them.
He asked for it by being involved in foolishness.

Maybe it was revenge.

You all, we shouldn't criticize because we don't know what happened.

D.M. Many of you seemed indifferent when you got the news about the young man's death. Why? Doesn't that type of news impact you?

Group: The thing is, every day someone dies here.

You get used to the violence.

Well, we do feel bad, and it is scary because they could kill us, too.

Well, they killed him, what can we do.

D.M. Why do you think that people don't object to youths' deaths? Why don't people organize or do anything about it?

Group: Out of fear. People are afraid.

Here if you say something, they kill you, so it's better to keep quiet.

La mara (people) are scared, that's why they don't say anything or do anything.

D.M. How many of you know a young person, a friend or family member who was murdered?

60% raised their hands.

After finishing classes that day, I asked a teacher what had happened, what he knew about the young man's death. He said to me, "It looks like he was killed near his house. They say that he was with a girl at the store and two guys came and shot him in the head. It seems like it was a high-caliber firearm because his head exploded. But that guy was a little weird." I asked him, "What do you mean by a little weird?" and he answered, "Well, how can I explain? The thing is, that guy was homosexual, and he must have done something and they killed him." I could not believe what I was hearing; the teacher was telling me that a student had been killed for being gay, and that it seemed reason enough to justify the crime. Outraged, I asked him, "You think it's justifiable for a guy to be killed for being gay?" The teacher's face changed color,

and visibly nervous, he replied, “Well, I don’t think that, but the thing is, here a person is killed for any reason.”

That same day I had lunch with another teacher. I told him that I was feeling very alarmed about what had happened that morning, and I asked for his opinion. Very serenely, he said, “The thing is, youth in these communities are so used to violence that it doesn’t surprise them anymore. They often have to normalize these types of incidents because they can’t live with fear all the time. Plus, you need to remember that these students are very young and only think of themselves. In general they are indifferent to everything; it seems like they don’t care about anything.”

Many people in Guatemala echo the idea that the population “is used to violence” or that “they get used to seeing dead bodies every day.” This idea is also cited by many human rights activists and Guatemalan authors to explain people’s passivity towards violence. However, in my fieldwork I discovered that people react differently to youth homicides depending on the victim’s identity. People were surprised and outraged when a youth considered “correct” died; that is, a youth from the community who was in school or working, a youth who was not a gang member or a criminal and did not do drugs. In those cases, people rejected the crime and showed solidarity to the victim’s family. But when a gang member, a presumed criminal, or a youth who used drugs died, people accepted the crime and justified it with comments like “he asked for it,” “he was up to something,” and “who knows what he did.” In those cases people basically did not support the victim’s family and did not even attend the wake or the burial because they were scared.

While I was in El Mezquital, I observed the bodies of three people who had been murdered on the streets. In general, lots of people would gather around the scene of

the crime to ask what had happened. People would look curiously at the cadaver, at the family's reactions of pain, and at the investigative activities of the police officers and the public prosecutors. In the crowd would be many women with children, speculating about what happened. The youngest children would stare in shock at the scene, not really understanding what was happening, and listen to the commentaries of their mothers and neighbors, who would implore them to keep quiet. Reporters would take photographs for their press releases and would seek interviews with the victim's family members, the police, or a neighbor. The scene would come to an end when the prosecutors would take away the body, the people would disperse, and everyone would return to their regular daily activities. People used the term *shutes* (nosy) to refer to curious people who would observe these types of scenes or any activity happening on the streets.

I later learned that it was also dangerous to observe a crime scene. One day a neighbor came up to me and said, "I saw you over there where the boy was killed. Be careful because there are lots of *shute* people there, but there are also gang members or people who collaborate with them, they are watching what people say, who talks with the police or with the family. Then they look for you to kill you." I learned later that gang members and homicide perpetrators often return to the scene of the crime to observe and warn people by their presence that they should remain silent.

Days later, at the Outreach Center, I met up with the brother of the murdered youth. I told him that I was very sorry for his brother's death, and I asked him how he felt. He said that he felt awful and he told me some of the details of the crime: "What happened is that on Saturday night a girl came to the house asking for my brother. My brother went out and they sat and chatted on the sidewalk. Then a guy came from behind and shot my brother in the head; the girl took off running and disappeared, no one's seen her. My mom says that the girl sold him out (turned him

in). My mom says that she isn't going to do anything about it, she says she's going to leave it in God's hands, that God will deliver justice to the girl and to the guy who killed him." While we chatted, some youth came over to express their sympathy; they hugged him and offered him words of encouragement. I was surprised by this show of solidarity, after the indifferent attitude that I had seen in the high school students days earlier. Gradually I discovered that on a personal level, youth and people in El Mezquital expressed solidarity and mutually supported each other, but in social spaces they appeared apathetic and indifferent.

Women's Distrust and Pain

Women generally do not speak with anyone about the youth homicides; they distrust everyone. Alma, a youth activist, once got upset when I asked her about the death of her brother, who was murdered in 2011 near his house. She told me that it was a personal and painful issue and that she and her family did not want to talk about it. I apologized to her and explained that I just wanted to listen to victims' family members to understand the causes and the effects of violence, but I did not want to upset or hurt anyone with my questions. After a long period of conversation and crying, Alma said to me, "You are right, people should know what is happening here, they should know that youth are being killed and that we are all suffering so much... because you don't understand another's suffering until you live it." Later she told me that her brother had died in an armed attack in which three other people died, a woman and two children.

On another occasion, Elvira accompanied me in visiting Doña Andrea to talk about the communities' origins. At one point in the conversation, Doña Andrea began to cry. I did not understand the reason for her crying and asked her if something had happened to her; she looked into Elvira's eyes and kept crying, but without answering the question. After a moment of silence, Elvira said, "What's going on with her is that

her son was killed some years ago.” I expressed my condolences and told her that I would understand if she preferred not to talk about it. She said, “The thing is, I don’t like to talk about this with anyone, it’s that it’s scary here to talk about what happens because you don’t know who you’re talking to.” Later she told me that her 18-year-old son was killed on the main street of El Mezquital because he was mistaken for another young man.

Whenever I listened to the stories of Alma, Doña Andrea, and other women who lost their children or other family members to violence, I would remember the stories of indigenous women who had related to me, when I worked as a researcher with the Commission for the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) in 1997 and 1998, how the army had killed or kidnapped their family members during the armed conflict. The stories of women in El Mezquital and the nature of the crimes were different, but the pain, fear, and distrust were similar to the indigenous women’s feelings.

Most families do not demand justice for crimes against their loved ones because they feel afraid and do not trust the justice system. Families often know or at least suspect who the perpetrators are, but do not denounce them to the police because they fear retaliation from the perpetrators. People console themselves with religious expressions like “You have to leave it in God’s hands,” “God will punish them someday,” and “God knows why these things happen” instead of pressing for justice. Besides, the justice system rarely investigates the homicides of young people in urban shantytowns; it usually shelves the files, arguing that there is not enough information or that it was a case of “gang trouble.”

Figure 7: A Body Dead on the Street



Source: Plaza Publica

Security Measures and Survival Strategies

In El Mezquital, as in the rest of Guatemala, people have developed security measures to prevent and protect themselves from violence and crime. People protect their houses with metal doors and bars on the windows, they keep their windows and doors closed, they only walk on the main streets and the vicinity of their homes, and they avoid going out at night. Merchants protect their businesses with iron bars separating vendors from customers, they close their shops at 8:00 pm, and some hire heavily armed private security guards to watch the doorway. Practically all of the houses, schools, churches, and businesses are protected by metal bars. I once

remarked on this to a resident of El Mezquital, and he said, “This looks like a jail. Here we live more shut-in than prisoners.”

Youth have also developed their own security measures: when they walk on the streets or ride on buses, they hide their cell phones and their money in their shoes or underwear; they dress modestly to avoid calling attention to themselves; and they do not talk with strangers. Women in general walk accompanied by a family member or male friend, and never leave home at night. Many youth go outside of the communities to walk and socialize; they feel safer in shopping centers or in Guatemala City’s historic downtown section, even if they do not buy anything there because they do not have money.

Women live in constant anxiety; mothers and wives worry when their children or partners return late from work or school, or when they go out at night for fun. Doña Andrea told me that after her son’s murder, she did not feel calm unless all of her children were at home, and that whenever she heard the sound of a bullet, a firecracker, or an ambulance, she would think that something had happened to one of her children. Mothers generally worry more about their sons because they go out at night to visit their girlfriend or drink alcohol.

Many young people appear to be indifferent to violence, and they create discourses to justify their indifference, for instance by repeating comments like “If you don’t get in anyone’s business, no one gets in yours,” or “*a mí me pela* (I don’t care) what others do.” However, they know that violence restricts their freedom for walking and socializing in the streets and public spaces; yet they do not find the means to change this situation because they are afraid and do not trust the police or the government.

Violence and fear limit youths' freedom, creativity, and social relationships, but they do not rule their lives. In spite of everything, the young people of El Mezquital laugh, joke, dance, fall in love, and dream, like youth all around the world. A youth activist in El Mezquital once told me, "We youth have energy, a desire to live, and we struggle, but we're not allowed to, we aren't given opportunities to excel. That's why lots of kids get discouraged and don't participate in anything, because no one takes them into account. If only society could understand that youth want to be taken into account." In the next chapter I examine in detail the struggles of youth activists in El Mezquital and their responses to violence.

Chapter 4

It's Not a Crime to Live Here!

Youth Activists' and Artists' Responses to Violence

It's not a crime to live here! It's not a crime to live here! Youth shouted emphatically at a festival for life and peace in the communities of El Mezquital, El Búcaro, and Villa Lobos. On a sunny Sunday in June 2013, over 300 community members participated in the festival organized by the group *Jóvenes por la Vida* (Youth for Life, JOVI). Young people marched and drummed down the main streets of each community; later, hip-hop, ska and reggaetón musicians performed a series of concerts. The youth shouted, sang, and danced cheerfully around the stage situated at 22nd Street in Villa Lobos I. From street corners, gang collaborators known as "*paros*" observed the events. The Kaminal Task Force, a group of police officers and soldiers who guard the communities, constantly patrolled the main street. The youth leaders' message was clear: "No more violence or discrimination against youth. We young people are tired of violence; we are tired of being discriminated against for living in a *zona roja* (red zone). It is not a crime to live here."

Since the 1990s, in El Mezquital and other marginalized urban communities in Guatemala, youth groups have formed to reject violence and fight for young people's rights. Violence has impacted many of these youth directly: some activists have died violent deaths, and many are intimidated and threatened constantly by gangs and police. Police officers and others often discriminate against them and criticize them for their clothing styles and their activities. They are regularly called "bums" or "delinquents" and are mistaken for gang members.

In this chapter, I briefly describe the history of youth groups in El Mezquital, from the groups' initial background in the Catholic Church in the 1990s through the present-day political struggles of activists and artist groups. I examine their strategies for denouncing the murders of youth and for preventing children and adolescents from joining gangs, and their struggles against social stigmatization and police abuse. Additionally, I explore how youth use community arts – theater, music, graffiti, drumming, stilt-walking, dance, and parades – as a strategy to retake the streets and promote a “culture of peace” in their communities.

In this chapter I highlight women's participation in youth groups and the interactions between local groups and national and international youth networks. Featured in this chapter are the voices of youth activists and artists from El Mezquital with whom I collaborate during my fieldwork: the youth of *Grupo Artiis* (Artiis Group), *Grupo JOVI* (JOVI Group), *Asociación Rincón Juvenil* (Youth Corner Association), and the *Centro de Alcance* (Outreach Center); as well as the voices of youth from the group *Caja Lúdica*, one of the largest community art groups in Guatemala that works closely with El Mezquital activists.

4.1. THE FIRST YOUTH GROUPS

The first youth groups in El Mezquital emerged out of initiatives by the Catholic Church and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the 1990s. Franciscan friars, local leaders, and mothers were concerned that young men were spending a lot of time on the streets and that they lacked educational and employment opportunities, while young women were engaged primarily in household chores and caring for their younger siblings. During that period, *maras* started forming; some young people used alcohol and drugs; and violence on the streets grew. Children and youth spent much of their time alone, since their parents worked all day long outside of their

communities or were busily engaged in community struggles such as acquiring legal status for their land, building their homes, and urbanizing the settlements.

The first youth groups were formed within the Catholic Church: *Amaneciendo con Cristo* (Awakening with Christ, AA), *Juventud Católica* (Catholic Youth, JUCA), *Juventud Franciscana* (Franciscan Youth, JUFRA), the Theater Group, and the Kerigma Music Group; these groups conducted religious, sporting, and cultural events. Later, FUNDESCO created the *Progama Trabajo Juvenil* (Youth Work Program, TJ) that offered educational and recreational activities to young people in the settlements; and UDINOV created a program for “vulnerable” children and youth in the communities that also offered educational, sports, and cultural opportunities.⁵⁹

Through participating in these groups, many youth discovered that they had a commitment to social causes and an interest in activism and art; some of them currently lead social groups and organizations at the community and national levels. Víctor, for instance, participated in the Catholic Church’s *Kerigma Group* in the 1990s; currently he is the coordinator of Artiis Group and one of the most committed activists in El Mezquital. Víctor explained to me that his commitment to social causes emerged through church youth group:

“I used to hang out in the streets and the ravines, just like all the *patojos* (guys) here, because we didn’t have much to do. In 1993, my sister invited me to the Catholic Church. There we formed the *Kerigma Group*; we played religious music and Andean social protest music. But we didn’t just want to be a church group: that’s why we started literacy work in the settlements, because many people didn’t know how to read or write. Gradually I learned about poverty and

⁵⁹ *La Fundación para el Desarrollo Comunitario* (Foundation for Community Development, FUNDESCO) is among the first organizations that emerged in El Mezquital in the 1980s; it has promoted local development projects and programs for women and youth. *La Asociación Unidad para el Desarrollo Integral La Novena* (The Novena United Association for Integral Development, UDINOV) also arose in the 1980s, promoting the rights of vulnerable children and youth through educational projects. In chapter 1 I provide additional information about these two organizations.

about our country's reality, and I began to take part in Franciscan activities and social marches. At that time we did lots of things, but now the Catholic Church doesn't get involved in anything" (Victor).

As indicated in chapter one, Friar Luis Rama and the Franciscan friars played a key role in El Mezquital's community organizing, and they were the first to take an interest in youths' education and participation. In 1991, they created the first junior high school in the area, the Juventud Nueva School, in order to enable youth to continue their studies, because there were no public junior high schools in the area. In 1994, they founded the Myrna Mack High School, whose name reflects the Franciscans' political commitment to Guatemala: Myrna Mack was a Guatemalan anthropologist who was brutally assassinated by the army in 1990 in downtown Guatemala City due to her research with people internally displaced by the war. Ironically, her murderer, Sargent Noel Beteta, lived in El Mezquital. The Franciscan friars also organized the first youth groups in the communities and included members of these groups in the political and social activities of the Catholic Church on the national level. Víctor refers to this when he says that he participated in church marches in the 1990s.

During the 1990's the Guatemalan Catholic Church was very active. It participated in the peace negotiations between the government and the guerrilla, accompanied the return of refugees from Mexico, defended the demands of the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR) and those internally displaced by the armed conflict, presented the truth report *Guatemala Nunca Más* (Guatemala Never Again), and carried out other actions to support victims and defend human rights. At that time, youth groups and many Catholics participated in numerous walks, seminars, workshops, lawsuits, and activities around social causes. However, the church lowered its political profile after the assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi in 1998. He was brutally murdered in his own home by army members two days after

presenting the report *Guatemala Never Again*, which denounced the horrendous crimes that the army committed against the civilian population during the armed conflict.⁶⁰

Víctor studied at the Juventud Nueva School and he saw his classmates begin to get involved in gangs: “Many guys started joining the *maras*, they got into fights with each other, they smoked, *flexiaban* (sniffed glue), and some already had weapons. I didn’t get involved with them because I didn’t like what they were doing. I preferred music and participating in social things.”

In 1993, FUNDESCO created the *Youth Work* Program whose organizing model was similar to that of the Boy Scouts. Youth were organized in small groups of 15 to 20 members; they would get together on weekends to socialize and engage in educational, sporting, and cultural events. Occasionally they organized exchanges with youth from other shantytowns in the metropolitan area, like Ciudad Peronia, Alioto, and Tierra Nueva; this allowed them to see living situations comparable to their own.

At that time UDINOV created a program for youth with learning disabilities and behavioral problems in school. UDINOV offered scholarships, workshops, and cultural and recreational activities to occupy youth’s free time. Youth were organized in two groups: *Sembradores* (Sowers) for men, and *Muchachitas* (Little Young Women) for women. About 25 young people participated in each group, and they would meet on the weekends. Elvira participated in UDINOV for many years and remarks that parents’ commitment in youth activities was key to the project.

⁶⁰ On the assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi, see Goldman Francisco (2007), *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop*. New York: Grove Press.

In addition, during that time some youth who studied in public schools in the capital and at the San Carlos University (USAC) got involved in student associations. They participated in protests and demonstrations organized by the *Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios* (University Students' Association, AEU) and the *Organización Nacional de Estudiantes de Educación Media* (National Organization of High School Students, ONEG) against the rise in public transport fares and the privatization of public education.

The student movement in Guatemala City has a long history of political opposition to militarism and of struggling for civil rights. The AEU arose in the 1920s, participated in the overthrow of the dictator Jorge Ubico in 1944, and maintained a critical position towards militarism during the armed conflict; as a result, many students disappeared or were killed by the army and paramilitary groups during that period. The ONEG, meanwhile, brought together students from public schools in the capital and in the 1990s struggled against the rise in public transport costs and defended the right to free education.⁶¹

In the 1990s, basically the only spaces for youth involvement were church youth groups, small NGO projects, and student associations. Some studies therefore contend that gangs arose as a way for youth to socialize and participate, since in marginalized urban neighborhoods youth have practically no spaces for socializing with peers or engaging in projects geared to their age (UCA et al. 2004).

⁶¹ On the student movement in Guatemala, see Gudiel Víctor and Alonzo Rebeca (2011), *Asociativismo Juvenil en Guatemala*. Guatemala FUNDAJU/SODEJU; and on repression against USAC students during the armed conflict, see Kobrak Paul (1999), *Organizing and repression in the University of San Carlos (1960-1996)*, Washington D. C. American Association for the Advancement of Science.

