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**The Transnational Expansion of Mara
Salvatrucha (MS-13):
An Assessment of the Gang's Transnational
Patterns, Purposes, and Prospects in Spain.**

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the nature and extent of the consolidation of Mara Salvatrucha gang (MS-13) in Spain. With the aim of answering the research question, *what are the nature and implications of the transnational spread of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain?* the dissertation intends to shed light on the local peculiarities of MS-13 in Spain and assess its transnational connections with the "original" Mara Salvatrucha who are active in Central America. The research will be conducted through the review of selected secondary sources on the topic, identifying academic gaps and misconceptions about the gang's transnational expansions. By comparing the structure, purposes, and level of sophistication of Mara Salvatrucha in Central America and Spain, the study will establish evidence of the divergence between the different manifestations of the phenomenon. MS-13 in Spain exhibits substantial differences in its aims, leverage and prospects compared to its counterparts in other settings. It can be argued that aside from shared symbology, branding, and cultural background, the Spanish MS-13 variant is configured as a distinct and separate reality from the Central American gang, shaped by the confluence of structural and psychological factors experienced by diaspora communities in the country. MS-13 in Spain is limited in its composition and organizational capabilities. It has no political aspirations and plays a minor role in the Spanish and European criminal scenario. These results clash with the narratives of threat surrounding Mara Salvatrucha. Nonetheless, understanding the actual dimensions and peculiarities of the Spanish chapter of MS-13 is crucial to re-demystify the gang's perception and design context-appropriate policies that target crime prevention and promote effective integration of immigrants. While it cannot be taken for granted that the Mara Salvatrucha will not undergo a process of evolution also in Spain, it is implausible that it will follow a development similar to its path in Central America, given the significant differences in the socioeconomic and institutional context.

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ABBREVIATION LIST

CLALS	Center of Latin American & Latino Studies
DDP	Dominican Don't Play
INE	Spanish National Institute of Statistics
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
MSS	Mara Salvatrucha Stoners
SIT	Social Identity Theory
TCO	Transnational Criminal Organization

INTRODUCTION

“MS-13 is a dangerous and violent criminal organization well represented in several American countries where they cause serious security problems and destabilization, especially in Central America, and which is trying to set itself up in Spain”.

This is stated in the press release issued by the Spanish police following the conclusion in March 2014 of the first major operation in the country against Mara Salvatrucha, commonly known as MS-13 (TheLocal 2014). The Spanish Civil Guard *Operación Cruasán* enabled the arrest of thirty-five alleged Central American gang members operating in various Spanish regions (Albaladejo 2018), validating the concerns of law enforcement and institutions about the growth of the *maras* (term used to define Central American gangs) in the country. The first activities traceable to MS-13 reported in Spain date back to 2013 and intensified in frequency over the decade (Robbins and Bargent 2014). Today, Spanish media report weekly news regarding the crimes and violence perpetrated by the gang, fuelling a climate of fear and alarmism. The general perception, often indulged by the authorities and law enforcement, is that MS-13 from El Salvador is stretching its tentacles into Spain, infiltrating the criminal underworld, and endangering the safety of the citizens (Robbins and Bargent 2014). The reputation for brutality that precedes MS-13 is a severe concern for authorities, terrified by the possibility that the *maras* could reproduce in Spain the same brutal dynamics and modalities with which it operates in the Central American region. Yet the evidence does not support the assumption that MS-13 is enacting a deliberate expansion plan in the Spanish country and very little is known about the activities and nature of the gang in Spain, where appears to be just a minor player in the criminal scenario.

So where does the concern surrounding the emergence of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain and Europe come from, and how is it justified? Indeed, although the MS-13 is considered the world's arguably most dangerous gang, there is still very little clarity about its actual nature, structure, and goals. The gang, originated in the poor neighbourhoods inhabited by Salvadoran immigrants in 1980s Los Angeles (Arana 2005), has consolidated over time into a transnational criminal network spreading its influence, interests, and ties across North and Central America and, more recently, Europe. Over the decades, MS-13 has allegedly contributed to turning the Northern Triangle – Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras – into the world's most dangerous area with the highest homicide rate (Cheatham and Roy 2022). Moreover, the eradication of MS-13 has long been a top priority of United States policies (U.S Department of Justice 2020), becoming the symbol of anti-immigration rhetoric. Finally, the gang has incredible resonance in the media. MS-13 and its

members are portrayed as inherently violent, compared to terrorists or animals (McNeill 2019). The political responses and media narrative foment a widespread perception of fear around the gang.

Yet, apart from mainstream political narrative and media sensationalism, little tangible evidence supports this widely shared conception of Mara Salvatrucha as priority transnational threat, at least for Europe (Kinosian 2017). The lack of explicit knowledge about the gang's nature and scopes makes it so frightening. MS-13 is perceived, by media and policymakers, as a transnational criminal organization with defined expansion goals. Nevertheless, while there are links between gang cells in different countries, there is no evidence of a unified project implemented by the organization (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). Under many aspects, Mara Salvatrucha manifestations or "chapters" emerging in different countries appear to be nothing more than mere imitations of the gang in El Salvador (Wolf 2012). The transnationality of Mara Salvatrucha, spread over two continents and composed of many small subparts that are autonomous and closely linked to the context in which they originate but at the same time connected to the "supra gang" by identity and cultural attributes, makes it a hybrid entity, caught between the local and transnational dimensions. When trying to investigate the MS-13, the main challenge is to differentiate the local features of each gang expression and its transnational connections and meanings. Indeed, gangs are product of the socio-economic context in which originate (Sullivan 2006); therefore, it is highly implausible that MS-13 will present the same structure and enjoy identical criminal and governance resonance in different socio-political contexts. Thus, it is fair to expect that MS-13 in Spain will acquire forms, modalities, and characteristics suited to the specific context, disentangling itself from the common conception of the gang.