4.2. DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST VIOLENCE AND THE MURDERS OF YOUTH

In the early 2000s, people started suffering the consequences of violence and gang harassment. Between 2000 and 2004, youth homicides began to increase in the communities, and the first wave of social cleansing was unleashed against gang members and alleged criminals.⁶² People also were scared by the fighting between gangs, as well as by extortions and robberies. This situation pushed activists to take to the streets to denounce violence and the murders of youth.

Youth in the Catholic Church took to the streets to denounce youth homicides and social cleansing. Supported by the Franciscan friars, youth began to organize masses, marches, and public activities to protest against youth deaths. In 2004, the *Pastoral Juvenil* (Youth Ministry), encompassing all the youth groups in the Catholic Church, organized the first “Walk for Life”; youth marched from El Búcaro to Villa Lobos II to denounce violence. Youth gathered the names of all the young people who had died of violence, and they painted hearts at the places where they had been killed. Julián, a member of the Youth Ministry at that time, told me about that first walk:

“Many youth had perished from violence, and we decided that it was time to remember the victims of the bullets. We gathered information about those who had fallen from violence, and we walked to tell people that we were youth, just like the youth who were being killed. We bought spray paint to paint hearts at the places where youth had been killed, but many people thought that we were *mareros* (gang members) because we were painting the streets.”

In the following years, youth continued to do similar walks; in 2005, they painted crosses, and in 2006, doves as peace symbols. In June 2006, they organized the First Festival for Life and Peace, also known as the 22nd Street Festival. Youth

⁶² In chapter II of this dissertation, I explain that between 2002 and 2004, the police implemented *Plan Escoba* (Sweep-up Plan), a secret policy to eliminate gang members and alleged criminals.

from other shantytowns in Villa Nueva and the capital participated in the festival. However, conservative groups from the Catholic Church and the community criticized the youth for organizing cultural activities unrelated to religious themes. For this reason, many young people began to move away from the Catholic Church: they thought that the adults were “intolerant” of their cultural expressions. Julián recounted to me in an interview how he left the Catholic Church at that time:

“After the festival, I was expelled from the church because some youth came to the festival with tattoos and piercings, lots of guys from the community and from (shantytown) Alioto. My catechism peers asked me if I wanted to work on Christian things or mundane things. After that, I left the church. I realized that I wanted to work for youth and the community, and that the church was not the best place to do that.”

In 2008, gangs killed a member of the Youth Ministry during a public event at the Juventud Nueva School. The gang members entered the school, which is located on the grounds of the Catholic Church, and in front of everyone gathered there, they killed a young catechist. Apparently it was a case of personal vengeance, because the young man was the boyfriend of a woman liked by the gang member who shot him. The Youth Ministry members were frightened and incensed by the crime. Erick, who was a Youth Ministry member at the time, told me the details of the incident and said, “It pained us so much to see Kevin’s body lying in the Catholic Church. He was attacked in the only safe place in the community. After that we thought that gang members could kill any of us.”

Youth in the Youth Ministry wanted to hold a massive march in the communities to denounce Kevin’s death, but the members of the Parish Council and church adults did not support them, saying that it was “too dangerous.” Many of the youth were disappointed, but they carried out the last walk with deep indignation for their friend’s death. Afterwards, Erick and other youth in the Youth Ministry left the

Catholic Church over the lack of support from the adults, and they sought other spaces to pursue their activism and community commitment.

The Catholic Church weakened in the aftermath of Kevin's murder, as many people stopped participating in the religious activities and social services provided by the church. The church is located in the Monte de los Olivos shantytown, a territory dominated by the Solo para Locos clique of the 18th Street Gang, and people are afraid to attend church, especially *la colonia* residents who live in Salvatrucha-controlled territory. Between 2009 and 2010, gang members tried several times to extort the Catholic Church, and the church was on the verge of discontinuing its social programs. The Catholic Church youth groups entered a phase of low activity that continues to this day.

Community Art

In the early 2000s, in El Mezquital and other marginalized urban communities in Guatemala, the Caja Lúdica Group introduced community art as a tool for youth expression and activism. Many community youth were enthralled by the festive, colorful spirit of Caja Lúdica's troupes and festivals, and by the group's discourse against violence. Caja Lúdica's activities combine theater, dance, music, stilts, painting, and political discourse against State and criminal violence.

Caja Lúdica was formed in 2000 by a group of Guatemalan artists from the *Colectivo de Arte Urbano* (Urban Art Collective) and Columbian artists from the *Corporación Barrio Comparsa* (Neighborhood Troupe Corporation). Caja Lúdica promotes youth participation and a culture of peace through community art; it provides classes and workshops to train animators and cultural promoters; and it conducts presentations and cultural activities locally and nationally. For Caja Lúdica,

community art is a healthy way for youth to share with peers, express their feelings and thoughts, recover public spaces, and promote a culture of peace.

In 2001 Caja Lúdica participated in an art festival in El Mezquital, y then support the formation of the Grupo Rhoje (Rhoje Group), the first community art group in El Mezquital. The Rhoje Group emerged in 2002 out of an initiative of youth who participated in the *Youth Work* Program in the 1990s and who attended workshops by Caja Lúdica on stilt-walking, juggling, drumming, and theater. Rhoje Group started with 15 youth who began organizing street festivals in El Mezquital and offering art workshops in their communities and other parts of the country such as Villa Canales, Tierra Nueva, and Esquipulas. Santiago told me about Rhoje Group's background:

“In 2001, there was a cultural festival in El Mezquital, and Caja Lúdica organized a *comparsa* (theater/dance troupe). I had never seen a *comparsa* and I liked it a lot. Then my friend invited me to participate in some art workshops with Rhoje and I joined the group. There were about 15 of us guys and girls in Rhoje. We did workshops on art, theater, poetry, and street festivals. Gangs viewed us with suspicion, and one time they wanted to kick us out of a poetry presentation that we organized on Sixth (Street), but we said, ‘If we leave now, we leave forever,’ so we stayed (at the event) and nothing happened.”

Between 2002 and 2006, Rhoje Group organized cultural activities in public spaces to show that the streets could be turned into stages for art, celebration, and community harmony, rather than just places of fear and violence. Rhoje Group youth consistently had the support of FUNDESCO and the Cajá Lúdica Group until the group disappeared in 2006.

In 2006 Julián came into contact with Caja Lúdica and other social groups in Guatemala City, and this experience helped him broaden his analysis on violence and his political perspective. He joined the *Red por la Vida* (Network for Life), a coalition of social organizations opposed to violence and the use of firearms in Guatemala City.

The coalition was comprised of the *Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado* (Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, ODHAG), *Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible* (Teaching Institute for Sustainable Development, IEPADES), *Movimiento de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* (Children's and Adolescents' Movement), and Caja Lúdica.

Later Julián and other activists from El Mezquital created the JOVI Group with the aim of preventing violence in El Mezquital through community art and workshops on education for peace in the schools. Julián remembers JOVI's inception as follows:

“Our intention was to demonstrate that work could be done outside the church. We kept working without gaining a single cent for our activities and without a central office, but we wanted to do something. We'd get together in young people's homes; their families trusted me because I had been part of the church and I was married. We started organizing troupes and teaching youth to use stilts. People got scared because they hadn't seen anything like this, and they said that we were the devil's children, that what we were doing was satanic, that we were gang members, and that we should stop doing this” (Julian).

Over the years, JOVI Group has organized the annual Festival for Life and Peace on 22nd Street in Villa Lobos I, and youth groups paint murals referencing peace and engage in creative troupes, camps, cultural festivals, and other activities.

Similar demonstrations against violence also take place in other shantytowns and poor neighborhoods in the metropolitan area of Guatemala City, such as El Limón, Ciudad Peronia, Tierra Nueva, Mario Alioto López, and Ciudad Quetzal. Groups in these communities that reject violence include *Jóvenes Activos* (Active Youth) Group in El Limón, *Peronia Adolescente* (Adolescent Peronia) and *Aguja* (Needle) in Ciudad Peronia, *Aliotos Locos* (Crazy Aliotos) in the shantytown of Mario Alioto López, and *Iqui Balam* (Moon Jaguar) in Ciudad Quetzal. Over time, youth in these different groups have gotten to know one another, and currently they share and exchange

experiences and carry out joint activities. Víctor told me about this process: “Bit by bit we got to know each other in the *HIJOS* marches, the Caja Lúdica festivals, and then guys from other shantytowns stated to invite us to go to El Limón, to Ciudad Quetzal, and we also invited them to come here to El Mezquital.”

HIJOS is a victim’s organization formed by children and family members of people who were disappeared during the armed conflict. Since 1999, HIJOS has organized numerous demonstrations in the capital against the military, for the recovery of historical memory, and to demand justice for the crimes of the armed conflict. HIJOS has included many youth from urban shantytowns in their marches, festivals, and activities; this is how youth from the shantytowns have learned about what happened during the armed conflict, since practically nothing is taught in Guatemala’s schools about the armed conflict.

Jóvenes contra la violencia / Youth against Violence

In 2009, a group of middle-class youth from the capital formed the Group Youth against Violence that organizes public demonstrations to reject insecurity in the country. Youth against Violence has carried out publicity campaigns, violence prevention workshops with middle-class and lower-middle-class youth, and lobbying activities with the government to improve the country’s security situation.⁶³ Many of the Youth against Violence activities have been financed by USAID.

The Group Youth against Violence arose in the context of protests by businesspeople and middle-class youth around the murder of lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg in May 2009. Protesters demanded the resignation of President Alvaro Colom because in his video, released posthumously, Rosenberg attributed his murder

⁶³ An example of the campaigns of Youth against Violence is the video *Jóvenes contra la violencia* available in Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_i4I4h-5vzE

to President Colom, his wife Sandra Torres, and other government officials. Through a judicial investigation, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the Public Prosecutor's Office revealed that Rosenberg's accusations were false and that he had planned his own murder with the collaboration of family and friends.⁶⁴ During the rallies, protesters used white shirts and people called them "those in white."

Activists in the shantytowns see the Youth against Violence with wariness because of differences in social class and political perspective. They view them with class prejudice and refer to them as "*fresitas* (snobs)," "*burguesitos* (little bourgeois)," "*hijos de papi y mami* (Daddy and Mommy's kids)," or "*los de blanco* (those in white)," the last referring to the white shirts that they wear to demonstrations. The activists believe that the Youth against Violence do not understand social stigmatization or police abuse because they do not suffer from such phenomena; nor do they share the middle-class youth's approach of lobbying politicians. The activists do not trust the government; they consider politicians to be corrupt liars who take advantage of youth to improve their public image and their political campaigns.

Activists in the shantytowns prefer to influence youth and people in their own communities to end violence, rather than the government or politicians; hence, they organize festivals, workshops, and educational activities in communities. Although the activists and Youth Against Violence have come together on occasion to discuss topics and coordinate joint activities, in general they do not reach agreements because of ongoing class prejudices and differences in the two groups' political approach.

⁶⁴ The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) is an UN special mission aimed to help the Guatemalan justice system to investigate and prosecute criminal groups operating in the State. On the Rosenberg case see the CICIG report *Tres años de labores* available on http://www.cicig.org/index.php?page=annual_reports

Meanwhile, youth in the communities' evangelical churches also carry out prayer gatherings, public religious services, and marches against violence. However, these actions have little impact in El Mezquital and marginal urban communities. Nothing seems to stop the violence; youth continue to die on a daily basis, and the population lives in a state of fear and anguish.

4.3. HOW TO PREVENT VIOLENCE?

In the 2000s, numerous Guatemalan NGOs, concerned about the spread of gangs in urban marginal neighborhoods, began to propose a violence prevention approach to keep children and youth from joining gangs. Among the first organizations to promote a preventative approach were the *Alianza para la Prevención del Delito* (Alliance for Crime Prevention, APREDE), Ceiba Group, *Instituto de Estudios Comparados en Ciencias Penales* (Institute for Comparative Studies on Criminal Science, ICCPG), *Fundación para la Juventud* (Youth Foundation, FUNDAJU), *Centro de Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos* (Center for Human Rights Legal Action, CALDH), *Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado* (Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, ODHAG), *Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible* (Teaching Institute for Sustainable Development, IEPADES), and others. The organizations' premise was that youth who did not go to school or work were "at risk" of joining gangs, and the strategy should be to provide them with opportunities for education, employment, sports, and cultural activities.

The organizations' main strategy was to open small community centers for "at risk" children and youth in marginalized urban neighborhoods of the metropolitan area, where classes and workshops were provided free of charge, so that youth would be "engaged in their free time." These centers and violence prevention programs were financed by international donor agencies, primarily USAID. In El Mezquital, the

first community centers for youth were created by *Grupo Ceiba* (Ceiba Group), the *Asociación Alianza Joven* (Youth Alliance Association), and FUNDESCO.

In 2006, the Ceiba Group opened a small center called Human Development Center (CDH), which offered youth free courses in computer skills, English, and painting; and later, it created a free high school. The Ceiba Group's programs were aimed at youth who were neither in school nor working, youth expelled from other schools because of poor behavior or low academic performance, youth who were above the average school age, and youth who did not attend school because of poverty or a lack of motivation. The Ceiba Group basically served youth to whom the educational system and the labor market failed to provide any opportunity.

Ceiba Group has wide-ranging working experience with youth in urban marginal communities. It formed in 1989 in El Limón of Zone 18, a marginal community in northern Guatemala City with a high crime rate; it steadily broadened its work to 10 communities in the country. The Ceiba Group provides alternative educational high school programs; vocational training programs in information and communication technology (TICS); and programs in community organizing and urban peace.

Meanwhile, in 2009, FUNDESCO created the Youth Corner, a small center that offers workshops in computer skills, theater, breakdance, and youth leadership. The Youth Center is run by youth who participated in the Catholic Church's Youth Ministry, and who gradually took charge of the project and became an independent group separate from FUNDESCO. The youth in the Youth Corner have a more political focus than the other youth groups in El Mezquital. In 2011, Youth Corner members spurred the creation of the MOJUDVI Network, along with four other participating organizations: Artiis, the Outreach Center, Ceiba Group, and JOVI. They organized

forums with the mayoral candidates in Villa Nueva and questioned them about community development and youth rights; and they created the *Agenda de desarrollo de las juventudes* (Youth Development Agenda), which they delivered to the Mayor of Villa Nueva to use as a basis for a municipal youth policy.

In 2011 the Youth Alliance Association opened the Outreach Center of El Mezquital and similarly offers free workshops in computer skills, English, stilt-walking, music, breakdance, and soccer, as well as psychological support to children and youth in the communities. The Center operates on the parish grounds and attends over 200 children and youth. Six youth volunteers participate, and it is sustained by its own funding. During my fieldwork, I volunteered at the Outreach Center and saw firsthand the enthusiasm among the youth involved in the Center's workshops and activities. For many of them, it was the only safe space for socializing with their peers; and it was a space open to all regardless of their religion.

The Outreach Center is a model created in 2006 by the USAID crime prevention program to keep youth in urban marginal neighborhoods from doing drugs or joining gangs. In 2006, the first such centers were opened with support from local churches in El Búcaro, Ciudad del Sol, and Palin. Later, the Youth Alliance Association, comprised of Guatemalan businesspeople, took over administering the outreach centers and replicating the model in other marginal communities.

Corporate Social Responsibility?

USAID has always insisted that Guatemalan businesses participate in crime prevention and gang member rehabilitation programs, under the notion of "corporate social responsibility." However, the results have been disappointing. In 2006, USAID and a group of business representatives launched a reality show called *Desafíos 10* to

help ten former gang members become small-scale businesspeople. Several gang members in El Mezquital participated in the reality show, and they relayed to me their deep disappointment at what happened during the show and in the months following. Aired as a series of episodes on Guatemalan national television, the show broadcast gang members' life histories and the training they received from businesses. Finally, the business representatives proposed that the gang members start a company to wash cars and another to shine shoes. The gang members felt extremely disappointed and humiliated because they had expected that they would be offered better jobs, but they continued on the reality show to the end. Weeks after the show ended, two of the gang members were killed; others left the country because the leaders of their gangs threatened them, and only one youth out of the ten worked at a car wash.⁶⁵

One of the gang members who participated said, "That was a mockery. They (USAID and the businesspeople) only used us to get famous, they didn't care about our life, just about getting famous. We thought that they were going to help us create a small business for real, an internet café or something like that. But we didn't expect that they would have us shining shoes or washing cars; that was humiliating, and everyone saw us on TV." This gang member told me that months later he sought out one of the businessmen from *Desafío 10* to ask for a job at one of his companies, and the man answered, "I'm sorry guy, but I can't help you, the show is over."

In 2007, USAID and Guatemalan businesspeople launched another, similar project called *Desafío 100*, with the aim of offering work to 100 former gang members, and in 2008 they presented *Desafío 200*, but this time without the reality show format. Very few gang members participated in these programs because they no longer trusted USAID or the companies; in addition, they feared threats from their gangs.

⁶⁵ See the video "Neoliberal reality TV fantasy: USAID exploits youth gang members," in which former gang members critique the reality show, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg1sPFLyCPs>

Meanwhile, some evangelical churches in El Mezquital also carry out prevention efforts: they offer talks and workshops on ethics in schools; they organize concerts, camp-outs, sports competitions, and recreational activities for children and youth. However, very few adolescents participate in these activities, so the churches prefer to focus on working with children. Moreover, rarely do churches manage to “convert” gang members to Christianity, because gangs practically prohibit their members from leaving the group without their permission.⁶⁶

Debates on Violence Prevention

Among activists there has been an extensive debate about how to prevent violence and youth gang involvement. The debates have primarily focus on five issues: a) the causes of gang violence, b) the concept of youth at-risk, c) strategies to prevent violence, d) the role of the State and of civil society in violence prevention, and e) the ways to work with gangs. Below I describe the major positions on these issues:

- a. In terms of the causes of gang violence, there are three major stances. Some argue that it is a social problem, that youth join gangs out of family abandonment, poverty, and lack of educational or employment opportunities; that is, that the primary cause is social exclusion. Others contend that it is a criminal problem and that youth join gangs to obtain easy money, weapons, drugs, and power. Yet others hold an intermediate position, affirming that gangs are the result of social exclusion but that they

⁶⁶ For the Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street Gang, gang membership is a life-long commitment, and there are only two ways out: by converting to Christianity or by fleeing the group and migrating elsewhere. On gang members' conversion to Christianity, see the detailed work by Brenneman R (2012), *Hommies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

have gradually turned into criminal groups due to the lack of social assistance from the State, hardline policies, and the proliferation of firearms.

- b.** There are two stances regarding the concept of youth at-risk. Some affirm that all the youth in marginal communities are at risk because they share the same socio-economic conditions: poverty, domestic violence, school drop-out, unemployment, easy access to drugs and weapons, etc., and that therefore prevention should be geared towards all the youth in the communities. Others, meanwhile, hold that those who are at risk are children and youth with more severe family problems and who face more obstacles to studying, working, or participating in youth groups; and that therefore prevention should focus on those groups.
- c.** In terms of violence prevention, in Guatemala a model of tiered prevention is followed, similar to that of public health, which is divided into first, second, and third tier prevention. First-tier or general prevention consists of offering all children and youth opportunities for schooling, work, youth group participation, sports, cultural activities, etc., to prevent them from committing crimes. Second-tier or focused prevention consists of specialized programs for children and youth considered “at risk” of committing crimes or joining gangs, such as street children, drug addicts, victims of domestic violence, inmates’ children, etc. Third-tier prevention focuses on rehabilitating prisoners so that they do not commit repeat offenses.

Following this classification scheme, social organizations in El Mezquital work in first-tier prevention, and their main strategy has been to create centers that offer education, occupational training, and sports and artistic

activities. Few organizations in Guatemala work on second- or third-tier prevention, that is, with more vulnerable groups like gang members and prisoners, because organizations lack sufficient capacity or resources to work with these groups.⁶⁷

- d. In terms of the role of the State and civil society in prevention, activists criticize the State because it assigns significant resources to police and military response and limited resources to preventing violence. In 2012, the government created a Vice-ministry in Crime Prevention as part of the Ministry of the Interior, but it lacks resources and qualified personnel. In El Mezquital, for example, there is no government program for preventing violence, and any preventative work is done by social organizations.
- e. There are two major positions regarding how to relate to gangs. The first is to not work with them because “it is dangerous.” Many activists and politicians say that gang members are “lost,” that “they are criminals,” and that “they are not going to change”; therefore, it is not worth developing prevention programs with them, but rather they should go to jail because it is no longer possible to work with them. The second stance is to negotiate with gang members, that is, that the State should make a pact with gangs to end violence and offer gang members economic opportunities so that they stop committing crimes, a pact similar to the 2012 gang truce in El Salvador. Many activists, however, believe that such a proposal is not feasible in

⁶⁷ Among the Guatemalan organizations that work with vulnerable groups, the following stand out: *Asociación Movimiento Jóvenes de la Calle* (Street Youth Movement Association, MOJOCA) and *Asociación Refugio de la Niñez* (Children’s Refuge Association) that work with street children and battered children; REMAR Association that works with drug addicts; and Nicky Cruz Association that works with former gang members. Those who work with inmates are the *Asociación para la Prevención del Delito* (Crime Prevention Association, APREDE), Caslen Association, *Asociación Senderos de Libertad* (Freedom Paths Association), *Colectivo Casa Artesana* (Artisan House Collective), some evangelical churches, and religious groups in the Catholic Church.

Guatemala because gang leaders resist change and the government refuses to negotiate with them, arguing that they are “criminal groups.”

Some activists propose working indirectly with gang members so that they participate individually and freely in prevention programs alongside other community youth, and in this way change gradually. However, this entails a slow and unlikely change because gang members do not have economic options for survival. As the Ceiba Group Director commented once to me, “When a young man learns how to make money by extorting, trafficking, or killing, it is very hard to convince him to change and to believe in legal ways of earning money. If we don’t offer them dignified opportunities, they are not going to change.”

Meanwhile, activists have different perspectives on the role of businesses in prevention. On the one hand, they blame businesses for youth’s social exclusion, because they do not offer job opportunities or they pay low wages; moreover, they do not want to pay higher taxes to improve social programs. On the other hand, activists realize that businesses are a key part of solving the problem. Youth Alliance and Ceiba Group, for instance, have approached many businesspeople to ask them for jobs for the youth who participate in their programs, but they have had little success because businesspeople have serious prejudice against youth from marginal communities and they “don’t want problems” in their companies. When they do offer work placements, they are often arduous jobs for young people that require them to work many hours for low wages; youth often end up leaving such jobs. An activist once said to me, “How is a young person going to accept working 10 hours a day in a *maquiladora* (garment factory) earning Q2,000 (\$256) a month, knowing that in a gang or through extortion they can earn the same amount in a week?”

Activists know that civil society's violence prevention programs are not enough to end violence or prevent youth from joining gangs. They work with scant resources and have limited coverage; they only serve a small number of children and youth. In El Mezquital, for instance, the Grupo Ceiba and Outreach Center programs serve approximately 400 children and youth in an area where over 16,000 children and youth live. In addition, civil society programs are not able to attend to youths' emotional and economic problems related to deep-seated family conflicts and the fact that many of them live in extreme poverty. Activists believe that the issue of violence will not change until the State and the economic elite in the country offer youth dignified opportunities for education, work, and participation.

4.4. STRUGGLES AGAINST SOCIAL STIGMATIZATION

Youth activists and artists in El Mezquital constantly face prejudice and criticism by those who judge them for their clothes, speech, activities, and for being poor. Several times I heard adults in the communities make comments about them like "those guys are bums, they should look for work"; "look at them, they spend all day making noise, they have nothing to do"; "their hair is so long they look like *mareros* (gang members)"; "look at those lazy girls, they should be at home doing chores and not hanging out with those guys." Youth are bothered by adults' intolerance and offended at being called "*mareros*," a pejorative term that gang members themselves also reject.

The attitude of rejection is higher outside the communities. Often, when I would accompany Artii's Group members to the city center, I would observe the expressions of distrust on people's faces in buses, streets, and restaurants. Women would hide their purses and move away; men would look at them with mistrust and would murmur about their clothing, long hair, or piercings. Obviously, the youth would feel bad and would be bothered by people's reactions and distrust. If people saw youth

with tattoos, they would assume that they were gang members; youth therefore preferred not to get tattoos.

Companies often decline to give work to youth who live in shantytowns or poor neighborhoods. Julián once told me how he was denied a job for mentioning that he lived in El Mezquital:

“Once I went to an office to look for work and I did well in the interview. The person who interviewed me treated me well and even joked with me, but her face changed when I said that I lived in El Mezquital. She got all serious and said that she’d call me later, but she never called me. I know that they denied me the job because I live here. I felt rage then that because of the *mareros*’ fault I was denied a job.”

Many youth feel ashamed to say that they live in El Mezquital because people reject them, they have a hard time making friends, they are refused jobs, and they do not have access to loans or bank credit. To avoid discrimination, they prefer to say that they live elsewhere or to give a relative’s or friend’s address. Ana, a 24-year-old activist, told me that her classmates at the San Carlos University made fun of her, saying: “how *grueso* (rough) it is that you live there”; “aren’t you afraid to live there?”; “you mean that I have *paro* (protection) through you because you live in El Mezquital.”⁶⁸

Prejudice against urban shantytown residents is historical. The city’s upper and middle classes and the government have always portrayed them as “delinquents,” “thieves,” or “lazy” because they are poor, many are indigenous, and because they have occupied lands illegally. The government has denied them access to services like water, electricity, drainage systems, health care, education, etc., arguing that the

⁶⁸ The term *paro* is used by gang members to refer to the support and protection that they provide to their members and collaborators; for instance, they say, “I have *paro* with the *mara* (gang).”

shantytowns are “illegal” and the residents therefore do not have rights. However, communities have struggled arduously to counter prejudice and to achieve community development.

This prejudice deepened along with the rise in insecurity and gang proliferation in the shantytowns in the late 1990s. The government and the media began to classify these communities as “*zona rojas* (red zones, i.e. high-crime zones)” dominated by *maras*. A stereotype began to form in the public imagination, of “*mareros*” as violent youth dressed in baggy clothes, with tennis shoes, short hair, and tattoos, who live in the shantytowns. This stereotype quickly extended to other youth, as people started using the term “*mareros*” to refer to groups of youth who used a different clothing style, like rockers, rappers, *reguetoneros*, emos, and skateboarders, as well as artists and activists.

Media have played a part in reinforcing stereotypes of marginal communities as “red zones,” and of young men in these communities as “*mareros*.” During my fieldwork I monitored *Nuestro Diario*, one of the most popular newspapers in Guatemala, and I logged 14 news articles about El Mezquital during a one-year period (June 2012 – July 2013). These articles covered four topics: homicides, armed conflicts between gangs, captures of gang members and extortionists, and trials of gang members. The titles that I recorded include: “*Mareros* attack youth in church,” “Former gang member riddled with bullets,” “Gang members murder student,” “Four hitmen captured,” “Gang members stand trial for extortion,” “Gang members convicted of murders.” The images accompanying the text show poor youth with tattoos, short hair, and loose clothing, or dead bodies on community streets.

Nuestro Diario covers hundreds of similar news pieces about all of the urban shantytowns in Guatemala; it also publishes reports about gangs’ organization and

criminal activities. This adds to the public image of urban shantytowns as highly dangerous places dominated by gangs. For example, whenever I told friends or others that I was investigating youth in El Mezquital, they would look at me in astonishment and make comments like “How dangerous, aren’t you scared?” or “There are lots of *mareros* there, be careful.” Most of them had never been to El Mezquital, but through media coverage had formed an image of a poor, dangerous, gang-filled place.

This image of danger and gangs has grown to encompass practically the entire metropolitan area. People who live in the provinces avoid traveling to the capital because, they say, “it is very dangerous,” “there are lots of *maras*,” “(there) they steal and kill.” People in the provinces feel a deep fear and rejection towards youth who look like gang members; when they see a young man from the capital or who has lived in the capital, they worry that he might be a gang member. This fear has led many rural communities to form security committees and social cleansing groups to kill “alleged” gang members, as has occurred in communities in the eastern and western parts of the country where there are practically no gang members because security committees have expelled or killed them.

Youth groups and human rights organizations in Guatemala use the phrase “social stigmatization” to refer to the criminalization, police abuse, and discrimination against youth in urban shantytowns. In 2007, a coalition of human rights organizations in Guatemala published the report “*Ejecuciones extrajudiciales de jóvenes estigmatizados* (Extrajudicial Executions of Stigmatized Youth)” (CALDH, ICCPG, SEDEM 2007) to denounce the practices of social cleansing and police abuse against youth from marginal neighborhoods. In 2011, another group of Central American organizations published the report “*Ejecuciones extrajudiciales de jóvenes estigmatizados en Centroamérica* (Extrajudicial Executions of Stigmatized Youth in Central America)” (ICCPG, FESPAD, PSJ 2011), to demonstrate that the problem was

similar in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Youth leaders in El Mezquital use the term social stigmatization to refer to the criminalization of youth in marginal communities.

Social stigma entails a rejection of individuals or groups whose physical or cultural characteristics are considered by the dominant group to be unacceptable or outside “the norm.” The concept was employed by Goffman in the 1970s to refer to the process by which others’ reactions affect individuals’ “normal” identity. People who are associated with a stigma are seen by the majority as “abnormal,” such as mentally ill or disabled people, gays, and criminals (Goffman 1963). In this sense, in Guatemala a stigma against “*mareros*” has been created, and they are viewed as pathological youth who act violently; this stigma has grown to encompass all young men who live in marginal neighborhoods who are seen as “*mareros*,” “dangerous,” “delinquent,” or “at risk.”

The social stigma against youth from marginal neighborhoods has a moral and criminal connotation; the police and the army perceive and treat young men from these communities as criminals. Police task forces and the army constantly detain young men without cause; they search them abusively, requiring them to take off their shirts to check if they have tattoos; they insult them; they hit them if they resist being searched; and occasionally they steal their belongings. Human rights organizations in Guatemala have documented police abuse against youth in marginal neighborhoods and against other vulnerable groups like street children, sex workers, gays, and women (Anderson 2000, Moran y Paz 2005, Svendsen 2007, Méndez 2013).

Police constantly search youth activists and artists in El Mezquital. In general they stop them because of their clothing style; because many have long hair, loose clothes, and piercings; and because they usually move in groups, which they do out of

friendship and for security. Women are generally not searched because Guatemalan law stipulates that only a female police officer can search a woman, and the vast majority of police officers and soldiers that patrol El Mezquital are men. Many youth decide to adopt a “normal” clothing style to avoid being discriminated against and searched by the police.

Youth groups have carried out various activities to denounce social stigmatization and police abuse. In 2010 and 2011, over 75 youth groups, the majority from urban marginal communities, launched a national campaign, “It’s not a crime to be young,” which included festivals, meetings, posters, fliers, videos, and other promotional materials to demand respect for cultural expression and an end to the criminalization of youth. In 2012 and 2013 in El Mezquital, JOVI Group and MOJUDVI launched the campaign “It’s not a crime to live here,” which included festivals and workshops with youth in the communities’ junior high and high schools. However, these activities have had little impact on public opinion, and discrimination and police abuse against youth continue to increase.

Figure 8: A Youth March in El Mezquital



4.5. ART AS ACTIVISM

Youth groups have always used art as a means to express their activism and to attract attention among other youth. In the 1990s, they used theater and Andean protest music to express their social vision and political thinking. Starting in the 2000s, they began to use other forms of artistic expression, like drumming, stilt-walking, juggling, graffiti, and dance. Youth in El Mezquital discovered these types of community art expression through Caja Lúdica.

Between 2000 and 2006 Caja Lúdica supported Rhoje Group's creation and its activities, when it held workshops and art festivals within and outside of El Mezquital. In 2008, Julián and other youth formed the JOVI Group and started using community

art as a means to denounce violence against youth and to prevent youth violence. JOVI started offering theater, miming, stilt-walking, and music workshops in schools; organizing marches and cultural festivals in the communities; and participating in spaces for dialogue and coordination with other youth groups and social groups within and outside the communities.

In 2010, some youth separated from JOVI to form Artiis Group. They got involved in offering workshops in music, stilts, dance, and miming to children and youth at the Outreach Center in El Mezquital and in schools, as well as organizing and participating in festivals. Currently over 25 young men and women participate in Artiis Group; they present art shows at institutions and companies that hire them for events. The group uses the funds from their artistic presentations to pay the young people and to cover organizational expenses. However, the group resists becoming an entertainment business; community commitment and activism are more important to the members. For them, art is a means of transforming youths' lives and the communities; hence, they continue to provide community-based art workshops to schools free of charge, participate in marches and social protests, and work with other youth groups. For Víctor, art serves several aims:

“Art helps youth know themselves, so that they can express their feelings, so that youth can struggle to change their communities, and to earn a bit of money. I, for example, feel very fortunate to work in something that I like (community art).”

Most activists and artists are volunteers who face economic difficulties; it is hard for them to find formal work, as it is for most youth in El Mezquital. Their families often criticize them for devoting their time to community art and pressure them to work and contribute to the family's income. William, for instance, says that the money that he earns from the Artiis shows is not enough to help his mother and

siblings, and he has to seek temporary jobs as a house painter, mason's assistant, or product loader in a warehouse.

The act of presenting a show to a private company or public institution presents a dilemma to young artists: on the one hand, they feel that this limits their capacity for social criticism and protest, but on the other hand, they need financial resources for their membership and their activism. Artiis, for instance, supports itself with payments earned through its art shows, because it does not receive financial support from international donors or Guatemalan foundations.⁶⁹ However, Artiis members and other youth artists' groups resist accepting funding from political parties or engaging in political campaigning because they perceive that politicians only want to use them.

Youth artists generally hold their presentations and activities on the streets to recover the public spaces that have been taken over by the gangs and the police, and to bring joy to people. Community art is not just a pastime for them, but rather a personal and social project. As Artiis member Hugo says, "For me, art began as a hobby, but bit by bit it turned into a life option and a way to help the other youth... With art I realized that I could help other youth to get away from violence and to show them the value in helping others. In the group we are like a family, we help each other out."

The analogy of the group as "family" is used by gangs as well. In practice the two groups, artists and gang members, share similar characteristics: members show affection and solidarity to one another; they have a particular way of dressing; they

⁶⁹ The vast majority of NGOs in Guatemala are sustained by international funding, but it is very difficult for youth groups and local organizations to access these grants due to their limited administrative and fundraising capacity and a lack of contacts when competing for resources.

share slang and symbols, as well as norms for interactions and behavior. The difference is that the artistic groups express their energy, feelings, and social discontent through art, while gang members do it through violence and crime.

Artists youth, for instance, meet every afternoon on the street in front of Víctor's house, a space that functions as group headquarters: there they rehearse, hang out, eat, plan activities, and share their personal problems; they feel like "a family." Gang youth do similar activities: they meet at a given *punto* (a street, a ball court, or a house), they talk, hang out, share their problems, and plan their activities. For both groups, respect among members is fundamental; perhaps for this reason, gangs respect youth artists and do not bother them during their rehearsals or shows.

I once asked Tomás, a youth activist from El Mezquital, about the difference between activists and gang members. He replied, "We are very similar. Both of our groups have a lot of energy, we like to be out in the streets and we like it when people pay attention to us. But the difference is that they do bad things and we don't. They only think of themselves and don't care about their community. We (activists), on the other hand, work for our community. That is the difference."

Activists criticize the gangs for being violent and attacking their own communities. Activists understand that gang members are youth like them and that they face poverty, exclusion, and social stigmatization, but they do not approve of gangs attacking communities or harassing other youth like themselves. Activists' primary motivation, as they express it, is "to work for the community"; according to their narrative, their commitment to community has formed through a process of participating in youth groups through churches, schools, NGOs, and artists' spaces, but it is also a personal decision. This indicates the influence of youth groups and young people's free will.

The majority of the youth activists and artists are male. Approximately 70% of youth group members are male, and 30% female. It is very difficult for women to participate in youth groups since their parents do not let them leave their homes because of insecurity on the streets, because they fear that they will be sexually harassed in the groups, and because they do not consider activism or art to be serious or productive activities for women. Azucena told me that her mother challenges her all the time for devoting her time to theater and activism: "Why don't you look for a job or get married, instead of hanging out with those bums and being involved in such nonsense?" Azucena gives theater workshop for children and youth on the weekends, and states that few women attend the workshops because "their parents don't give them permission" to leave the house.

In spite of their limited participation in youth groups, women are starting to have greater leadership positions in these groups. Of the five organizations with which I worked in El Mezquital, two are led by women: Youth Corner and the Outreach Center. However, women leaders face the *machismo* (sexism) that dominates the groups and the communities. Ana says that her relatives and neighbors criticize her constantly for "*andar* (hanging out)" with a group of men, and that she has to perpetually earn the respect of group members who do not acknowledge her leadership because she is a woman.