The intent of the dissertation will be to assess the socio-cultural, criminal, and political expressions and specificities of MS-13 in Spain, by clearing up misunderstandings around the issue and shedding light on the concrete implications of the replication of Mara Salvatrucha in the context to understand its nature, extent, and eventual prospects and developments. The dissertation's outline will attempt to provide a fulfilling and exhaustive answer to the main research question: *What are the nature and implications of the transnational spread of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain?*

To provide an adequate answer, it will be necessary to produce a robust theoretical and analytical framework and an overview of the socio-economic, political, and criminal background of the Mara Salvatrucha on an international scale. Understanding the position and perception of Mara Salvatrucha in the broader existing literature will enable zooming in on the Spanish case study

to identify the features and purposes of the local manifestation of MS-13. Throughout the thesis, a set of research sub-questions will be addressed to assess and evaluate all aspects of the local and transnational nature, meanings, and implications of the consolidation of the Mara Salvatrucha as a criminal and cultural agent in the Spanish context. The explicit research sub-questions leading the case study investigation are: *What does Ms-13 present itself as in Spain? What are the common elements and differences between the transnational expressions of MS-13? What is the extent of the transnational network and links between the "original" gang and the transplanted units in Spain? And, finally, Does the Mara Salvatrucha genuinely pose a threat to Spanish, and more generally European, stability and security, or does this perception stem from exaggerations and misconceptions?*

The first chapter aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical and analytical framework. First, an attempt will be made to define the concept of gang. Through the support of theories such as Multiple Marginality (Virgil 2019) and Social Identity Theory (Hennigan and Kelber 2014; Demmers 2017; Lauger 2020), the structural and psychological factors that allow gang formation will be analysed. Secondly, the attention will be shifted to conceptualizing transnational gangs to grasp their causes, and characteristics. Here, the Third Generation Gangs model developed by Sullivan (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008) will be a crucial tool for understanding the transformations and conditions from which "transnationalisation" derives. The theoretical framework will provide the key elements for the analytical approach based on the operationalization of gang formation and gang transnationalisation concepts as lenses to capture the contextual local peculiarities of MS-13.

Following the theoretical overview, the second chapter will instead frame Mara Salvatrucha as a transnational gang, providing a historical and socio-political background to the phenomenon. Analysis of the structural, psychological drivers and external factors – such as governments repressive policies and media representations - behind the development of MS-13 in Central America would serve as the foundation for drawing comparisons with the Spanish scenario. This chapter will investigate the gang's composition, structure, objectives, and involvement in criminal economies (Insight Crime & CLALS 2018).

The third chapter will focus on the expression of MS-13 in Spain. The aim will be to identify the peculiarities of MS-13 in Spain and assess the interplay of structural and psychological factors underlying the phenomenon, addressing the decisive impact of contextual dynamics and factors on local gang development. The most substantial section of the chapter will be devoted to the discussion of the findings. The data collected from the analysis of the literature and observation of the case study will allow for drawing conclusions and providing an answer to the research questions. The findings on the nature and purposes of MS-13 in Spain will also result in a critical

review of Sullivan's Third Generation Gangs model (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008). The evidence gathered will be used to identify and suggest approaches to overcome the model's shortcomings. The expectation is to produce accurate knowledge of the nature, purposes, and prospects of the Mara Salvatrucha in Spain, without falling into the misconception of treating the gang as a cohesive entity but acknowledging its internal distinctions and local uniqueness.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the dissertation is to investigate the transnational implications in terms of organisation, illicit economies, policies, and fear narratives of the expansion of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain. Although MS-13 consolidation has also been reported in other European settings, the Spanish case study proves to be the most investigable due to the phenomenon's rootedness and the availability more defined evidence.

The topic was selected due to a strong personal interest in non-state groups that use violence for socio-economic purposes. Moreover, the topic also has socio-political relevance. Proper understanding of the phenomenon of *maras* and their performance in context is key to deploy preventive and resolute policies to reduce crime and gang proliferation in Spain.

The research approach is deductive; starting from the assumption that the gang will take on different characteristics and purposes depending on the context, an attempt will be made to prove this through an analysis of the literature and data collected. The research will be mainly based on secondary sources including academic research and articles, documents from governmental bodies and institutions (INE - Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2022; U.S. Department of Justice 2018; 2020), non-governmental bodies reports (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018; InSight Crime 2021; EPA España 2022), and newspaper articles. Secondary sources were selected based on relevance and affinity to the dissertation topic. The choice to conduct secondary data research also relies on considerations on data access, feasibility, and ethical concerns. First, the existing literature was found to be sufficient to support the arguments of the project. The selected literature review promptly revealed the theoretical and analytical elements needed for the dissertation and the academic gaps to be addressed. In addition, the timeframe for conducting the research was also determined in the selection of the modality. While ethnographic research would have been ideal, the expected time frame for the development of the dissertation did not make fieldwork feasible. Finally, ethical and positionality concerns contributed to the preference for secondary rather than

primary data. The gang environment and culture did not accommodate the conduction of interviews and other qualitative data collection methods, such as participant observation, due to issues of confidentiality and safety, both for the researcher and any interviewees.