Women have always faced great obstacles to participating in and leading organized groups in the communities. In the 1980s people criticized women who participated in land takeovers and on neighbors' committees, and in the 1990s they criticized women who participated in housing construction and community urbanization. People called them "lazy," "nosy," "self-interested," and their partners monitored them and forbade them from participating in groups. Women's

involvement became more difficult after the growth of gangs and the rise of insecurity in the communities, as many women stopped attending group activities out of fear of gangs and violence, and parents started forbidding their adolescent daughters from leaving the house.

The youth groups in El Mezquital gradually started interacting with other groups and national and international youth networks. *Artiis* and *JOVI*, for example, are part of the national *Red de Arte Comunitario* (Community Art Network), comprising over 25 community art groups from marginal zones, and are part of the *Red Maraca* (Maraca Network), a coalition of Central American artistic groups that holds exchanges and activities for its members. Several youth from *Artiis* and *JOVI* have participated in Maraca Network's international gatherings. The Community Art Network organizes an annual *Chitiq* Gathering; over 400 young stilt-walkers from across the country attend and together form the biggest troupe in Guatemala. In 2014, this gathering will be held in El Mezquital and will be organized by *Artiis*.

Youth in El Mezquital have also participated in the political struggles of the Guatemalan youth movement. They have participated in the *Coordinadora Juventud por Guatemala* (Youth for Guatemala Coordination, CJG), a national coalition of youth organizations that push for youth rights. The CJG has presented several initiatives to increase youth participation in public entities and political parties, to strengthen youth institutions, and to improve public policies for youth. Nevertheless, the State basically does not listen; for instance, in 2008 youth organizations presented a draft bill to Congress, but six years later representatives show no interest in signing it into law.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ For more information on the struggles of the Guatemalan youth movement, see the report by CALDH (2009), *¿Y la juventud qué? Estado situacional de los derechos de la juventud en Guatemala*.

Exchanges with other national and international youth networks have helped activists in El Mezquital experience the social reality in other communities, learn new activism strategies and community art techniques, and broaden their political vision. For instance, in 2009, youth from El Mezquital participated in the protests against the coup d'état in Honduras and issued several statements against the repression of Honduran youth artists and activists.

Another type of artistic expression that has spread in recent years is breakdance. The Youth Corner and Outreach Center offer breakdance workshops that attract many youth; youth perform at cultural festivals, and several of them have won national and international dance competitions. Hip-hop and breakdance are very popular among youth in Guatemala's urban shantytowns, and in these communities popular hip-hop bands have formed, such as *Los Aliotos Lokos* and *Bacteria* Soundsystem Crew, whose song lyrics reflect the realities of poverty, discrimination, violence, and police abuse that youth in shantytowns experience.

In general, the vast majority of youth in El Mezquital do not participate in any organized group; many do not even know about local groups due to population growth, insecurity, and the individualism that is promoted by capital and by the consumer culture. According to my estimates, some 600 youth participate in youth groups, either in church or in activist and artist groups; this represents 8% of the total of 8,000 youth who live in El Mezquital. Around 200 youth participate and collaborate with gangs, that is, 2% of the population. That means that 90% of youth in the communities are not involved in any organized group, and essentially live isolated and shut-in, afraid, in their homes. Where is this generation headed?

Chapter 5

The Capital Turned Violent!

Violence and Fear in the Guatemalan Metropolitan Area

On July 17, 2013, Moisés, 23-years-old, tried to steal a cell phone in zone 1 of Guatemala City (downtown district), but Leonel, a 19-year-old student, prevented the theft, and Moisés shot him in the head. A group of students who were with Leonel, together with some onlookers, pursued Moisés and lynched him in front of two police officers. Eventually an ambulance arrived and transported Moisés, badly beaten, and Leonel, who had a bullet wound. Days later, both young men died in the hospital.

Leonel studied at the San Sebastián School, a prestigious private high school in the capital, and his death provoked national distress because he was “a good boy.” Meanwhile, public opinion condemned Moisés for being “a criminal,” even though he was lynched to death. Leonel was a strong, white young man who lived in a middle-class neighborhood; Moisés was a dark-skinned, thin young man who lived in Villa Lobos I, a poor neighborhood next to El Mezquital. Leonel was buried as “a victim of violence” and a hero; Moisés was buried as “a criminal”, and no one was interested in his history.

In this chapter I examine urban violence and fear from a broader perspective. Based on my ethnographic work in El Mezquital, I analyze the escalation of violence in the metropolitan area of Guatemala City in the postwar period. I provide statistics on urban crime to illustrate the extent of the problem, and describe the spread of gangs in the shantytowns and poor neighborhoods. Based on my fieldwork I question the concept of “transnational gangs” that many reports and studies on Central

American gangs repeat almost automatically. I argue that the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang in the metropolitan area of Guatemala City operate with local autonomy and do not depend on organized crime.

I examine the perverse relationship between the police and gangs, on the one hand, the police is complicit with gangs and participate in extortion; on the other hand, the police harbors social cleansing groups aimed at eliminating gang members. In this chapter I examine the role of the police in the escalation of crime and fear in the metropolitan area, as well as the consequences of social cleansing. Finally, I examine the effects of fear on social relationships, and people's strategies to survive and resist state and criminal violence.

5.1. A CITY OF LUXURY AND POVERTY

A quick tour through Guatemala City clearly reveals the immense socio-economic inequality in the country: grand buildings and opulent shopping centers coexist alongside precarious shantytowns and impoverished neighborhoods. The limited economic elite in the country lives in exclusive estates and condominiums; the ladino middle-class lives in gated neighborhoods protected by private security systems; and the indigenous people and poor ladinos who comprise the vast majority of the population live in poor neighborhoods and shantytowns on the sides of ravines.

Guatemala City was founded in 1776 after the previous capital, Antigua Guatemala, was destroyed by the Santa Marta earthquakes in 1773. Since its founding, Guatemala City has been the center of political and economic power in the country. During the colonial period (1540-1821), the city headquartered the Spanish power's Captaincy General of Guatemala, which encompassed the provinces of Chiapas, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Following Independence in 1821, it became the capital of the United Provinces of Central

America until 1824 when the provinces divided. Historically, the country's criollos (European descendants) and economic elite have lived in the capital, and in the Twentieth Century a small but burgeoning ladino (mestizo, of mixed race/culture) middle class took charge of managing the companies and businesses held by the economic elite and by the State bureaucracy. Criollos and middle-class ladinos view the capital as "their space" and systematically reject indigenous people and poor ladinos who migrate to the city.⁷¹

Starting in the colonial period, indigenous people were relegated to residing in the northwestern highlands. There they majority continued to live in conditions of extreme poverty and marginalization. Poor ladinos, meanwhile, concentrated in the southern and western parts of the country. However, the second half of the Twentieth Century witnessed a massive migration of indigenous and ladino people to the capital due to the poverty in the rural areas, the 1976 earthquake, and the State-induced terror of the armed conflict in the 1970s and 1980s. In short order this caused rapid and uncontrolled population growth in the metropolitan region.

Currently, the metropolitan area surrounding Guatemala City consists of 15 municipalities; over three million people are estimated to live in this area. In the last 50 years, the metropolitan population has increased fivefold. In 1964, the population of the Department of Guatemala, including the area where the capital is located, was 630,846; by 2013 it had reached 3,238,555. In municipalities adjacent to the capital, the population has boomed: in Villa Nueva, for example, the population grew from 7,236 in 1964 to 539,909 in 2013; this entails a growth rate of 736.14%. Other municipalities have seen similar increases, such as Villa Canales (625.57%), Mixco

⁷¹ On the historical creation of the criollos and powerful groups in Guatemala, see the extraordinary work by Casaus, Marta Elena (2007), *Guatemala: linaje y racismo*. Guatemala: F&G Editores, 3rd Edition.

(618.91%), and Chinautla (487.70%); while the population of Guatemala City proper has had moderate growth (73.41%).

Table 2: Population Growth in the Metropolitan Area

Municipality	1964	1981	1994	2002	2013	Growth % 1964 - 2013
Guatemala	572,671	754,243	823,301	942,348	993,552	73.41%
Mixco	7,756	179,293	209,791	403,689	487,830	618.91%
Villa Nueva	7,236	56,648	101,295	355,901	539,909	736.14%
Petapa	2,035	9,619	12,949	101,242	175,331	851.57%
Villa Canales	2,373	3,909	5,525	103,814	150,823	625.57%
Amatitlán	12,248	21,559	36,999	82,870	112,912	82.18%
Santa Catarina	2,212	4,925	8,193	63,767	92,150	406.59%
San José Pinu	2,554	5,296	7,225	47,278	74,395	281.28%
Fraijanes	1,769	3,121	5,048	30,701	46,448	252.56%
Palencia	3,114	3,818	6,007	47,705	61,237	186.65%
San Pedroyan.	3,340	3,842	5,679	44,996	75,251	215.30%
Chinautla	2,601	30,077	37,102	95,312	129,454	487.70%
San Raymundo	1,624	2,519	4,579	22,615	30,680	178.91%
San Juan Sacate.	5,363	6,726	8,349	152,583	225,821	411.07%
San Pedro Sacate.	3,950	5,358	8,764	31,503	42,740	98.20%
Total	630,846	1,090,953	1,280,806	2,526,324	3,238,553	413.36%

Source: National population censuses and INE projection 2014

The process of urbanization has been moderate in Guatemala compared to other Latin American countries. In 1964, Guatemala's urban sector comprised 33.6% of the population; by 2011 it had risen to 48.5%. This situates the country at a moderate level of urbanization, comparable to Honduras (45.6%) and Haiti (37.5%), and Aruba (45.4%). In the most developed countries, the urban population ratio generally surpasses 70%; in less developed countries it averages 42%; and in poor countries the rate approximates 26.6%. Over half of Guatemala's population, 51.5%, continues to live in rural areas (ENCOVI 2011).

An estimated third of the population in the metropolitan area lives in shantytowns and poor neighborhoods with limited basic services, many of which are situated on the slopes of ravines. The metropolitan area is home to over 350 shantytowns and an unknown number of poor neighborhoods, similar to El Mezquital, which arose from land takeovers.

The first paradigmatic land takeover in Guatemala City was *La Limonada* in 1959, when more than 10,000 people occupied the slopes of the La Palma plantation in Zone 5, in the center of Guatemala City. Most of the occupants were peasants who had migrated to the city in the 1950s due to rural poverty. Residents of the capital immediately rejected the La Limonada occupation. The action was so emblematic that for many years the residents of the capital called all slums in Guatemala City “las limonadas.” Over time, La Limonada continued to grow, and it now comprises five communities: El Esfuerzo, El Limoncito, 15 de Agosto, Lourdes I, and Lourdes II. It is estimated that over 12,000 people live there.

In 1973, sociologist Bryan Roberts conducted a study on the shantytowns and poor neighborhoods of Guatemala City, and he explained residents’ difficulties in establishing trusting relationships and organizing. According to Roberts (1973), people in these areas faced many struggles in organizing because of the diversity of their origins, their family histories, and their mobility within the capital; they were strangers united by poverty in a city on the cusp of modernization.

The first great wave of land takeovers in the metropolitan area occurred in the wake of the 1976 earthquake: an estimated 126 shantytowns and provisional camps sprung up as a result of the earthquake. The government offered plots of land with water and drainage systems for earthquake victims, on the condition that people build their own houses. Thus arose poor neighborhoods such as Tierra Nueva I,

Sakerty, Madre Dormida, Tecúm Umán II, Las Margaritas, El Amparo, Los Granizos, Niño Dormido, Kjell Laugerud, Martínez de Lejarza, El Limón, and El Mezquital. However, the demand for housing was greater than what the government offered; as a result, people invaded the lands around poor neighborhoods, but the army quickly evicted them (Quezada 1985).

The second great wave of land invasions occurred in the 1990s, when thousands of survivors of the armed conflict migrated to the capital, and other communities were formed, such as La Franja, El Encinal, La Frontera, and La Maranata in Tierra I and II; La Unión; 8 de Diciembre, Las Arenitas, and Villa Lobos II; Ramiro de León Carpio and Ciudad Peronia; Las Guacamayas; Las Torres and El Cerrito. As a result of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, many residents of ravines and slopes in the capital lost their homes. The State relocated them onto neighboring municipal lands, such as Palencia, Villa Canales, and San Pedro Ayampuc. The aim was to decentralize urban pockets of poverty (Moran 2011).

Land takeovers continue into the present. While I did my field work (2012-2013), several lands were occupied in zones 1, 5, and 7 of the capital. However, the police violently evicted the occupants, in full view of TV cameras and the national press, and the government did not offer the occupants any housing options. The media represented the occupants as "opportunists" who acted "illegally," and justified the violent actions of the army and police.⁷² Meanwhile, inhabitants of the capital referred to the "lazy people" and "thieves," and made comments like "Who knows where these people came from, they should return to their towns," "How ugly those shacks over there are, they should be evicted"; and they justified the government's violent actions.

⁷² *El Periódico*, March 11, 2012, "De cómo se forma un asentamiento". *CPR Urbana*, August 13, 2013, "Militares desalojan asentamiento Jacobo Árbenz y arrojan a la calle a cientos de niñas y niños."

The upper and middle classes of the capital have always rejected the people of urban shantytowns. Their profound social stigma is evident in the epithets “*choleros*” and “*mucos*” (pejorative terms for poor people), “*maleantes*” (thugs) and “*mareros*” (gangbangers). The central and municipal governments, meanwhile, systematically deny them basic services, and their communities are classified as “*zonas rojas*” (red zones) due to the presence of gangs and the high crime rate.

Urban Poverty

Based on the Gini Coefficient, Guatemala is the ninth most unequal country in the world, surpassed only by Angola, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Comoras, Haiti, Honduras, and South Africa.⁷³ According to the National Survey of Living Conditions (ENCOVI 2011), 53.73% of Guatemala’s population lives in poverty and 13.33% lives in extreme poverty. The Government considers as poor those who survive on less than Q9,030.93 per capita annually (US \$3 per day), while those in extreme poverty survive on Q4,380 annually (\$1.50 per day).

Table 3: National Poverty: Comparison of 2000, 2006, and 2011

Year	Extreme Poverty	Non Extreme Poverty	Total Poverty
2000	15.70%	40.30%	56.00%
2006	15.20%	35.80%	51.00%
2011	13.33%	40.38%	53.71%

Source: ENCOVI 2011.

⁷³ The Gini coefficient is an international tool that employs socio-economic indicators to measure the degree of inequality in income distribution among individuals and households within a country. It is calculated on a scale of 0 to 100, with an equitable society approaching 0 and an unequal society approaching 100. Guatemala in 2010 scored 53.7 (IDH 2011).

This comparative table shows that poverty has increased by 2.71% over the past five years but extreme poverty has declined by 1.87%, which means that about 25,560 people rose from extreme poverty and improved their living conditions. Households in extreme poverty have an average of seven members and have low levels of formal education, while poor households have an average of five members. The poorest areas are those with the largest indigenous populations: Alta Verapaz (78.24%), Sololá (77.47%), Totonicapán (73.29%), and El Quiché (71.25%); while the departments with higher ladino population register less poverty: Guatemala (18.64%), Escuintla (39.64%) and El Progreso (41.05%). The poverty rate is higher in rural area (65.3%) than urban areas (34.97%). This reflects the deep racial inequality and the discrimination against indigenous peoples that persist in Guatemala.

Urban poverty is concentrated in shantytowns and poor neighborhoods like El Mezquital. In 2010, the Catholic church in El Mezquital conducted a survey in the communities that revealed that 22% of the population was unemployed, 25% had regular jobs, and 53% worked in the informal economy, that is, they were engaged in activities such as selling food, footwear, clothing, toys, ornaments, etc.; collecting and selling plastics, aluminum, glass, and scrap metal; and washing and watching cars.⁷⁴

The Catholic Church survey indicates that the daily cost of feeding a family of four was Q75 per day (US\$10), without taking into account fixed costs such as propane gas, electricity, water, transportation, medicine, and telephone services, among others. However, most people who work received an average salary of Q2,000 per month, that is, Q66.66 per day (US \$8.33). Families were unable to afford the cost of food and other basic needs such as health care and education. Thus, most people

⁷⁴ Pastoral Plan of Dios Con Nosotros Parish, 2011-2015.

borrow from family, friends, and moneylenders; take on temporary jobs; eat only once or twice a day; or limit their diet to beans, rice, and tortillas.

However, many people in poor neighborhoods do not acknowledge that they are poor, and they discriminate against people from the shantytowns. In El Mezquital, for example, even though they endure the same poverty and social exclusion, the residents of the *colonia* continue to discriminate against the people of the shantytowns, and refer to them with the same derogatory epithets that the upper and middle classes call all urban poor people: “*chusma*” (riffraff), “*choleros*” (bumpkins), and “*ladrones*” (thieves). Many residents of El Mezquital prefer to say they live in a *colonia* rather than a shantytown to avoid discrimination or out of a desire for social mobility.

Many people in the capital do not like talking about poverty and try to hide their poverty. They are ashamed to talk about poverty openly, or they refer to it as a problem that affects others, as if poverty were a private matter. This presents a serious problem because it prevents people from organizing and demanding that the State respect their rights.

5.2. GROWTH AND INTENSIFICATION OF URBAN VIOLENCE

People in the metropolitan area live in a state of constant distress over the violent crimes that occur in streets, buses, and all public spaces; the crimes that especially disturb them are homicide, femicide, extortion, and robbery. People feel anxious about the possibility of being physically hurt or killed over a mugging or extortion or even by mistake. People in Guatemala therefore speak of violence rather than crime.

That does not mean that other crimes or violent acts do not occur in Guatemala. In 2013, the crimes most frequently reported to the justice system were domestic violence (15.11%), threats (14.42%), larceny (7.37%), and mild injury (5.26%).⁷⁵ Undoubtedly, domestic violence against women is the most pervasive crime in Guatemala; however, I do not include it in this analysis because it was not a part of my research and it is not unique to the urban area. In this study I focus on the violent crimes that cause the greatest fear on the streets and in urban public spaces.

Homicides skyrocketed during the postwar period. Between 1997 and 2013, 80,303 homicides occurred across the country, 37% in the metropolitan area. Of the victims, 89% were men and 11% women; 85% of the murders were committed with firearms.⁷⁶ These statistics reveal that post-war violence is predominantly an urban and male phenomenon.

Homicides occur primarily in places populated by ladinos; the departments with the highest homicide rates are Guatemala at 37.3%, Escuintla at 9.5%, Petén with 6.4%, and Izabal with 5.4%. Predominantly indigenous departments, meanwhile, have almost no homicides: Totonicapán has 0.45%; Sololá, 0.60%; and Baja Verapaz, 0.74%. These data indicate that cultural factors either fuel or contain violence. In general, rural indigenous communities are more tightly knit than urban ladino communities. Many indigenous communities have conserved their own leadership structures, social control systems, and conflict resolution methods; moreover, indigenous communities share responsibilities in tending, protecting, and

⁷⁵ See report on 2013 activities of the Office of Public Prosecution. Available at <http://www.mp.gob.gt/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Memoria-de-Labores-2013.pdf>

⁷⁶ See GAM report (2014), La violencia después de la firma de la paz, based on National Civilian Police data. <http://areadetransparencia.blogspot.com/2014/08/la-violencia-despues-de-los-acuerdos-de.html#!/2014/08/la-violencia-despues-de-los-acuerdos-de.html>

supervising children and youth. Further, in indigenous communities, the police force is essentially absent and State presence is limited.

Graph 2: Homicides 1997 - 2013



Source: National Civilian Police

The graph demonstrates that the first decade of 2000 was extremely violent. Homicides began to rise during the administration of President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004). At that time the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang expanded throughout the metropolitan area, and armed confrontations between the two gangs intensified. Homicides heightened during the Oscar Berger administration (2004-2008), when gangs began to extort in their own communities and the government implemented a social cleansing policy to eliminate gang members and alleged criminals. Finally, in the first part of the Alvaro Colón administration (2008-2010), homicides increased due to extortion schemes and ongoing social cleansing practices. While perhaps not the sole reasons behind the phenomenon, these factors undoubtedly influenced the rise in homicides in Guatemala.

Homicides began to decrease in 2010, for two possible reasons. First, that year the La MS and La 18 gangs agreed on a truce to stop killing each other, since they realized that they were losing many of their members to social cleansing and inter-gang warfare. The truce was temporary and did not mean an end to the war between the two groups. As recounted in chapter two, El Seco, a member of La MS, spoke to me about this truce: “gang members stopped killing each other because they realized that they were running out of people.” The truce was a secret and practical strategy in the midst of an adverse situation. Secondly, in 2010 social cleansing began to wane, and investigations by the justice system improved. Claudia Paz y Paz, a renowned human rights defense lawyer, took office that year as Attorney General; she helped improve the investigative capacity of the Public Prosecutor’s Office and prosecuted police officers and government officials who had been involved in social cleansing in the preceding years.

The population is not only overwhelmed by the quantity of homicides but also by the brutality with which the crimes are committed. In the metropolitan area, people often see horrifying crimes similar to those committed during the armed conflict: mutilated corpses dumped on the streets, massacres of entire families, armed attacks on buses, raped and dismembered women. People do not comprehend the motives behind such cruelty and hatred.

Crime reports pinpoint the following motives for homicides: gang rivalry, robbery, extortion, social cleansing, and personal revenge. Practically all perpetrators are men, many of them gang members and assassins for hire, and it is known that many of the assassins for hire are former members of the military or police. The reports also indicate that over 70% of homicides go unpunished because the justice system does not investigate or penalize the killers; this impunity

encourages perpetrators to continue committing crimes (UNDP 2009, PDH 2012, GAM 2014).

Official reports on femicides link the murders of women to gang problems, the settling of scores between organized crime groups, crimes of passion, and “common crime.” But feminists attest that the root causes are sexism and the power inequality between men and women. Femicide is the most brutal expression of the abuse of power and sexual abuse by men towards women, and its purpose is to create terror in order to uphold masculine power (Aguilar 2005, Donoso 2008). The anthropologist Victoria Sanford (2008) argues that the Guatemalan State is femicidal because during the armed conflict the military committed sexual abuse against indigenous women as a war strategy, and in the postwar period the State does not penalize femicidal men.⁷⁷

For people in urban Guatemala, the second most devastating crime is extortion. In 2013, across the country 9,265 acts of extortion were reported, 80% of which occurred in the metropolitan area. However, it is known that the actual figure is higher: most people do not report extortion because they are afraid of retaliation from the extortionists and do not trust the police. In El Mezquital, for example, all of the merchants and product distributors are being extorted but do not report it. Many attest that the police officers are the gangs’ accomplices: they receive a portion of the extorted monies, and inform the gangs when a person reports being extorted. People feel completely unprotected and have no other recourse but to accept the blackmail and pay the fee; others resist paying and instead leave their homes and communities.

⁷⁷ In 2008 Guatemala passed a law against femicide and other forms of violence against women. This was the result of a long struggle by women’s organizations.

Extortion is a recent problem in Guatemala, primarily affecting poor people in the metropolitan area. In 2004, the first acts of extortion were reported as being committed against bus drivers and small-scale merchants in marginalized communities. Initially, the perpetrators were gang members, but over time other groups of extortionists emerged. Currently, practically anyone can extort because it is an easy form of blackmail that instills fear in people.

Extortionists generally call victims on the phone to demand an amount of money in exchange for not killing them or their families. Victims often do not know who the extortionists are because they do not show their faces but rather send women or children to collect the money. Sometimes the children and women are accomplices, but other times they are forced to do it. A person who does not pay the extortion fee runs the risk of being killed. In Guatemala City, merchants and bus drivers who do not pay extortion money are killed on a daily basis, which obviously generates panic in the population.

The government contends that gangs, headed up by incarcerated gang leaders, are responsible for 30% of extortion acts. The remaining 70% are perpetrated by “other groups” about which the government does not provide any information.⁷⁸ Many people in El Mezquital told me that they had received phone calls from extortionists demanding money, but did not know for sure who they were; they even suspected their own family members or neighbors.

Extortion affects all urban poor people. People pay extortion fees indirectly because merchants raise their prices to cover the extortion costs; also, when extortionists attack bus drivers, the bus routes are suspended for several days and people have to pay for taxis or walk significant distances. In 2013, homicides of 70

⁷⁸ Siglo 21, September 8, 2014: “MS domina trece zonas y Mara 18 lo hace en siete”.

bus drivers and 32 *brocas* (bus assistants) were recorded; the vast majority of these crimes were committed because extortion fees were not paid.

The third most concerning crime for people is theft on streets and buses: 5,833 muggings on buses and 57,569 stolen cell phones were reported in 2013. According to civil society organizations, these numbers could be thrice as high, since many people do not report thefts because they do not believe in the justice system.⁷⁹ In Guatemala City cell phone theft is common because even among the poor, everyone has a cell phone. What most worries people is being physically injured or killed over a theft, since the criminals are usually armed.

Mugging is not a new phenomenon in the city or the metropolitan area. People in El Mezquital say that muggings were common in the communities and the downtown area of the capital in the 1980s; but what is alarming now are the bus assaults and the use of firearms. Currently almost all criminals are armed. In Guatemala in 2013, there were 465,146 legally registered weapons, 65% belonging to civilians, 19% to security guards, and 16% to the State; but it was estimated that there were over a million and a half unregistered weapons. For instance, in 2013, the police confiscated 4,916 firearms, and 86% of them were illegal.⁸⁰

I did not uncover any studies that explain the motives behind muggings and extortion in Guatemala, but based on my ethnographic work in El Mezquital I can attest that the primary causes include poverty and unemployment. Many youth and adult feel desperate because they cannot find jobs or financial assistance, and turn to stealing in order to survive.

⁷⁹ See the 2013 annual report by the Public Prosecutor's Office in Guatemala, available at <http://www.mp.gob.gt/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Memoria-de-Labores-2013.pdf>

⁸⁰ Regarding firearms in Guatemala, see the report by CIEN (2013), *Armas de fuego y violencia homicida en Guatemala*. Available at http://www.mejoremosguate.org/cms/content/files/que-estamos-haciendo/cien/Boletin_Armas_VF.pdf

5.3. LAS MARAS / GANG VIOLENCE

The government blames gangs for almost all the crimes that occur in the metropolitan area, and the media portray gang members as dangerous and bloodthirsty criminals, thus feeding the population's terror. However, gangs commit only a portion of urban crimes; in the metropolitan area an unknown number of small criminal groups operate that commit theft, extortion, and homicide on a daily basis; many police officers collaborate with them.

Valid information on the number of gang members in Guatemala has been lacking. Studies' estimates range from 14,000 to 165,000 members (USAID 2006, WOLA 2006) but do not provide adequate empirical evidence. In 2012, the government estimated 12,000 gang members in the country, the vast majority belonging to the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang, which are concentrated in the shantytowns and poor neighborhoods of the metropolitan area.⁸¹

⁸¹ According to information managed by the police, the 18th Street Gang has cliques in zones 5, 6, 13, 16, 18, 19, and 21 of the capital, and in the municipalities of Villa Nueva, Mixco, San Miguel Petapa, Villa Canales, Fraijanes, San José Pinula, and Chinautla. The Mara Salvatrucha, meanwhile, operates in zones 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 18, 19, and 21, and in the municipalities of Mixco, Villa Nueva, San Miguel Petapa, and Villa Canales. See In Sight Crime, September 10, 2014: "Mapa del territorio de la MS y el Barrio 18 en la Ciudad de Guatemala".

Table 4: Number of Gang Members in Guatemala

Year		Number of cliques	Number of gang members
2000		104	2,599
2002		434	7,987
2004		340	8,114
2006		432	14,000
2010		N/S	10,000
2012		N/S	12,000

Sources: Ranum 2006, PNUD 2007, Interpeace 2010, PNC 2012.

The government-based estimate of 12,000 would mean that gang members make up 0.08% of Guatemala’s overall population of 15 million. As indicated in chapter 2, I identified approximately 100 gang members in El Mezquital, an area of 25,000 people; that equates to 0.4% of the population. The vast majority were adolescents and young men between 12 and 24 years old; women rarely participated in gangs because they were closed and violent masculine groups. However, based on these numbers anyone wonders how is it possible that such a small group of young people could have such power and be responsible for practically all the crimes that occur in Guatemala?

Gangs arose in Guatemala City in the mid-1980s. In 1988, Levenson published the first study on *maras* in Guatemala. She found over seventy *maras* in poor neighborhoods, public schools, and streets in the center of the city.⁸² According to Levenson, the *maras* emerged as an “expression of class” in the capital’s poor neighborhoods and public schools. She argues that three factors combined to give rise to *maras*: the poverty among youth in marginal neighborhoods, the political

⁸² Among these *maras*, the following stand out: Los Ángeles Infernales, Las Brujas, Las Piñatas, Los Guerreros, Los Escorpión, Los Huevudos, Los Zopes, la Mara Miau Miau, Los Cobras, la Mara Fie, la Mara 33, Los Angelitos, la Mara 3 de Julio, la Mara Relax, la Mara Nice, la Mara de la Sexta Calle, Los Títeres, Los Garañones, Los Motines, Los Botudos, La Mara del Ruso, La Mara de la Isla, El Ceviche, Las Vacas, Las Llantas, Los Apaches, la Mara del Paraíso, among others (1988: 2).

struggles of high school students, and common crime. She describes gangs' inception as follows:

“Their baptism as *maras* occurred during the massive protest of September 1985, when they burglarized stores (like gangs) and fought against the rise in public transportation costs until they won (like politicized youth). As descendants of previous urban youth movements, their members tend to be workers, students, or both, in addition to being thieves. They combine the traditions of high school students' political movements with those of gangs; in this situation, despite a strong legacy of radical ideas and language, youth are disconnected from left-wing organizations” (page 35).

According to Levenson, the *maras* did not emerge as a political movement caused by the State terror of the 1980s. She suggests that the use of violence among *maras* reflected two social influences: the brutal State violence against the civilian population at that time, and the influence on youth of television and movies from the United States in which violence was portrayed as a heroic virtue. Levenson notes that public opinion rejected *maras* from their inception and blamed them for the rise in criminal acts in the capital. The government, evangelical pastors, and journalists attributed the creation of *maras* to the lack of parental supervision in homes and the influence of North American films that promoted materialism and violence.

At the same time, some middle-class youth organized “anti-*mara*” groups, known in Guatemala as *Anti-breaks*,⁸³ to attack members of the *maras*, whom they rejected for being “*choleros*” (“bumpkins”) and thieves. The *Anti-breaks* used bats, chains, and even firearms to seek out and attack “*mareros*” (“gangbangers”). *Maras* began to be perceived as a “security problem” caused by poor youth in the capital.

⁸³The name *Anti-break* is in opposition to *Los break*, as *maras* were known because they identified with the breakdance music of that time. Middle-class youth rejected that music and its related style as a way of distinguishing themselves from the impoverished neighborhoods of the capital.

Maras appeared in the mid-1980s because, as I discovered through my research, three factors coincided at that moment in history: the growth of shantytowns in the capital; the beginning of the transition to democracy; and a rise in urban inequality. By 1985, the number of children and youth living in shantytowns and poor neighborhoods within the metropolitan area had risen; and Guatemala had started the process of transitioning to democracy. It was a period of increased political tolerance, and youth experienced greater freedom of expression.

Between 1985 and 1990, important social and political changes took place in Guatemala: the military transferred political power to civilians; the independence of the three branches of government was reestablished; freedom of the press was instated; and spaces were opened for political participation and social protest. In Guatemala, human rights began to be discussed: victims of the armed conflict denounced the massacres and forced disappearances committed by the army; unions demanded labor rights; students protested against the rise in public transportation fares; land occupations multiplied in the capital and the countryside; people who occupied shantytowns like El Mezquital demanded that the city and the national government provide basic social services; and people mobilized around other social issues.⁸⁴

Moreover, Guatemala City began to modernize. New architectural styles and commercial development emerged. Cable television, videogames, and telecommunications expanded at that time as well. The inequality between the rich and the poor became more prominent. Youth in shantytowns and poor neighborhoods studied in public schools and saw the contrasts between the poverty in their communities and the commercial development in the city. The market and

⁸⁴Regarding this historical period, see FLACSO (2012): *Guatemala Historia Reciente*, Volume III.

the media encouraged consumerism, but did not offer youth job opportunities to be able to consume or to integrate into “modernity.”

Youth who witnessed these changes sought ways to express their repudiation of the authoritarianism and violence of the previous generation and the inequality and social marginalization that they themselves suffered. Poor youth in the capital encountered three ways to express their social unrest: through student protests in the public schools, through the rock movement that grew in the capital at that time, and through *maras*.⁸⁵

Many youth joined the *maras* to rebel against the authoritarianism and violence that they endured at home, schools, and street; they opposed the socio-economic inequality and marginalization that they suffered. Members of *maras* shared the same problems and needs: they sought respect, affection, employment, and money to survive in a world that battered and marginalized them. As Levenson notes, *maras* did not form as a political project by youth in marginalized areas; yet they were certainly a clear expression of youths’ discontent with an authoritarian political system and an exclusive socio-economic system.

Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street Gang: Transnational Gangs?

The *maras* underwent a radical change in the late 1990s when members of the Mara Salvatrucha, the 18th Street Gang, and other gangs originating in California arrived in Guatemala’s shantytowns and poor neighborhoods. As discussed in

⁸⁵ Regarding the student movement at high schools and the San Carlos University, see the work by Gudiel V. and Alonzo R. (2011): *Asociacionismo juvenil en Guatemala*, Guatemala: Fundaju-Sodeju. On the rock movement, see the documentary by Rizzo V. and Espaderos J. (2011): *Alternativa: Historia del Rock en Guatemala*. In the 1980s, songs by the rock group Alux Nahual, including *Alto al Fuego* and *Como un Duende*, became very popular among city youth. About the *maras* of that time period, the most valuable work continues to be Levenson (1988): *Por si mismos: un estudio preliminar sobre las maras de la Ciudad de Guatemala*. Guatemala: AVANCSO.

chapter two of this dissertation, members of these gangs arrived in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras as deportees from the United States, and quickly incorporated members of local *maras*. Members of local *maras* were enthralled by the *cholo* style of the new gang members. Many impoverished young people joined the Mara Salvatrucha or the 18th Street Gang and began to fight each other in their own communities.

The situation worsened in the early 2000s when gang members obtained firearms and began committing crimes in their own communities. For instance, in El Mezquital, people say that the police facilitated gangs' first weapons acquisition, possibly as a strategy for gangs to kill each other off, but gangs also used these weapons to extort bus drivers and local merchants. Gangs began to extort merchants locally because they could not leave their territories due to police persecution and gang war. In some cases, extortion schemes were initiated by gangs that from other communities who came to hide in El Mezquital. This generated considerable fear and tension in the communities.

In Guatemala and Central America, an intensive debate has considered the transformation of gangs into criminal groups.⁸⁶ In 2006, USAID published the report *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessments*, which refers to the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang as “transnational gangs.” The report estimates between 50,000 and 350,000 gang members in the whole region, and links the gangs to

⁸⁶ Most studies on *maras* and *gangs* in Central America have been conducted in El Salvador, and a significant portion have been carried out by the Instituto de Opinión Pública (Public Opinion Institute) of the UCA University in El Salvador, though other Salvadoran and foreign academics have also contributed to the literature on this topic. Meanwhile, few studies have been conducted on *maras* and *pandillas* in Guatemala and Honduras. Between 2001 and 2006 the UCA University published three studies on gangs in Central America. These studies explored the emergence of gangs in marginal urban neighborhoods and the repressive responses to gangs by States in the region, particularly calling into question the *políticas de mano dura* (heavy-handed, tough-on-crime policies) in El Salvador and Honduras, and examined civil society programs and initiatives aimed at preventing violence in Central America.

international criminal activities such as kidnapping, robbery, extortion, murder, drug trafficking, and contraband at the borders of the U.S., Mexico, and Central America. However, the report did not include evidence on how these statistics and conclusions were obtained.

In the same year, WOLA published the report *Youth Gangs in Central America*, which questioned gangs' "transnational" nature and sought more precise data about gang numbers and evidence of criminal activities. WOLA cited the role of the United States in deporting Central American immigrants and noted that the gang phenomenon had intensified due to urban poverty and the institutional weaknesses of Central American governments that had only recently ended internal wars. The report also criticized the Salvadoran and Honduran government's "heavy-handed policies" in tackling the issue, and proposed combining strategies for prevention, prosecution, and rehabilitation.

In 2006, Ranun conducted a brief study on gangs in Guatemala. Using the police database and other local sources, she found between 8,000 and 10,000 gang members in the country, a figure that contrasts with that of the USAID report; and she did not find evidence that gangs are a "transnational" criminal organization. Ranun attests that gang members who migrated between countries did so for personal reasons and for their own security, not out of any gang criminal strategy. She notes that gang members from other countries were not automatically accepted by Guatemalan cliques, nor did they receive special privileges: on the contrary, they had to adapt to local rules and conditions.