To collect the secondary data needed to support the research project, a comprehensive literature review has been conducted. Alongside providing a theoretical and notional background, the research will be ground on the comparison of the collected data and literature to fill knowledge gaps and misunderstanding on the challenging transnational nature of Mara Salvatrucha. The purpose of the comparison is to highlight discrepancies in the collected data and identify answers and alternatives suitable for the case study. A selection of the most relevant sources and their contribution and input to the research will be illustrated below.

The theoretical and analytical framework will be based on a substantial set of existing literature, academic articles, and ethnographic research. However, the primary theoretical input will be provided by the Third Generation Gang Model (3 GEN Gang) developed by Sullivan (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008). His theory of gang transnationalisation will serve as an analytical lens for understanding the transnational evolution of the Mara Salvatrucha. Sullivan divides gangs into three generations and identifies MS-13 as a third-generation gang as transnational in terms of spatial expansion, criminal networks, and political-cultural influence and aspirations. Transnationalisation occurs through processes of politicization, internationalization, and sophistication. Nevertheless, the dissertation will progress with a critical reinterpretation of the model as too narrow to capture the dissimilarities between local subparts of MS-13. Revisiting the 3 GEN Gang will constitute the research's theoretical contribution.

The further theoretical framework will be provided by the theory of Multiple Marginalities developed by Virgil (2019) in his article *Street Gangs: A Multiple Marginality Perspective*. The theoretical-analytical perspective originates from the assumption that poverty and exclusion are the underlying structural causes of gangs (Virgil 2019). Virgil proposes a holistic, multidimensional, and intersectional approach to explain the socio-economic and identitarian motivations that drive individuals to group in social formations such as gangs and resort to crime and violence. Such an approach will prove particularly appropriate for investigating the nature and characteristics of Mara Salvatrucha. The concept of Multiple Marginalities will be operationalized while analysing the drivers and possible prevention strategies of *maras* formation in Spain. Also, the theory will support the comparison between the Central American MS-13 and the Spanish chapter.

A detailed multidimensional background of MS-13's characteristics and purposes will be provided by InSight Crime and CLALS Report *MS13 in the Americas How the World's Most Notorious*

Gang Defies Logic, Resists Destruction (2018). The study, conducted through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods including extensive fieldwork and interviews with MS-13 members, aims to explore MS-13 organization and development, criminal activities, relationship with other criminal organizations and criminal organizations, modus operandi, use of violence, accumulation of social capital, and political power (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018:10). The research findings provide a detailed overview of the features of the "original" gang. The empirical data collected will be complemented through the contribution of the systematic criminological research *Conceptual and empirical obstacles in defining MS-13 - Law-enforcement perspectives* conducted by Barak, León, and Maguire (2020). Based on surveys and interviews with law enforcement officers in the Washington, the researchers explore the inextricable nexus between MS-13 reproduction and anti-immigrant policy, assessing the unintended consequences of overcriminalization approaches (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020). This research is a tool to determine the influence of repressive approaches in the proliferation and transnationalisation of MS-13.

Finally, the case study analysis will be based on multiple secondary sources. Notable among these is undoubtedly the ethnographic research *Jóvenes "latinos" en Barcelona: espacio público y cultura urbana* conducted by Recio, Feixa, and Porzio (2006). The study aims to assess the correlation between identity struggles, public space, involvement in criminal activities, and formation of youth *bandas latinas* in Spain, mainly in Barcelona. The information gathered demonstrates the complex socio-economic and identity marginalization faced by immigrant youth face in Spain. The research explicitly parallels the mechanisms and logic of MS-13 Spain and its counterpart in Central America. Nevertheless, the significant contextual discrepancies identified provide the basis for distinguishing the two realities and supporting the research's discussion and findings.

1 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FRAMING TRANSNATIONAL GANGS

The contemporary globalized world is characterized by marked interconnectivity between places, people, and societies. Everything is interlinked; everything is affected and has potential repercussions globally. The same applies to the processes and patterns of organized violence and crime that undergo continuous transformations while stretching across different environments (Winton 2014). Political, social, and economic shifts condition and alter the international landscape of violence (Winton 2014). Actors of violence are no longer localized but can operate nationally, regionally, and even globally, making it complicated to distinguish between different groups (Winton 2014:401). In this complex scenario, transnational gangs have emerged as major international violent agents in recent decades. Yet, the concept of transnational gangs is still very blurred in its definition and manifestations, as they arise as undefined hybrid organization at the intersection of spatial dimensions, crime, politics, and social phenomena (Sullivan 2006:488).

For this reason, this chapter aims to discuss the nature of these human formations through the lens of transnationality. First, an attempt will be made to obtain a better understanding of the key concept of gangs and identify the preconditions that foster their emergence. Then, the factors and conditions that make the transnational transformations of gangs possible will be analysed in detail. Careful analysis and understanding of the concepts, nature and developments of urban and transnational gangs prove crucial to support the investigation and to answer the main research question of the dissertation: *What are the nature and implications of the transnational spread of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain?* Since this is a complex, multifaceted, and ever-changing topic, the analysis of the transnational nature and links of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain can only occur with solid theoretical support and a clearer understanding of the observed phenomena' definitions, challenges, and circumstances.