In the following years, many reports and news articles unquestioningly reiterated that gangs were transnational criminal groups, comparable to international crime mafias; they accused gangs of posing a threat to public security

and democratic stability in the region (Aguilar and Carranza 2008, Cruz 2009 and 2010, Wolf 2012, Farah 2013). Besides this body of literature, numerous sensationalist documentaries, videos, and news pieces portrayed gang members as bloodthirsty, dangerous, and irrational beings.⁸⁷ Intentionally or not, these works and materials, as Zilber (2011) notes, contributed in constructing “the transnational gang crisis” as a regional security problem that the United States and Central American governments used to justify tough-on-crime policies nationally and anti-terrorist and anti-immigrant policies regionally. Zilber argues that governments intentionally depicted gangs as “the new enemy” threatening the region, as they had in the past depicted guerrillas and communists, to justify bolstering internal security measures, militarizing the borders, and controlling people’s movements in the region.

In my fieldwork in El Mezquital and my research experience in Guatemala and Central America, I did not find sufficient evidence to substantiate the claim that gangs operate as a transnational criminal organization; I found, rather, that local gangs and cliques operate with significant autonomy. Nationally, *ranfleros* (gang leaders) meet inside and outside jail to determine general strategies, but locally cliques have the autonomy to make decisions or solve problems within their territory. As an example, a nation-wide agreement is that a clique cannot operate or extort on another’s territory; a local agreement is that a gang member cannot extort without the clique’s authorization.

⁸⁷ During this time, most investigators bypassed issues about the gangs’ origins and the reasons why youth joined gangs; they focused on understanding their criminal aspects and governments’ and civil society’s responses to the problem. Most investigators stopped talking to gang members directly or doing fieldwork in marginal communities because it was “too dangerous”; they based their studies on official data, opinion polls, and interviews with former gang members and social activists who worked in youth violence prevention programs.

Undoubtedly, *ranfleros* hold regional contacts and communications; but there is no evidence of any international power group that all gang members acknowledge and obey. Regionally, gang members share the same background, identity, and culture (symbols, tattoos, vocabulary, rituals, etc.), and a similar organization, but nationally and locally gangs operate autonomously. A clear example of gangs' independence is the truce between gangs in El Salvador that began in March 2012. The truce was a decision undertaken by Salvadoran gangs and is not shared or acknowledged by Guatemalan gang members. The Guatemalan *ranfleros* (gang leaders) have said publically that they are not willing to negotiate with the government or with opposing gangs, and the government have officially said that "they will not negotiate with criminals".⁸⁸

Additionally, in my fieldwork I did not find any evidence that gang members are being "used" by organized crime or political parties; rather, gangs act with autonomy and group allegiance. In general, gangs operate with organized crime bands when the two groups have common interests, and these joint arrangements are short-lived and specific. This certainly varies from place to place; I do not doubt that at the borders, where drug trafficking and organized crime dominate, gangs feel compelled to negotiate or conform to these groups' power. However, gangs in the metropolitan area of Guatemala are concentrated in poor neighborhoods where they have territorial control.

⁸⁸ On the negotiations between gangs in El Salvador and the government, see the extraordinary journalistic piece in the El Faro digital newspaper: <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201203/noticias/7985/>. On the Guatemalan government position regarding the truce see El Faro June 11, 2012: "Una tregua entre pandillas no sería la solución en Guatemala. On the gangs position regarding the truce see El Faro July 2012: "Enviamos a representantes de la pandilla a explorar la tregua en El Salvador".

Nevertheless, gangs do not operate alone. As quoted in chapter two of this dissertation, El Seco, member of the Mara Salvatrucha, attests that gangs have power because they do not act alone: many police officers and community members collaborate with them. Moreover, he remarks, “many people live off of extortion money and take advantage of the gangs’ image.”

5.4. POLICE CORRUPTION AND SOCIAL CLEANSING

In Guatemala, as in many Latin American countries, people do not trust the police. In the metropolitan area, people think of police as incapable, corrupt, and dangerous. In my fieldwork I often heard people make remarks like “police are thieves in uniform,” “police are good for nothing,” and “the police never show up when you need them.” According to public opinion polls, only 16% of Guatemalans trust the police; the police force is the most discredited institution in the entire country.⁸⁹

The National Civilian Police (PNC) was created in 1997 to replace the former corrupt police force that had participated in human rights violations during the armed conflict. The PNC was formed to fulfill one of the commitments of the peace accords; the main purpose was to create a professional police force independent of the military. However, the process of installing the PNC was rushed, and many former officers were able to continue as part of the new force. PNC agents received barely three months of training, and quickly replicated the old practices of corruption and bribery on the streets.

Guatemala has over 34,000 police officers, which is three times the number of gang members; 81% are men and 19% are women. The majority are young

⁸⁹ See report by Iberobarometro (2013): *Las policías bajo la lupa*. Available at <http://www.centronacionaldeconsultoria.com/articulos/La%20policia%20bajo%20la%20lupa.pdf>

indigenous people and impoverished ladinos from the countryside who join the police force due to poverty and lack of employment. The vast majority of police officers have low levels of formal schooling and receive minimal training. They work long hours for low salaries and live in precarious conditions in the police barracks. Moreover, due to distrust, people do not respect them or interact with them. This situation favors a negligent attitude among officers and leads many to engage in corruption.

Corruption is entrenched in the police force. Agents not only accept bribes from people; many are even accomplices for criminals or participate in criminal groups. In recent years, many police officers have been apprehended and convicted in the courts for their involvement in kidnapping, extortion, drug trafficking, scams, etc. People in El Mezquital say that the police are allied to gang members and criminals and therefore are not trustworthy. Women are afraid of the police because “they are men,” and youth reject the police for arbitrarily searching them and treating them badly.

Corruption and crime are entrenched problems in the Guatemalan State. Many politicians and members of the military and police force are involved in criminal groups. For that reason, in 2008 the *Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala* (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, CICIG), an entity assisted by the United Nations, was created to help the justice system prosecute criminal groups operating within the State. However, the CICIG’s achievements have been minor compared to the extent of corruption and crime in the Guatemalan State.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Regarding criminal structures within the State of Guatemala, see the report *Poderes Ocultos: Grupos ilegales armados en Guatemala post-conflicto* WOLA 2006. For the CICIG’s results, see reports: *Cambiar la cultura de la violencia por la cultura de la vida: los primeros dos años de la CICIG*, Guatemala: IW, ICTJ and PHCI 2010; and *Informe de la Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala con ocasión de su quinto año de labores*, CICIG September 2012.

Social Cleansing

As I mentioned in chapter two, some police officers participate in social cleansing groups aimed at eliminating social groups considered “undesirable,” such as street children, prostitutes, gays, gang members, and criminals. During Álvaro Arzú’s administration (1996 – 1999), groups of police officers killed street children and criminals in zone 1, in Guatemala City’s downtown area. Under the Alfonso Portillo administration (2000 – 2004), the police implemented the *Plan Escoba* (Sweep-up Plan), a secret policy for eliminating gang members and criminals in the metropolitan area. During this time, groups of police officers killed gang members who participated in rehabilitation groups financed by USAID. Police identified the youth involved in such programs, and later kidnapped and killed them mercilessly. Consequently, many gang members stopped participating in rehabilitation programs and began to distrust and distance themselves from local NGOs and international donor agencies.⁹¹

Social cleansing worsened during the Oscar Berger administration (2004-2008). The Ministry of the Interior, Carlos Vielman, and the Chief of Police, Erwin Sperisen, led a social cleansing group dedicated to killing gang members and criminals, even inside jails. In 2005, this group killed three inmates who had escaped from Infiernito Prison in Escuintla; and in 2006, they killed seven leaders in Pavón Prison. Moreover, they killed many gang members and alleged criminals in the metropolitan area. During this period, social cleansing groups operated in El Mezquital.⁹²

⁹¹Regarding social cleansing during this time period, see the report by the ICCPG (2004), *Transparentando el Plan Escoba: Análisis de la Estrategia Política con relación a las pandillas juveniles de Guatemala*; and the report by Samayoa et al (2006), *Ejecuciones de jóvenes estigmatizados en Guatemala*.

⁹² On social cleansing groups during this time, see the study by Fernández L. (2011), *Crimen de Estado: Caso Parlacen*. Guatemala: F&G Editores. Additionally, see the documentary *Contra la impunidad* about the executions in Pavón Prison.

In 2006 and 2007, the Guatemalan Ombudsman and the UN Rapporteur on Extra-judicial Executions denounced the murders of impoverished urban youth during Berger's administration. The UN Rapporteur's report indicates that the crimes followed the same pattern: youth were tortured, with coup de grace death blows; dead bodies were abandoned in streets or vacant lots; the culprits of the crimes were State agents and private groups; and the justice system never investigated these crimes. The pattern indicated that it was a deliberate policy to eliminate gang members and criminals considered "undesirable."⁹³

During the Alvaro Colon administration (2008-2012) as well, social cleansing groups operated within the police. In March 2012, the CICIG and the Public Prosecutor's Office charged former Chief of Police Marlene Blanco and three police officers with forming a social cleansing group in 2009 aimed at killing extortionists. Marlene Blanco was Chief of Police and Vice-minister of the Interior under Colon. According to the legal charges, the crimes were committed "to lower crime statistics in the country."⁹⁴

In June 2014, the former Chief of Police in Berger's administration, Erwin Sperisen, was sentenced to life imprisonment by a Swiss court for the execution of the Pavón Prison inmates. Former Minister Carlos Vielman faced trial in Spain for the same crimes. Sperisen and Vielman are part of the Guatemalan business elite. They sought refuge in Switzerland and Spain, respectively, to avoid being prosecuted in Guatemala; but they were tried in those countries for committing crimes against humanity, in which universal jurisdiction was applicable.

⁹³ See the report by PDH (2006), *Las Características de las Muertes Violentas en el País*; and the Report by UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston on summary or arbitrary extra-judicial executions in Guatemala (2007).

⁹⁴ Prensa Libre, March 23, 2012: "Exfuncionaria capturada por crímenes".

The trials against Sperisen and Vielman launched a fierce debate in Guatemala about social cleansing. The economic elite and right-wing groups justified the executions of prisoners because “they were dangerous criminals” and it was necessary to “impose order in the prisons”; they even organized a social movement to defend the two former officials. In addition, businesspeople defended Vielman because he had been President of Guatemala’s Chamber of Industry and they felt a strong class-based identification with him. Meanwhile, human rights defenders celebrated the rulings, asserting that “the State cannot murder murderers.” The debate spread to social media sites; many middle-class people expressed their support for the executions of prisoners and for social cleansing, saying that criminals and gang members “are the scum of society.”⁹⁵

Social cleansing is a practice inherited from the armed conflict. During the war, death squads engaged in torturing, kidnapping, and killing “alleged” guerrillas and communists. Among the better known death squads were the *Mano Blanca* (White Hand), the *Nueva Organización Anticomunista* (New Anti-Communist Organization, NOA), and the *Consejo Anticomunista de Guatemala* (Guatemalan Anti-Communist Council, CADEG), which were comprised of anti-communist military members, police officers, and civilians who operated clandestinely. Death squads generally kidnapped, tortured, and killed their victims, and dumped the dead bodies on the streets to induce terror in the population. They often published their threats through press releases, pamphlets, and lists placed on the streets.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ On the debates in the press and social media, see: Prensa Libre, June 6, 2014: “Enfrentados por sentencia de tribunal en Ginebra”; Analistas Independientes de Guatemala, June 11, 2014: “El debate sobre Erwin Sperisen”.

⁹⁶ In a 1997 press interview, Mario Sandoval Alarcón, anti-communist leader and head of the political party *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Movement, MLN), said that death squads formed “to fight the guerrillas on the same terms, during a dirty war that was governed by military codes.” Sandoval affirmed that these groups “were military disguised as civilians, though there were also organizations that operated parallel to the army, supported by the MLN.” *El Periódico*, April 20, 1997. For

A particularly perverse aspect of social cleansing is the participation of community members in crimes against their own neighbors. In El Mezquital, it is known that the residents who participated in social cleansing were soldiers, police officers, or civil patrollers during the armed conflict who replicated the criminal patterns of wartime death squads. The aim of social cleansing was to drastically punish gang members and generate fear in the communities.

The first dismemberment in El Mezquital was committed by social cleansing groups to punish gang members, and gangs “learned” to imitate this brutal practice from social cleansing groups. Nevertheless, gangs torture or dismember people only exceptionally; they do it to punish a group member who betrays the group, especially if it involves a woman, or an enemy who has caused much harm. This type of crime generates considerable fear in the population, and feeds the idea that gang members are bloodthirsty and merciless.

As mentioned in chapter two, El Seco says that gangs do not kill arbitrarily; they only kill their enemies; gang members who “*planchan*,” that is, who commit serious offenses; and people who do not pay extortion money. This last case is done to generate fear and to pressure all victims to pay the extortion fee. Gang members learned from social cleansing groups to use fear as a strategy for domination and social control.

5.5. FEAR ON STREETS AND BUSES

In the metropolitan area, people’s fear on streets and buses is palpable: they look around nervously and walk hurriedly. Women walk with lowered gaze, and men look all around constantly and are on the defensive. People practically do not talk to

additional details on death squads, see the reports *Guatemala Memoria del Silencio* (CEH 1999), and *Guatemala Nunca Más* (ODHAG 1998).

strangers. During the course of my fieldwork, I would often stop to ask people how to find a particular address or person, and they would say, “I don’t know, I don’t know my way around here” or “I don’t know, I don’t know anybody” and would avert their gaze.

In recent years, public bus routes have become places of danger and fear. Practically all of the owners and drivers of the red buses in the capital are being extorted. These buses belong to individual owners or small cooperatives; they provide poor service, but they are the only buses that travel into urban marginal communities. When a bus owner or driver does not pay the extortion fee, the extortionists shoot the buses and kill the driver or others on the bus. This causes panic. Armed assaults are also common on the red buses; groups of armed criminals enter the buses, mug passengers, and even harass women.

I often observed fear on people’s faces while on buses; people look anxious and expectant about what might happen; women hold tightly to their children, protect their purses, and lower their eyes; men are on the defensive and look distrustfully all around them. People avoid using their cell phones on buses and do not talk to anyone. An atmosphere of distress, fear, and distrust is palpable, and people appear impatient to arrive quickly at their destination.

Violence and “*transas*” (shady deals) create deep distrust and affect people’s everyday relationships, as people distrust everyone and fear being cheated, betrayed, or harmed. Many people live in a state of constant stress and dread that someone will take advantage of them; as a result, they do not get involved in social organizations or political parties out of a fear that they will be tricked and used by social leaders or politicians. People have very narrow trusted social circles and only confide in their relatives and close friends.

Extortion feeds people's distrust. People face extortion in private and do not tell others that they are being extorted, because they distrust everyone and even suspect their own family members or neighbors of being extortionists. In El Mezquital, for instance, when I began my fieldwork, people did not want to talk to me about extortion; they viewed me with fear and distrust, and would get nervous and change the topic. Some people thought that I was a policeman; others believed that I was asking because I wanted to extort from them. Only after a year of fieldwork did some people confide in me that they were being extorted.

As indicated in chapter three, in poor neighborhood such as El Mezquital people live essentially confined to their homes out of fear of crime; even children and youth are shut in to their homes. The situation is even worse in most middle-class neighborhoods where people are enclosed by bars, metal doors, security cameras, and gates guarded by private security personnel. People live as though they were in jail, and are continually monitored by heavily armed security guards whose wages the residents pay themselves. Middle-class people only organize "for protection."

In the whole metropolitan area, highly visible and heavily armed security guards watch over many kinds of businesses, neighborhoods, product distributor trucks, and even public buses. Some 140 private security companies operate in the country, with 60,000 guards, twice the number of police officers. These companies' owners are primarily former army officers. Most of the guards are former soldiers, and many are indigenous farmers with low levels of formal schooling; they receive low wages, live in precarious conditions in company housing, and are treated poorly.

The main street of Guatemala City are constantly monitored by police patrols and motorcycles, and by armored military vehicles carrying heavily armed soldiers.

These scenes give the impression that the country is at war and thus incite people's fears. President Otto Pérez (2012-2016) has increased military presence on the streets. Pérez, who is 63 years old, is a former military officer who participated in the counter-insurgency war in indigenous communities in the 1980s; he came to power by offering "mano dura" (to be tough on crime) in order to end violence in the metropolitan area. Many people voted for him because they felt distraught about crime and disappointed by the police, and thought that the military would solve "the security problem." However, this has not been the case, and people continue to experience great fear on the streets.

Over 3,000 soldiers collaborate with the police on task forces that patrol the metropolitan "zonas rojas" (red zones). President Pérez created these task forces to "retake control" in gang-dominated zones, and essentially militarized shantytowns and impoverished neighborhoods throughout the metropolitan area.⁹⁷ This approach has been frequently criticized by human rights organizations for "violating the spirit of the peace accords." As indicated in chapter two, the Kaminal Task Force guards El Mezquital, but the situation there has not changed.

Strategies for Survival and Resistance

In Guatemala, as many Latin-American countries, people have developed a series of individual and collective security measures to protect themselves and prevent violence. Middle-class and lower-middle-class people protect their homes with metal doors and bars and keep dogs; some even have alarms and firearms. They stay mostly at home; walk only in their own neighborhoods; do not go out at night or to parties; do not speak to strangers; do not use cell phones in public, etc. Collectively,

⁹⁷ The government created the Maya Task Force in zone 18, the El Milagro Task Force in Mixco, and the Kaminal Task Force in El Mezquital; these are considered the most dangerous areas within the metropolitan region. In addition, it created task forces against extortion and contraband. Each task force is comprised of xx police officers and xx soldiers with war equipment and armaments.

they organize to form “security committees” that are charged with encircling the neighborhood with metal bars and gates, installing security cameras and private entrances, and hiring security guards, among other measures.

In many neighborhoods, security committees have become a kind of parallel police force that ends up extorting and abusing their own neighbors. These committees are frequently made up of armed adult men that monitor residents and illegally kill presumed criminals. In many marketplaces and street stall areas, security committees are also formed to capture suspected thieves and extortionists, and often lynch and kill them. The most reckless security committee in the capital is *Los ángeles justicieros* (The Angel Avengers) that operates in *La Terminal* market, located right in the center of the capital; many people accused of being “criminals” have turned up dead in this market, and the police basically do not intervene.