1.1 DEFINING GANGS

The first challenge is to identify a shared definition of the term “gang.” The concept of gangs turns out to be very contested and multifaceted as it tries to encapsulate a varied phenomenon in scale, scope, and characteristics (Winton 2014). The term assumes different meanings and connotations depending on the countries, times, and social groups to which it refers. Moreover, the colloquial term “gang” differs substantially from its academic definition, just as it

carries different shades of meaning within the media narrative or political rhetoric (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020:566).

The mainstream understandings of gangs are often based on stereotypes and simplistic generalizations. In the collective imagination, strongly influenced by media and fiction, gangs are portrayed as groups of criminals, predators, and murderers whose members are vicious and violent (Hazen 2010:317). Gangs are automatically linked to urban spaces and marginal neighbourhoods, or “ghettos” characterized by conditions of social unrest, poverty, and drugs (Wacquant 2008:25; Jaffe 2012). Also, there is a widespread tendency to perceive gangs as all functioning in the same way as specialized criminal organizations with definite profit-making and looting intentions against citizens (Hazen 2010:317). Often the stereotypical notion of the gang has youth and ethnic connotations.

This conception overlaps in many ways with the political understanding and operationalization of the term gang. In this context, the term is loaded with pejorative connotations of danger, threat to the status quo, criminality, and involvement in illegal activities often instrumentalized to support conservative and anti-immigration political rhetoric (Esbensen and Maxson 2012:5; Winton 2014:405; Curry 2015; Feixa, Sánchez-García and Brisley 2020:9). Usually, political discourse and media narratives about gangs revolves around the US-centric vision of the phenomenon, using the U.S. gang stereotype as an archetype to categorize any group with similar features (Feixa and Sánchez-García 2022; Barak, León, and Maguire 2020).

Regarding the identification of an academic definition of the term gang, the question becomes even more complex. Indeed, defining what exactly constitutes a gang has historically plagued researchers and scholars (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020). Nevertheless, several classifications have been formulated to frame and identify universal characteristics of this multifaceted social phenomenon (Feixa and Sánchez-García 2022). Most conceptual definitions developed by gang researchers mainly focus on the organizational aspects of the gang, the purpose, whether social, economic, or criminal, and the symbolic characteristics of the group (Bjerregaard 2002:33).

The understanding of gangs has changed over time. Nowadays mainstream conception of gang always carries negative connotations; however, in the early years of gang investigation, many scholars believed that the term gangs could also be used to describe non-delinquent groups of people sharing some identity traits without involvement in violence and crime (Thrasher 1927/2013; Miller 1958; Bjerregaard 2022). For example, the first and widely known definition of a gang, developed by the pioneer of gang studies Frederic Thrasher (1927/2013), reads as follows:

"An interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behaviour: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behaviour is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory".

(Thrasher 1927/2013:46)

According to this conception, any informal group locally rooted and composed of peers who clash with other peer groups or adult institutions (Thrasher 1927/2013) could become a gang when spontaneity, informality, attachment to the territory, and conflict criteria are met. However, according to Thrasher's successors, this definition proves too vague and broad, failing to establish a clear difference between street gangs and any other type of youth association (Klein 1971; Miller 1992; Feixa and Sánchez-García 2022).

In contemporary scholarship on gangs, it is generally accepted that what differentiates gangs from other youth or delinquent groups is the "use of systematic and socially meaningful violence" (Winton 2014:404). These conceptualizations view gangs as a product of contemporary society, its disparities, and changes, thus, violence and crime acquire a social meaning as they arise from social inequalities. Nowadays, scholars tend to define gangs as forms of socialization for alienated individuals that can assume different modalities, organizational structures, and purposes (Winton 2014:405). In this regard, a well-accepted definition of gangs has been elaborated by Hagedorn (Sanders 2019).

[Gangs or] Organizations of the street are composed of either the socially excluded, alienated, demoralized, or bigoted elements of a dominant racial, ethnic, or religious group. (...) The gang is not stable but can change its shape and function over time. While most gangs begin as unsupervised adolescent peer groups and remain so, some institutionalize and become business enterprises within the informal economy (...) Most gangs are characterized by a racialized or ethnoreligious identity as well as being influenced by global culture."

(Hagedorn Definition in Sanders 2019)

1.1.1 Preconditions of Gang Formation

For the purposes of understanding the nature of gangs, it is critical to proceed from the assumption that these human formations do not happen in isolation but rather are the result of a combination of social and institutional dynamics (Winton 2014:403). In the words of Winton (Winton 2014:403), gangs should not be "understood as aberrations but, rather, as coherent, logical

and functional groups immersed in local institutional landscapes and responding to structural disadvantage at different scales."

The conditions that enable the formation of gangs, while deeply interconnected and interdependent, can be divided into two types; on the one hand, the structural factors of society that create conditions of disadvantage and inequality, and on the other hand, the human need of the disadvantaged segments of the population to come together and belong to a group. Also, "external" elements can influence and affect the emergence of gangs. External conditions are closely linked to the specific context where the gang develops and can take various forms (Feixa, Sánchez-García and Brisley 2020). Throughout the chapter, the impact of institutional responses and media representation of MS-13 in its formation and transnationalisation will be considered.

First, the structural causes of the phenomenon should be considered. Indeed, gang formation could be intended as the product of the co-presence and simultaneous action of different forces affecting specific segments of society, what Virgil (2019:2) called Multiple Marginality. Poverty, lack of educational and employment opportunities, social and political exclusion, ethnic or religious discrimination, spatial segregation in marginal neighbourhoods, lack of rights, access, protection from institutions, and migratory background are some of the factors that promote gang proliferation (Feixa, Sánchez-García and Brisley 2020:9). These different types of mutually interconnected exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination cause individuals to join together (Virgil 2019). Indeed, gangs are, first and foremost, human associations revolving around shared backgrounds, experiences, identities, values, grievances, and aspirations reinforced collectively through members' interactions.

Secondly, it is possible to think of gang formation in response to psychological factors (Virgil 2019), such as the so-called identity impulse (Demmers 2017:41), according to which individuals have a universal and fundamental need to belong to and identify with something. The sense of exclusion deriving from the "overlapping marginalities" can drive individuals to socialize with their peers to satisfy their recognition, appreciation, and belonging needs (Virgil 2019).

Many scholars, like Hennigan and Kelber (2012), believe that the best approach to investigate gang membership is the Social Identity Theory (SIT). Indeed, according to gang researchers, SIT is particularly fitting to investigate this kind of group dynamics as it focuses on intergroup dynamics rather than just interpersonal ones (Hennigan and Kelber 2012:128). The approach is grounded on the idea that individuals' self-concept depends on intergroup relations. This implies that individuals seek to reduce instability and obtain a positive sense of self through participation in social groups (Demmers 2017:43). Once individuals have identified their group of

belonging, they internalize the group's distinctive values and behaviours to the extent that they become a constituent part of their own identity.

Gangs certainly, fulfil this function for their members by providing them with a purpose, a community, and a social role and status. Gang group identity is often emphasized and taken to extremes through rituals and symbols, such as tattoos and graffiti. The gang, its distinctive behaviour, and codes regulate and shape every aspect of its members' lives, acting like a single organism.

Moreover, gangs are mostly constructed in opposition to other groups. Indeed, collective identities are the shared sense of "we" within groups that are continuously reinforced by group members' interaction with the external society (Lauger 2020:2). According to SIT, in-group formation automatically leads to categorizing out-groups (Demmers 2017). Positive group identity is reinforced by comparing the in-group with selected out-groups. The perception that the in-group is superior, better, or, in the case of gangs, "toughest" promotes a sense of positive distinctiveness, self-definition, and self-esteem individually and collectively (Hennigan and Kelber 2012:129). The process of group comparison, intended as a collective strategy to enhance self-worth, may evolve into group competitions and, ultimately, group hostility (Demmers 2017:43). Hostility, which can result in intergroup conflict, such as clashes between rival gangs, occurs due to a negative evaluation of the in-group performance and status in relation to another group. In this circumstance, destroying the perceived superior out-group is necessary to recover the group's self-esteem and social status. When it comes to street gangs, group cohesion, and intergroup conflict play a key function in strengthening members' identification with the group (Hennigan and Kelber 2012:133).

Having examined both the structural factors of society and the psychological-identity factors underlying gang formation, it is possible to derive that these social organizations develop as movements of "resistance" and "resilience" to social disruptions and grievances (Queirolo Palmas 2014:23; Feixa, Sánchez-García and Brisley 2020:9). Individual and collective empowerment thus acquires a key significance in gang formation (Queirolo Palmas 2014). Nevertheless, this empowerment is often accompanied using violence and involvement in criminal economies. Therefore, while it is not intended to deny the criminality and violence related to gang activities, predatory motivations are not the rationale behind the formation of these groups but are developed because of the environment (Feixa, Sánchez-García and Brisley 2020). Gang violence perpetrated by gangs tends to be functional in maintaining the integrity of the group's identity, status, and social and territorial leverage (Farah and Babineau 2017).

The nature and manifestations of gangs cannot be disconnected from the socio-political and economic context in which they develop. Identity and cultural elements combine with

perceptions of exclusion and marginalization, creating a fertile ground for the emergence of gangs (Farah and Babineau 2017). Perhaps, it is precisely this visceral connection to the specific context that makes understanding and categorizing gangs so complex. While different gangs may share common traits and characteristics, it is implausible that one group formed in one setting will exactly mirror another created in a different environment. Similarly, psychological, and cultural factors are also linked and shaped by the context (Feixa, Sánchez-García and Brisley 2020).

Gangs are thus found to be highly context specific. Gaining this awareness will prove crucial to grasping the intricacies and misconceptions about the nature and structure of transnational gangs and, as the ultimate purpose of this investigation, to assess the real extent of MS-13 transnationalisation in the Spanish context.

1.2 TRANSNATIONAL GANGS

With the intent to explore the nature of contemporary gangs, it is necessary to dispel one last misconception about gangs. In the popular imagination, gangs are closely linked to the territory where they originated. Gangs are generally perceived as something static that belongs to a specific place (Hazen 2010; Jaffe 2012). However, although the close relationship between gangs and territory is undeniable, these organizations move and expand spatially. No longer relegated solely to poor and marginalized neighbourhoods, gangs take over new territories. Urban areas that used to be free of such organizations, like residential areas and small towns, are no longer alien to the gang phenomenon (Hazen 2010). Similarly, many gangs worldwide are also expanding their presence and influence in rural areas (Farah and Richardson 2022). Finally, even national borders can be easily surpassed by contemporary gangs capable of transmitting their values and interests to other countries, regions, and even continents, becoming transnational entities. But what is and how does the process of “transnationalisation” take place?