Few public demonstrations against violence and crime have taken place in the metropolitan area, even though they are issues that concern everyone. Churches have organized prayer circles and public worship services to “pray for peace in Guatemala.” Middle-class groups like *Jóvenes contra la violencia* (Youth against Violence) have organized marches and concerts to demand that the government provide “more security.” Women’s organizations have carried out protests “against femicide and violence against women.” Youth groups from shantytowns and poor neighborhoods, together with *Caja Lúdica*, have organized drumming events and festivals in the capital’s Historic Center to call for “no more violence against youth.” These demonstrations, however, have been sporadic and marked by religious, political, and class-based differences. This reflects the weakness of Guatemala’s social organizations, the divisions within civil society, people’s fear, and their distrust of the State.

In chapter four, I explained that at the community level there are small-scale expressions of collective resistance against violence. El Mezquital's youth groups organize marches and festivals on the streets, addressed at their own neighbors; activists in El Mezquital do not ask for "more security" from the State but rather appeal to society, including members of their own communities, for "respect." They demand respect for youths' lives and rights.

Studies on urban violence in Guatemala emphasize a broad array of factors as causes of violence: family disintegration, marginalized groups' social exclusion, the proliferation of firearms and the expansion of gangs, impunity, and the State's institutional weakness (McIlwaine y Moser 2000, Levenson 2013). Many authors hold that this violence is a consequence of the internal armed conflict, and some of them even say that a "culture of violence" exists in Guatemala (Cruz 2000, Lopez 2005, Steenkamp 2005). In my fieldwork I did not find evidence of a "culture of violence" in Guatemala. Guatemalans are not aggressive, nor do they teach their children to be violent; on the contrary, people are friendly, genuine, and hard-working. People do feel deep fear and distrust due to the violence generated by criminal groups and the police. These armed groups use violence and fear as strategies to control the population, make money, and wield power. People not only distrust the State, but they fear the State.

In my fieldwork, I identified at least of four conditions that lead to urban violence in Guatemala: the social exclusion faced by residents of shantytowns and poor neighborhoods; State violence and corruption; disputes over public spaces; and the humiliation and mistreatment of children and youth. These factors are interrelated and operate at all levels. Many people in poor neighborhoods reproduce the very attitudes of social rejection displayed by the upper and middle classes

against their own members, and many replicate the violent and corrupt practices of the State as a way to defend themselves, to survive, or to wield power over others.

Social exclusion is evident in the ways that the upper and middle classes shun the indigenous people and poor ladinos who migrate to the capital. Dominant groups call them “*choleros*” (bumpkins), “*mucos*” (boors), “*ladrones*” (thieves), etc.; deny them educational and employment opportunities; and pressure the State to evict them and to refuse them basic services. Reinforcing this rejection, the State denies them access to housing, violently evicts them when they take over lands, withholds access to basic services, and criminalizes them.

In this context, public space becomes a matter of contention. Dominant groups claim the capital as “their space,” while the poor seek “a space to live.” The upper and middle classes appropriate the streets, parks, and other public spaces, closing them off with metal bars for what they say are “security reasons,” and the State accepts it; but when the poor take over the slopes of ravines to live on, “that is a crime” and the State violently evicts them. Young people, meanwhile, also reclaim public space: for example, gangs see the streets in their communities as their “territory” and are willing to die for it; and activists seek to “recover” the streets as spaces for socializing and celebration. The State aims to impose control on the streets using violent means, through police and military patrols on the streets, surveillance cameras, etc.; this generates greater tension.

Another decisive factor in urban violence is the perverse role of the State. On the one hand, the police abuses and beats the most vulnerable citizens, even forming social cleansing squads to eliminate gang members and other “undesirable” social groups. Yet on the other hand, the police associates with gangs and criminal groups to extort, steal, kidnap, and even kill citizens. Corruption is an entrenched problem

in the Guatemalan State and is not limited to the police; people therefore do not believe in the State but rather fear the State.

A final factor that influences urban violence is adults' lack of respect for the poorest children and youth, who are often called "*patojos cerotes*" (shitty kids) and are mistreated and beaten. This disrespect is echoed by adults at every economic and social level: among the dominant classes, State officials, and people in poor communities. This causes deep pain and discontent among children and youth, who feel humiliated. In chapter two of this dissertation, El Seco, member of the Mara Salvatrucha, says that many young people join gangs due to the humiliation they have faced from adults, and that young people have learned to use violence to defend against humiliation. Like the police, gang members use violence so that people will respect them; but instead of respecting them, people fear them.

Conclusions

Over the last 15 years, gang violence has pushed the public and numerous social researchers to focus their attention on shantytowns and poor urban neighborhoods. Gangs have revealed a problem that many preferred to ignore: the poverty and violence that children and youth in marginalized urban communities endure. Nevertheless, many of the studies and newspaper reports have been limited to highlighting gangs' criminal activities and extreme violence: they do not explain the context and living conditions of children and youth in these communities; nor do they examine why a few youth join gangs and others do not, or how youth and residents of these communities respond to such violence.

This study shows how the urban poor are forced to take over lands and create shantytowns due to their desperate poverty and systematic exclusion by the State, and that they endure many hardships due to illnesses and the lack of water, latrines, drainage, and other basic services. The upper and middle classes consistently shun them for settling in "illegal" areas, and they blame them for urban disorder and insecurity in the city. However, people from these communities have developed a great organizing capacity and the ability to work together for local development; and women play a key role in community struggles.

Gangs arise in the shantytowns and poor urban neighborhoods as an act of rebellion by youth against the social exclusion, humiliation, and violence that they endured at home, in schools, and on the streets. Youth from these communities search respect, affection, and resources to survive in a context that marginalized them. Gangs do not emerge as a political project; rather, they arise as an expression of young people's discontent with the authoritarian political system and the exclusive socio-economic system.

In Guatemala, *maras* (gangs) grew in many of the shantytowns that arose in the metropolitan area in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake; these shantytowns were formed by poor families that migrated to the capital due to rural poverty and the State terror induced by the armed conflict in the northwestern part of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. *Maras* emerged during the transition period to democracy (1985-1990) when the armed conflict had lowered in intensity and there was greater political and social tolerance in the country. At that time, *maras* used violence to defend against humiliation by those stronger than them and to fight against other gangs, but they did not have firearms. *Maras* emerged as a class expression, their members were primarily men, and they occupied streets as “their territory” (Levenson 1988).

In the 2000s, *maras* turned into transnational gangs due to immigration and the massive deportations launched by the United States government in the late 1990s. The Mara Salvatrucha, the 18th Street Gang, and other California-based gangs spread to practically all of the marginalized urban areas of Central America. These gangs absorbed local *maras*, passing on their identity, cultural elements, and rivalries. Nevertheless, in each country and each community, gangs have recreated their own identity, organization, and survival strategies, and they act with relative autonomy: in some areas they engage in transporting and selling drugs; in others, they steal or extort. The Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street Gang are transnational gangs because they share a common origin and cultural identity.

As the literature shows, gangs rapidly began to change, becoming tightly closed, more organized, and highly violent groups; gangs started to commit horrendous crimes and to attack their own communities. Studies on gangs in Central America attribute these changes to the transnational gang model of the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang, the “*mano dura*” (tough-on-crime) policies of

the region's governments, and the influence of organized crime on gangs (Aguilar and Carranza 2008, Cruz 2009, Wolf 2012, Farah 2013), but in my ethnographic research in Guatemala I did not find evidence that gangs operate as an international criminal group, on the contrary each clique operate with relative autonomy.

The transformation of gangs and the intensification of violence has incited great tension and fear in marginalized communities. This situation is affecting and changing young people's lives in these communities: the vast majority of youth, particularly women, are afraid and live "*encerrados*" (shut in) at home; they do not trust anyone, they drop out of school, they are unemployed, and they seek refuge in television, internet, and other technologies. Yet violence is also generating resistance: local activists use community art to protest violence, social exclusion, and stigmatization; but their activities have limited social impact due to the indifference of the State and the people.

In the introduction to this study, I present the main research questions that guided this investigation: Why did the gangs change and become so violent to the point of attacking members of their own communities? What is the State's responsibility in the intensification of violence in these communities? How do young people and community members face this violence? Based on my ethnographic research, in the following sections I present my conclusions on these issues.

GANGS' TRANSFORMATION AND THE EXACERBATION OF VIOLENCE

Gangs gradually separate themselves from their own communities and they began to extort in their own territories. Gangs began to commit crimes in the communities out of fear of police persecution or attacks by rival gangs elsewhere, and because they discovered that extortion was an easy way to make money. People feel betrayed by gangs, and some community members have even gone so far as to

participate in social cleansing groups to kill gang members. Gangs have allied with police officers to extort their own people, but they hold a conflictive relationship with the police. Gang members and police officers are at once partners and enemies; they are not joined by trust or loyalty but rather by coinciding interests: the police receives money and gangs receive impunity.

Gang members debate among themselves the relationship between the gang and the community. Many first-generation gang members, the veterans from the 1980s and 1990s, do not approve of extorting or committing crime in their own communities; they assert that this was not gangs' initial purpose and that gangs were formed "to protect and take care of the neighborhood." However, second-generation participants, the rookies from the 2000s, are not familiar with gangs' origins and only learned that gangs protect their own members and that extortion is the easiest and safest way to make money. Many veterans believe that gangs should retake their initial aims of respect and loyalty to the community; but gangs are stuck in a situation of corruption and violence that they cannot easily relinquish.

The gang truce in El Salvador is evidence of gangs' willingness to change and their desire to "reconcile with society," as they express it. Salvadoran gangs do not talk of reconciling with the State or with rival gangs but rather with their communities: in all of their communiques and public announcements, they ask for "society's forgiveness" for the harm that they have caused. Many gang members, especially veterans, are tired of violence and are willing to change, but the State is not apparently interested in offering them a real solution, since the State itself benefits from gangs' criminal activities.

In my fieldwork, I identified at least three historical facts that led to changes in gangs and to a separation between gangs and the communities. These same facts help understand the escalation of gang violence:

First is the influence of North American gangs. When the Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street Gang arrived in the poor urban neighborhoods, gangs changed radically. These groups imported a more violent and expansionary model to the communities; the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang fed divisions among young people and took over public spaces. These gangs turned communities into battlegrounds.

Studies on gangs in the 1990s and 2000s warned of the North American influence on gangs in poor urban neighborhoods in Central America, and blamed the United States government for relocating a problem that had initiated in its territory to the region (Cruz and Portillo 1998, Cruz 2005, Ranum 2006, ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP 2001, 2004 and 2005, WOLA 2006). Central American youth began to imitate a gang model that was different from the one they knew, and this new “cholo style” clashed with the communities. Studies also anticipated that the “mano dura” (heavy-handed) policies of Central America’s governments were not the solution but would in fact aggravate the problem, as indeed effectively happened. These heavy-handed policies basically consist of passing anti-gang legislation and pursuing and jailing gang members; all this achieved was that gang members started acting clandestinely and moving to other communities to hide.

Second is the use of firearms and extortion. Firearms boosted gangs’ power, as they used them to kill their rivals and commit crime. People in El Mezquital say that the police facilitated gangs’ first weapons purchase, possibly as a strategy for gangs to kill among themselves, but gangs also started using weapons to commit crimes. Today practically all gang members are armed, which is why people are scared of them;

moreover, many people have weapons to protect themselves or to commit crime because it is very easy to acquire weapons in the black market. On average, a gun costs between \$150 and \$250. In the past 10 years the number of firearms in Guatemala has increased 17-fold; in 2004 there were 22,419 legally registered weapons and in 2013 there were 465,146, although it is estimated that there are over a million illegal weapons in the country.⁹⁸ Firearms feed aggressors' power and people's fear.

Extortion separated gangs from their communities even further. Between 2002 and 2004, gangs discovered that extortion was an easy way to make money, and they began to use death threats to demand money from people. Gangs began to extort in their own communities since they could not leave their territories due to police persecution and inter-gang warfare; in some cases extortion was initiated by gang members who had fled other places and were hiding in the communities. Police started participating in the extortion schemes and received bribes from gangs; police covered up for gangs, brought them information, and acquired weapons for them in exchange for payment. People were very upset because the very children whom they had seen grow up in the communities were now extorting and threatening them.

The third factor that definitively determined the separation between gangs and communities was social cleansing. As indicated in chapters two and five, the police and community members organized social cleansing groups to kill gang members. Many of these groups' members are former police officers, soldiers, and civil patrollers who participated in the armed conflict. During the war, they mercilessly killed guerrillas and communists whom they considered their "enemies" and to display their dead bodies publicly to cause terror and warn others against joining the guerrilla. They transferred this practice to the post-war time and applied it to gang members; they began killing

⁹⁸ On firearms in Guatemala see reports by the CICIG (2009): *Armas de fuego y municiones en Guatemala: Marco legal y tráfico ilícito*; and IEPADES (2013): *Control de armas de fuego en Guatemala*.

gang members cruelly and displaying their dismembered bodies on the streets with messages like “this is going to happen to all mareros.”

Social cleansing is the most brutal expression of the State’s disregard for members of gangs and the most vulnerable social groups. The nature of social cleansing is similar to the nature of genocide: disdain and abuse of power against the most vulnerable groups. The State constructs discourse and legal and illegal policies to justify the persecution and crimes committed against marginalized social groups. During the armed conflict, the State justified the massacres against indigenous people because “they were guerrillas”; in post-war times it justifies the executions of poor urban youth because “they are criminals.”

As explained in chapter five, practically all of the government administrations after the signing of the peace accords have supported social cleansing policies against gang members and alleged criminals. Social cleansing intensified during the administration of President Oscar Berger (2004-2008), an extreme right-wing government comprised of representatives of Guatemala’s traditional elite; and this attests to the “security perspective” of Guatemala’s conservative elite. Moreover, during his term, the justice system did not investigate any cases involving the execution of gang members.

Social cleansing is the most drastic expression of contempt towards a social group. Studies demonstrate that in many Latin American countries, social cleansing is a hidden State policy for eliminating social groups considered “undesirable” and involves vulnerable groups like street children, gays, sex workers, and street criminals (Schwartz 1995, Ordonez 1996, Sandford 2008, Wilding 2010). Carole Negengast (1994) argues that all States create “punishable categories of people” among the population not only to penalize alleged criminals, but also to maintain and reinforce power hierarchies and inequality structures in society. The State constructs discourses to convince citizens

that it only punishes the “bad guys,” in order to secure people’s support and legitimize its power.

In Guatemala, the State has constructed imagery and discourse to blame gangs for all crime in the metropolitan area and to feed social disdain against “mareros” (gangbangers) to justify their elimination. In the social imagination, “mareros” are seen as irrational, bloodthirsty youth who control the shantytowns and poor urban neighborhoods, and people refer to them as “the scourge of society.” The State justifies gang members’ deaths through comments like “he was a marero,” “it was a gang problem,” “he was mixed up in something,” and does not investigate these crimes; the justice system closes the case.

The most perverse aspect of social cleansing is the participation of community members in young people’s executions. The State urges residents to organize to monitor and execute “mareros” in exchange for providing power and impunity to collaborators. The State used a similar strategy during the armed conflict: the army created military commissioners and civil defense patrols in indigenous communities to monitor their own communities and kill “guerrillas.” Many military commissioners and civil patrollers committed abuses and killed members of their communities with State authorization and without any type of criminal sanction. This strategy allowed the State to wield control over the communities and to eliminate “their enemies” with people’s complicity (CEH 1999. ODHAG 1998).

Many former military and paramilitary members who participated in the armed conflict and migrated to the capital due to rural poverty now live in the marginal urban communities. Many of them have joined the police force or private security companies, and some became hitmen who commit murder for hire. In chapter two I show how many hitmen are hired by companies, small-scale merchants, or individuals to kill human

rights defenders, gang members, alleged criminals, or personal enemies. Everyone in the communities, even gang members, fear these assassins for hire.

One of the main goals of my research was to understand how marginalized communities “tolerate” social cleansing against youth in their own communities. I found that many people are in favor of social cleansing for three reasons: a) because they feel pained that gangs are harassing their own communities, especially in the case of family members of the victims of violence and extortion; b) because the State is incapable of prosecuting gang members since it participates in extortion as well; and c) because many former military and paramilitary members who live in the communities spread the idea among people that it is best to kill “mareros” to solve the problem, since that is what they learned during the armed conflict. In this context, people begin to see social cleansing as an easy solution to the “gang problem.”

Social cleansing has made gangs become more closed and violent groups. Gangs have wrought vengeance on family members of people who collaborate with the police, and they have learned how to kill just as cruelly as their own members are killed. Gangs learned from social cleansing groups to dismember bodies and display them on the streets to demonstrate their power and instill terror. The State and social cleansing groups showed young people the power that brutal violence and fear have to control and dominate.

This does not mean that gangs kill indiscriminately and irrationally. As indicated in chapter two, gangs only kill their enemies, those who do not pay extortion dues, and gang members who commit a serious infraction or betray the group. Gangs use death to defend against their enemies, to make money, and to maintain control within the gang; and they have created rules and discourse to justify their crimes. Gangs justify these crimes with comments like “he was from the other gang,” “they didn’t pay the extortion,”

and “*planchó*” (he or she messed up). This logic is similar to that of other violent social groups; for instance, during the internal armed conflict, the military created discourse to justify the massacres and crimes against citizens, repeating phrases like “they were enemies of the fatherland,” “they wanted to overthrow the government,” “they were guerrillas,” “they were communists.”

With the onset of social cleansing, gangs started to distrust everyone and to behave hysterically. Gangs think that everyone wants to attack them; they feel persecuted by the police, by rival gangs, by community members, and they even distrust their own fellow members. They fear that people will betray them or organize once again to kill them; they are therefore constantly nervous and on the defensive. In 2011, Giovanni, a Salvadoran member of the Mara Salvatrucha, said to me: “The gang feels pressured; we have everyone on us, everyone wants to kill us.” Gang members feel very afraid and distrust everyone so are always on the defensive.

In this dissertation, I argue that in Guatemala gangs learned from social cleansing groups to kill “their enemies” with contempt and to provoke terror in the population. Social cleansing is a practice inherited from the armed conflict; in the post-war period, many former police officers, soldiers, and civil patrollers replicated this practice against gang members; gang members are killing with the same disdain shown to them. In this sense, gangs reproduce the practices of the State itself: the use of brutal violence to demonstrate power and cause terror.

STATE’S RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ESCALATION OF CRIME AND VIOLENCE

This study demonstrates that the State is primarily responsible for the increase in criminal violence in urban areas. First, the State excludes people from marginalized urban communities and creates the conditions that give rise to gangs and criminal groups by denying youth opportunities for education and employment.