1.2.1 *Factors Underlying Gangs’ Transnationalisation*

The term “transnationalisation” refers to the identification of “common and convergent elements” - ethnicity and cultural background, organizational structure, scope, identity markers, name, and symbology - amongst gangs that emerged in different national contexts (White 2013).

The primary driver behind gang transnationality is migration flows and human mobility. From the dawn of time, human societies have been transmitting values, knowledge, and ideas through migration flows and undergoing processes of enrichment and sophistication through encounters among societies and customs. Similarly, human migration can foster the transmission and transposition of organizational and cultural forms, such as gangs (White 2013).

Through migration, diaspora communities consolidate into a new context in which they seek to fulfil their socioeconomic, political, and identity needs. Yet, frequently, the host country and society do not meet the expectations of migrants generating a sense of alienation, exclusion, and frustration (Khan, Combaz, and McAslan Fraser 2015). These feelings drive the migrant population to regroup in the communities of origin and create a network of support, within which different types of dynamics can take shape, among which, precisely, the formation of new gangs.

Indeed, Khan, Combaz, and McAslan Fraser (2015:402) identify the causes of gang proliferation and growth in new areas and host countries as a "combination of structural factors (poverty, disadvantage, and immigration), process factors (cultural conflict and racial and group threat), and cultural factors." Migration, therefore, can be a cause of social exclusion. Often migrants are unable to access the labour market, having to make do with precarious and low-paying jobs, and tend to concentrate in poor and vulnerable areas of the city, such as slums (Khan, Combaz and McAslan Fraser 2015). Exclusion can also be political. Not only do migrants often not enjoy the same political rights and freedoms as citizens, but the host country's anti-immigration policies and rhetoric that directly or indirectly affect the migrant population can reinforce patterns of marginalization (Khan, Combaz and McAslan Fraser 2015; Jaffe and De Koning 2015). The discrimination of migrants usually ramifies along the lines of ethnicity, gender, religion, and language (Graham 2010). Finally, cultural exclusion is also a determinant in the disadvantaged status of the migrant population who may struggle to integrate into a context characterized by different values, customs, and ways of life than in the mother homeland (Khan, Combaz and McAslan Fraser 2015).

All these elements contribute to an increased sense of alienation and nostalgia. The combination of multiple marginalities (Virgil 2019) encourages migrants to approach criminal environments and can fuel tensions between host societies and immigrant communities. However, the concurrence of multiple marginalities does not always automatically translate into gang formation. Not all communities and individuals who experience such identity and socioeconomic tensions participate in social formations like gangs. Nevertheless, the likelihood of gang formation in conjunction with different dimensions of exclusion is very high, even more so if these occur in a migratory context (Virgil 2019). Some socio-economic, political, and cultural arrangements, such as the development of policies for the integration of migrant communities and crime prevention, may contribute to reducing the chance of gang formation even when multiple marginalities exist (Martínez Martínez 2008.) In chapter 3, the factors that alleviate the chance of MS-13 proliferation in Spain will be examined in detail.

It becomes clear, therefore, that the formation of gangs in host countries means more to diaspora communities than just opportunities for enrichment through involvement in criminal economies. Gangs provide migrants with a collective identity, shared purpose, and social and economic networking (Paalberg 2022:16-17). Furthermore, gangs tend to reproduce the same patterns of the homeland's behaviour, values, and customs, giving its members and the diaspora community a sense of connection to the motherland (Paalberg 2022). This connection is emphasized by the gangs that consolidate “abroad” by replicating identity-based gestures and behaviours, such as native language, slang, and symbols typical of the original group. In most cases, therefore, these groups form spontaneously to fulfil the diasporas' needs and have, at least initially, no direct intention of expansion by the homeland gang (Khan, Combaz, and McAslan Fraser 2015).

Diasporas are never isolated from the country of origin but rather maintain close personal, family, and economic interactions, and connections. The ties between the diaspora and the homeland are not one-sided. These transnational interactions can be conceptualized with the term "social remittances," developed by Lewis (1998). According to the scholar, social remittances are all forms of "ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow between the host and sending country" (Lewis 1998:926), whether they are political, cultural, religious, economic, or even criminal. Like all other dimensions, "crime" and criminal organizations are also altered, enriched, and influenced by the connections established between sending country and the diaspora abroad (Paalberg 2022:16).

Therefore, the transnationalisation of gangs is a spontaneous phenomenon that may occur naturally when diaspora communities experience the structural preconditions of exclusion and “multiple marginalities” (Virgil 2019) underlying the gang formation process in the new environment (Thrasher 1927/2013; Decker, van Gemert and Pyrooz 2009; Cruz 2010; Paalberg 2022).

Finally, other two “external” elements affect and spur the process of gang transnationalisation: the gang-state relationship and the political media representation of the phenomenon (Hazen 2010).

Regarding gang-government relations, the responses and policies enacted by the authorities may inadvertently foment the spread and proliferation of the phenomenon (Hazen 2010). Since gangs are perceived as threats to stability, authorities tend to enforce repressive responses to eliminate their violence and brutality. These institutional responses are often ineffective and counterproductive. On the one hand, they worsen marginal groups' conditions, exacerbating exclusion and resentment, thereby expanding the gangs' recruitment pool both in the homeland and host countries (Wolf 2012; Seelke 2016). On the other, repression drives communities,

including gang members, to migrate to flee state violence, furthering the transnational spread of the phenomenon (Seelke 2016). In a sense, the nexus between state repression and the escalation of violence can be explained by what some scholars (Kleinfeld and Barham 2018; Ellefsen 2021) call the paradox of repression. While the theory focuses on the eruption of violence by nonviolent movements when repressive policies are enforced, the mechanism can also apply to gang proliferation. This paradox predicts that "repressive coercion can weaken a regime's authority, turning public opinion against it. Paradoxically, the more a power elite applies force, the more citizens and third parties are likely to become disaffected" (Kurtz and Smithey 2018). Hard repression strategies tend to produce unexpected consequences by altering the dynamics of contestation, diminishing state legitimacy, promoting radicalization, and driving individuals and groups whose conditions have worsened to resort to more violence (Winton 2014; Bergmann 2019). Often, governments' use of coercion backfires (Winton 2014).

In the following chapter will be observed how repressive policies implemented by government in Central America and the U.S. contributed to the formation and expansion of Mara Salvatrucha, sharpening the structural and psychological preconditions underlying the group while simultaneously providing greater political and social leverage to the gang (Seelke 2016; Kinosian 2017).

Finally, a last driver to considerate when looking at the transnationalization of gangs is the mainstream media and political narrative of gangs. The transnationality of gangs consists not only of the flow of people and gang reconstitution but also of the transmission and transnationalisation of stories and imaginaries. Misconceptions, stereotypes, and exaggerations related to gang brutality and violence in other countries spread by media and political rhetoric contribute to creating an international narrative of gangs (Barak, León and Maguire 2020). This phenomenon can be called "enemy construction," which is the strategic use of political rhetoric to label certain individuals and groups, affixing them with negative characteristics such as danger, threat, deviance, or just otherness (Andersen Jones and Grow 2017). Nowadays, this political strategy is widespread especially toward groups such as immigrants. Media sensationalism encourages repressive policies toward groups that arise in host contexts, even if they do not exhibit the same characteristics as the original gang (De Cesare 2018; Barak, León and Maguire 2020:581). In addition, these narratives, often instrumentalized for political purposes, shape an atmosphere of public fear, mistrust, and exclusion towards diasporas, limiting integration and consequently fostering alienation and gang formation (Cruz 2018). In the next chapter, the enemy construction rhetoric implemented by the United States against MS-13 and how it affects international perceptions and reactions toward the gang, will be briefly explored.

1.2.2 *From street gangs to transnational enterprises: Sullivan's Third Generation Model*

These two-way links, in the form of social, cultural, political, or economic remittances, between gangs in the home country and "spin-offs" in the host countries, foster gang transformation and sophistication (Sullivan 2006; 2008). While the "original" gang is the model from which the diasporas are inspired and provides them with a sense of belonging and status, knowledge exchanges, new inputs from the diasporas, and encounters with different socioeconomic and political backgrounds and patterns alter and enrich the characteristics and prospects of the gang. New contexts provide new opportunities, including criminal and predatory ones. Economic interests and criminal involvement in the new environments develop as a consequence of the natural and spontaneous process of transnationalization (Wolf 2012; Virgil 2019). Rather than a deliberate expansion strategy, gangs take advantage of the transnationalisation that has already occurred to extend their criminal networks (Dudley and Avalos 2018; InSight Crime & CLALS 2018).

This process is not automatic and takes time, gangs evolve gradually. According to Sullivan (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008), the evolution of gangs consists of three stages, which he refers to as generations in his Third Generation Gangs Model or 3 GEN Gangs. According to the model, the generational shift is driven by the occurrence and interaction of three factors: politicization, internationalization, and sophistication (Sullivan 2006:489).

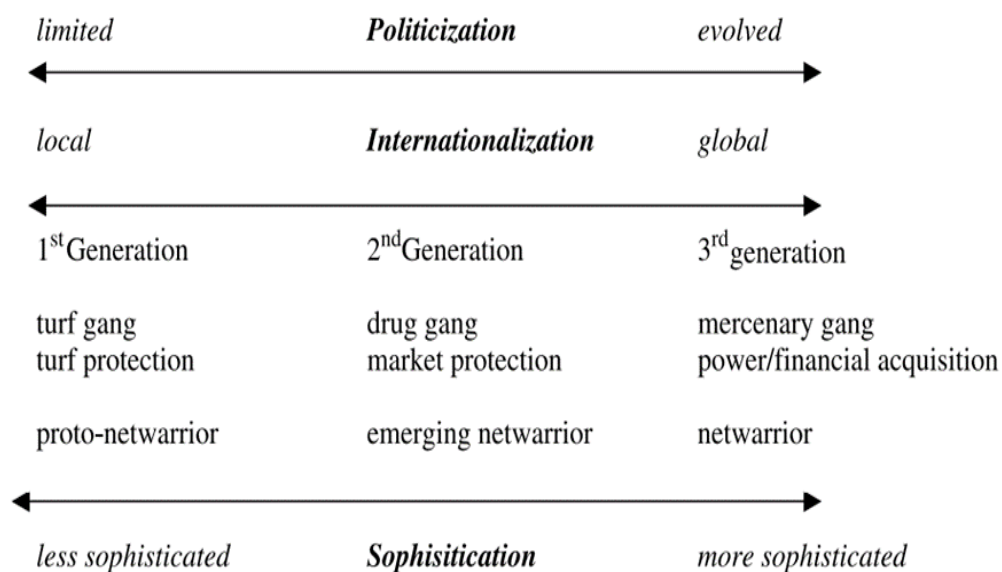


Figure 1: The Third Generation Gangs Model (Sullivan 2006:490)

First Generation: According to the model, first-generation gangs are typical street gangs, local, small, and characterized by an unsophisticated organizational structure. Sullivan calls them "turf gangs" as they concentrate their limited leadership and protection activities on very limited territories within a neighbourhood. These gangs also have limited, if any, political scope (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008).