Second, it criminalizes young people from these communities, blames gangs for all crime in the city, and even organizes social cleansing squads to kill gang members. Third, the State feeds violence and criminality in these communities since many police officers serve as accomplices to gangs and criminals and participate in extortion.

The State not only uses violence to “enforce the law” but also to illegally kill members of social groups considered “undesirable” and to do business with criminals. Politicians and public officials have looted the State for personal gain, unscrupulously allying with drug traffickers, organized crime bands, gangs, and small-scale criminal groups, reaping economic benefits in exchange for impunity.

Numerous authors refer to Latin American States as failed, weak, or fragile (Fruhling 2008, Briscoe and Stappers 2012) because they have not managed to build strong democratic institutions and are susceptible to bribery from drug trafficking and organized crime rings. But the problem is even more severe: violence, corruption, and impunity are entrenched in the State. Corruption does not only arise outside the State and then enter it, but also emanates outward from within the State itself. Many politicians, police officers, and public officials offer shady deals and impunity to anyone in exchange for money and power. While in the past the State was at the sole service of the traditional economic elite, now it serves the highest bidder. The State is acting as a gang, as suggests anthropologist Dennis Rodgers (2006).

State criminality has major social consequences. Citizens do not perceive the State as an entity that guarantees and protects their rights, but rather as an entity that violates and corrupts their rights. People learn that they have to either protect themselves from, or negotiate with, the State. Not everyone, however, is able to

negotiate with the State, but rather only those with power and money; this means that the State persecutes and penalizes the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, and even kills them illegally. The poorest people feel not only unprotected, but even threatened, by the State.

The State persistently denies to urban poor, housing options, basic services, education and employment. Young people from these communities face many obstacles in obtaining work; companies generally require a series of qualifications that they cannot meet and also reject them for living in a “zona roja.” Many youth drop out of school because they know that they will not be able to find work and thus do not feel motivated to study. Many only find temporary jobs or work in the informal sector where they receive meager pay.

The urban poor are in constant touch with economic and social inequality, which causes anxiety and frustration. The poorest young people inevitably compare their economic situation to that of middle- and upper-class youth; they see the differences in their houses, clothing, cell phones, etc. In addition, in the media they see messages that invite them to consume, but the economic situation denies them opportunities to work; this causes them much frustration. Unemployment and desperation push many youth to steal and commit crime in order to survive.

Urban poor people face the persistent rejection by the upper and middle classes in the city who constantly insult them with classist and racist prejudice. The elites generally call them “*chusma* (riffraff),” “*indios choleros* (bumpkin Indians),” “*mucos* (louts)”; and repeat phrases like “Why don’t they go back to their towns?” and “What did they come to do here?” They blame shantytown residents for urban disorder and insecurity in the metropolitan area, and use the media to feed social rejection against them. The media depict shantytowns as precarious and dangerous places.

Sadly, many urban poor people reproduce the elite's prejudices and attitudes, rejecting those who are on a lower rung in Guatemala's class stratification system and racial hierarchy: the poorest and the indigenous people. In chapter one I showed how the residents of the *colonia* El Mezquital reject the shantytown inhabitants, denying them water and electricity and threatening to burn down their huts if they do not leave, even though they are equally poor. Many urban poor people deny being poor and indigenous, in order to avoid discrimination and because they aspire to upward social mobility; but they reproduce the same discrimination towards those lower than them in Guatemala's stratified class system and racial hierarchy.

Numerous studies demonstrate that social exclusion creates conditions ripe for gangs and criminal groups to emerge in marginalized neighborhoods (Cruz 2005, Savenije 2009, Virgil 2002). In my fieldwork I found that young people join gangs to rebel against the social exclusion and humiliation that they encounter in their environment. In chapter two, *El Seco* says that he joined the Mara Salvatrucha so that people would respect him and not treat him like a "*patojo cerote*" (piece of shit kid). In Guatemala, adults use the term "*patojo cerote*" to refer to the poorest and most vulnerable children, those whom no one takes care of and who spend a lot of time on the streets. The term is very offensive and is humiliating to the children. In gangs, youth seek affection, respect, protection, and resources for survival.

The State moreover criminalizes the urban poor: it classifies shantytowns and poor neighborhoods as "zona rojas" and blames gangs for all crime and insecurity in the metropolitan area. The State uses this justification to impose heavy-handed, tough-on-crime policies in poor neighborhoods: it installs joint police and military task forces to patrol the communities; it arbitrarily searches young poor men; it arbitrarily apprehends alleged criminals; and it imposes drastic criminal penalties on

gang members and delinquents. The media feeds into the prejudice and the criminalization of gang members through sensationalist images and articles.

On the other hand, the State feeds crime in marginalized communities. Police act as accomplices to gang members and criminals who extort community members. In chapter two, gang members recounted that the police facilitated their first weapons purchases, pass information on to them, and receive a portion of the extorted monies. Moreover, police accept bribes from drug dealers, illegal businesses, and people who commit crime on the streets.

Police and gangs have a conflictive and dangerous relationship: they are simultaneously enemies and accomplices. . Gangs know that the police can arrest them or even kill them at any time, but the police also know that the gangs can kill them and publicly expose them. Police use their power to intimidate, persuade, and even kill gang members, but also to blackmail them and make money in exchange for impunity.

The State contends that social cleansing and corruption are not State policies, but the facts indicate the opposite: many police officers participate in social cleansing groups and criminal groups that extort, kidnap, steal, and commit other crimes against the population; and the State rarely investigates and sanctions these crimes. The military used this same argument to justify massacres against indigenous people during the armed conflict: they contended that the State did not have a policy of genocide, but rather that the massacres were “excesses” committed by soldiers on the battlefields and that they were inevitable in the context of war.

In this dissertation I argue that the State is responsible for exacerbating violence in marginalized communities because it plays a perverse role as gangs’ executioner

and accomplice. On the one hand, the State instigates community members to pursue and kill gang members; on the other hand, it spurs gang members in committing crime and extortion in their own communities, since the police receive bribes from the gangs and the criminals are granted impunity. People feel caught in the middle of two violent forces that dominate and extort them: the police and the gangs. People feel completely unprotected and do not report crimes because they do not trust the State.

THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE AND COMMUNITIES' RESPONSES

Violence is producing three reactions among youth and marginal communities: more violence, fear, and resistance. Many young people are learning to use violence to defend themselves and survive in a context dominated by physical aggression, crime, and firearms; others feel deeply afraid and are living practically confined to their homes; and a small group of activists are openly opposing violence, but their actions have limited social impact.

Violence is a socially construed concept whose meaning depends on the social context and historical period. In Guatemala City's metropolitan area, people associate violence with violent crimes like homicide, femicide, kidnapping, rape, extortion, and theft. People are most frightened by the cruelty with which many of these crimes are committed; as a result, people talk about "violence" rather than crime.

Reproducing Violence

"La violencia genera violencia" (violence begets violence) is a popular saying in Spanish. Young people are learning that the street belongs to the strongest men and that to survive on the streets they must be violent, appear aggressive, or join the strongest ones. Many youth therefore put themselves on the defensive, are constantly

nervous, maintain a challenging gaze, and use crude language. Many, moreover, seek “*paros*” (protection) via gangs, police, and other local power groups in exchange for personal favors.

As described in chapter three, many students at the Ceiba School imitate the “*marerito*” (mini-gangbanger) style to intimidate classmates or defend against those who are stronger. Even women imitate gangs’ speech and gestures to protect against abuse from men; some women say that they act in a masculine, aggressive way “so that men will respect them.”

Many young people use violence to defend and protect themselves, and also to earn money and power. Groups of extortionists and thieves imitate gangs’ style and strategies to instill fear and make money, but they are not themselves gang members. In recent years, in Guatemala City an unknown number of extortion groups have emerged, made up of men, women, and even children, who simply copy gangs’ ways to intimidate people and make money.

Violence also serves to reinforce male identity and power. Men know that violence is used to dominate the streets and also the home. As explained in chapters one and three, historically there has been a great deal of domestic violence in El Mezquital, and many men still beat women and children “to discipline them.” However, domestic violence is apparently being questioned, ever since the discourse on human rights, children’s rights, and women’s rights spread throughout the communities. Many women began to oppose domestic violence and denounce batterers. Many men, meanwhile, reacted by opposing human rights on the grounds that it restricts their masculine power; they blamed human rights for youth violence and crime, arguing that parents can no longer hit their children “to discipline them.”

Many women in El Mezquital insist that NGOs and local leaders “must speak to men” about how to solve conflicts nonviolently. In my fieldwork I found that practically no one speaks with youth about violence because people are afraid; pastors, teachers, and local leaders associate violence with gangs and do not dare speak about this issue with young people. However, it is highly unlikely that youth and men will change their behavior if no one talks to them about it.

Street violence is overwhelmingly a male phenomenon: the vast majority of gang members, police officers, assassins for hire, and thieves are men. Women are present around them, often collaborate with them, and suffer the consequences of violence and danger; many are their mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters, and friends. Yet very few women decide to participate in violent groups like gangs, and when they do, they replicate male behavior so that the men will respect and accept them.

Based on my fieldwork, I hold that young people are learning from the State and their social context that violence is a tool to defend themselves, wield power, and make money. The Guatemalan State’s use of violence follows this same logic: it uses violence “to protect” citizens, to maintain its power, and to obtain money through corrupt practices; and young people reproduce these practices. Politicians and police officers teach youth to be violent and corrupt; in fact, many youth justify their actions by making comments like “if Congress people and police officers steal and are *transeros* (corrupt), why can’t we?”

However, even though youth violence is a learned behavior, it is not repeated automatically; youth have free will and make their own personal decisions. For example, in El Mezquital, the vast majority of youth oppose violence and resist committing crimes. They say that “it is not right” to be violent or to commit crime, and that their parents, teachers, and church members have taught to respect

others. This indicates that respect for youth and guidance in ethics are key factors in preventing violence.

Fear and Distrust

The most visible social effects of violence are fear and distrust. Fear is changing people's lifestyles: people live in houses protected by metal bars, do not leave home, do not join local organizations, do not speak with strangers, are always nervous, and are on the defensive. Fear is palpable in all public spaces: streets, buses, markets, schools, and even churches.

As I explained throughout this study, fear means that children and young people are growing up confined inside their houses and do not interact with their peers in person. Young people are discouraged by unemployment, violence, and the lack of spaces to socialize with other youth. The situation is more exasperating for young women because their parents do not let them leave the house for fear of crime or sexual harassment. In spite of this, young people are not depressed; they have a great sense of humor, and they laugh, fall in love, and dream.

Studies on fear show that aggressors intentionally use fear to dominate and control (Robin 2004, Furedi 2005, Jackson 2009, Bourke 2007) and that fear causes profound damage to victims. In my fieldwork I found that many aggressors use fear to intimidate victims and to achieve their goals of making money or earning respect; yet people do not respect them, they simply fear them. Aggressors generally use firearms to instill fear, and they live in a state of constant paranoia, assuming that everyone wants to attack them.

Women generally face fear and pain silently and alone: the mothers, wives, girlfriends, and relatives of homicide and femicide victims do not speak to anyone

because they fear retaliation from the perpetrators, who usually live in the same communities. Moreover, they must deal with commentary from people who criminalize the victims, asserting that someone was killed for being a “gangbanger” or “mixed up in something”; this causes profound indignation and pain. Women do not access the justice system because they do not trust the State and they fear that the aggressors will retaliate; they seek solace in religious phrases like “I’m leaving it in God’s hands.” They live in anguish and constantly fear that another one of their family members will die of violence.

Meanwhile, as I mentioned in chapter five, violence creates deep distrust, and this affects people’s everyday relationships. Many people distrust everyone and fear being cheated, betrayed, or harmed; they live in a state of constant stress and dread that someone will take advantage of them. As a result, they do not participate in local organizations or political parties out of a fear that they will be tricked and used by social leaders or politicians. People have very narrow trusted social circles and only confide in their relatives and close friends.

Marginalized communities are divided by violence. Many people do not express publicly what they think about violence because they fear that informers with the gangs or the police will overhear; people feel that they are being monitored and controlled. This situation is similar to that of the armed conflict, when people did not speak openly about politics out of fear that army or guerilla informants would hear them. Many people hold onto the idea of a person acting as “*oreja*” (spy): a civilian who would intermix with the population and inform to the army.

Numerous authors contend that violence and fear in Guatemala are a consequence of the armed conflict (McIlwaine y Moser 2000, Koonings y Kruijt 2002, Levenson 2013); some even hold that a “culture of violence” exists in the country

(Cruz 2000, Lopez 2005, Steenkamp 2005). State terror and massacres in the 1980s caused profound harm to social relationships, and many victims continue to suffer the effects of fear and distrust of the State (Green 1999, Navarro y Sarti 2002, Manz 2004). Linda Green's ethnographic study (1999), with indigenous women who were widowed as a result of the armed conflict, provides important insights to understanding fear in Guatemala:

“Fear is a response to danger, but in Guatemala rather than being solely a subjective personal experience fear has also penetrated the social memory. And rather than an acute reaction it is a chronic condition. The effects of fear are pervasive and insidious in Guatemala. Fear destabilizes social relations by driving a wedge of distrust between family members, neighbors, and friends. Fear divides communities by creating suspicion and apprehension not only of strangers but of each other. Fear thrives on ambiguities. Denunciations, gossip, innuendos, and rumors of death lists create a climate of suspicion. No one can be sure who is who. The spectacle of torture and death and of massacres and disappearances in the recent past have become more deeply inscribed into individual bodies and the collective imagination through a constant sense of threat. In Guatemala, fear has become a way of life. Fear is the arbiter of power: invisible, in-determinant, and silent” (page 136).

Guatemala moved almost immediately from wartime State-induced terror to postwar fears around criminal violence. Numerous studies show that in the postwar period former army and State officials transitioned to criminal groups while maintaining contacts within the State to guarantee impunity for their crimes (Robles 2002, Peacock and Beltran 2004, Briscoe and Stappers 2012). These former military and government officials are very knowledgeable about the State and about the power of fear in subduing the population; in postwar times they use violence, fear, and impunity to sustain their economic advantages.

In my fieldwork I did not find evidence of a “culture of violence” in Guatemala. Guatemalans are not aggressive, nor do they teach their children to be violent; on the contrary, people are friendly, genuine, and hard-working. What I found is a society dominated by fear and distrust due to the violence generated by the State and criminal groups. These armed groups use violence and fear as strategies to control the population, make money, and wield power. People not only distrust the State; they also fear the State.

Violence has not been normalized in Guatemala. People do not see violence as “normal,” nor do they become desensitized to it; violence alters and damages people’s lives and affects their social relationships. People oppose violence, but they feel powerless and unprotected because armed groups act unscrupulously and with absolute impunity. People stay silent and show apathy because they feel deeply afraid of criminal groups and the State.

Resisting Violence

Violence also generates resistance. The vast majority of Guatemalans oppose violence but do not express so publicly, out of fear and distrust towards the State and their neighbors. Nevertheless, groups of activist youth and members of churches and local NGOs have bravely taken collective action to protest violence, thereby challenging the power of the State and gangs. They use community art, marches, and religious services to demonstrate against violence; they use youth centers and educational workshops to prevent violence.

Vinthagen (2006) suggests that resistance is an active response to power by subordinate groups; it is a practice that challenges power and has the possibility to reduce or subvert it. Resistance is conveyed in different ways: it can be expressed in public and confrontational ways such as protests, boycotts, strikes, etc., but it can also

be expressed through small and silent everyday acts (Scott 1990). People's resistance strategies vary depending on the social context and historical moment; in a context of extreme violence, people generally adopt silent strategies of resistance, as Scott suggests (1990). In El Mezquital, for instance, activists publically express their opposition to State and criminal violence, while many women resist violence in their everyday life at home.

Activist youth protest not only violence, but also social exclusion and stigmatization. Yet no one appears to pay attention to them; public attention continues to focus on gang violence, as if violence were the only way to garner public attention. In fact, the two groups, activists and gang members, are expressing, albeit in different ways, the same problem: the deep-seated discontent of thousands of children and youth who feel excluded, humiliated, and mistreated.

Many activist youth have motivations similar to those of gang members: they seek affection and respect; but, as they express it, they also "want to do something for the community." Their activism generally arises through church youth groups, student groups, and local NGOs; in recent years they have employed community art as a means to express themselves. They do not believe in the State because it marginalizes and represses them; they therefore direct their activism to the communities: they conduct festivals and local campaigns against police and criminal violence, against firearm use, and against social stigmatization.

Activists believe that violence prevention is key in reducing violence in the communities; they run small-scale youth centers that provide classes free of charge in computer skills, English, sports, and community art. In addition, they give violence prevention workshops in schools. However, few children and youth get involved in these centers and activities because they are afraid to go out on the streets or because

their parents do not allow them to do so. Furthermore, these centers operate with limited funds and depend on minimal aid from international donors.

The majority of activists are men. It is difficult for women to participate in youth groups because their parents do not let them leave the house due to the insecurity on the streets and the fear that they will be sexually harassed in such groups, and because they do not consider activism or art to be serious or productive activities for women. Despite this limitation, some women manage to head up youth groups, although they must face criticism from community members who question them for participating in primarily male groups, and they must work hard to “earn men’s respect” within the groups.

This study shows how violence affects women: they suffer the loss of their children, spouses, siblings, and other relatives, and they live practically confined to their homes, anxious and afraid of “male violence” on the streets. Yet this study also demonstrates that women play a key role in containing everyday violence; many women defend men to the police and gangs, talking with them so that they “calm down.” Mothers, especially the leading women who founded the communities, often negotiate with gang members so that they do not extort or attack members of community organizations. Even though they feel deep-seated fear and indignation, these women play an important role in curtailing violence. Throughout their involvement in community work, they have developed ample capacity to negotiate: they negotiated with the State in order to acquire basic services; they negotiated with community leaders in order to participate in neighbors’ committees; and now they are negotiating with gangs so that they do not extort community organizations.

The vast majority of activists are volunteers who face financial problems; like most other youth in El Mezquital, they have a very hard time finding work. Their

families question why they are so devoted to community art and pressure them to work and contribute to family expenses. Moreover, they endure social stigmatization, since people criticize them for their choice of clothing and their activities, dubbing them “*vagos* (bums)” and “*huevo*nes (lazybones)” and often mistaking them for gang members due to their membership in an organized group. Police constantly harass them and search them abusively. Gang members, meanwhile, continually monitor them but do not attack them; interestingly, the gangs respect the activists.

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