Second Generation: Second-generation gangs are more business-oriented, characterized by a pronounced entrepreneurial connotation generally focused on drug trafficking. Compared to first-generation gangs, they have a broader, sometimes political, agenda focused on market and business expansion opportunities. These networks may be multinational or even international. Some second-generation gangs forge relationships with other criminal groups and organizations to sustain their activities. According to Sullivan (2006; 2008), most existing gangs fall into this category, which is characterized by a more centralized and organized leadership and structure.

Third Generation: The third generation represents the last stage of gang evolution when politicization, internationalization, and sophistication processes overlap. Third-generation gangs are products of societal transformations resulting from "the confluence of globalization and technological advances that alter the nature of conflict and crime, favor small, agile groups, and fuel the privatization of violence" (2006:488). Throughout their transition, these criminal "enterprises" (2008) develop political aspirations and goals, operate internationally, and have undergone organizational and structural sophistication to sustain their political and predatory activities (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008).

Sullivan's third-generation gangs reflect what is commonly intended under the concept of transnational gangs. The "transnationalisation" makes these gangs more complex in terms of economic and political scope and networks.

Nevertheless, the gangs spread in various countries should not be considered a unitary structure. This is because although the emergence of "spin-offs" in new contexts makes the gang as a whole more complex and sophisticated, this does not necessarily mean that there is a common leadership and goal or that the different manifestations of the gang have the same level of evolution (Wolf 2012). Rather than a coherent entity, the different smaller gangs that make up the "transnational supra-gang" share common cultural elements transported from place to place and adapted to the specific context (Jaffe 2012) that facilitate the reproduction of similar formations. Sullivan's model (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008) provides a theoretical framework for categorizing and

understanding the nature and transnational extent of gangs; nevertheless, it fails to capture all the nuances these groups can take on in the real world. The characteristics of the different categories are fixed and unchanging in the model. However, gangs that exist in different contexts may present the co-presence of distinctive elements of the three different stages of the model at the same time.

To answer this dissertation's research question and sub-questions, the 3 GEN Gangs Model will be critically applied to the Mara Salvatrucha to analyse its transnational evolution. The second chapter will address the politicization, internationalization, and sophistication processes that have led it to become what Sullivan calls the quintessential transnational gang (2008:6). In the third chapter, however, the model will be critically challenged by applying it to MS-13 Spanish variant assessing its degree of evolution and differences from other gang's manifestations in other countries to demonstrate that the process of gang transnationalisation is not unified in its forms (Wolf 2012).

Perhaps it is because of this undefined hybrid nature at the intersection of crime, politics, and social phenomena (Sullivan 2006:488) that today's gangs are such a major concern for governments and policymakers. The variety and mutability of transnational gangs make them elusive in the eyes of policymakers who, not understanding their range of manifestations, fail to designate appropriate policies and approaches, tending to prefer repressive responses.

Since it is recognized as the more influential third generation gang (Sullivan 2008), the following chapters will attempt to understand how Mara Salvatrucha became transnational, the connections between groups that identify themselves under the MS-13 name in different countries, and its national and international instability implications by comparing MS-13 manifestations in Central America and the U.S. with its Spanish spin-off. To answer the main research question *What are the nature and implications of the transnational spread of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain* and sub-questions, this theoretical review provides some central conceptual tools and processes that form a valuable analytical framework. In the next chapters, these concepts will be operationalized to undertake the analysis of Mara Salvatrucha in the Spanish case study and to deconstruct and examine the different elements and drivers that fostered the transnationalisation of MS-13 over time and the implications of its emergence in the Spanish context.

- ❖ **Concept/Process of Gang Formation:** In the next chapters, the concept of gang formation will be explored to understand in which instances the coexistence of multiple marginalities (Virgil 2019) and aggregation drivers - structural, psychological-identitarian, and external factors – in the specific context concur in the emergence of MS-13

manifestations in different contexts. The process of gang formation in Central America and Spain will be compared to assess and interpret the similarities and differences.

- ❖ **Process of Transnationalisation:** The transnationalisation of gangs is a natural phenomenon spurred by several factors. Through the analysis of the processes of politicization, internationalization, and sophistication predicted in Sullivan's 3 GEN Gangs model (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008), an attempt will be made in the second chapter to assess the transnational transformation of MS-13. A key element of the transnationalisation processes is the role of diasporas and how their status in host societies profoundly influences the international violence landscape. Secondly, external elements like media narrative and counter-gang policies will be a crucial part of the picture of the transnational expansion of MS-13. Finally, in the analysis of the Spanish case study, the concepts of diaspora, multiple marginalities, transnationality will be instrumentalized to fully understand the extent of the transnational nature, meanings, links, and prospects of the Spanish version of the gang.

2 GETTING TO KNOW MARA SALVATRUCHA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE “WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS GANG”

In recent decades, Mara Salvatrucha expansion and alleged involvement in transnational crime have attracted the attention of scholars, journalists, and policymakers. The MS-13 is commonly described, by media and policymakers, as one of the world's most influential, and dangerous gangs (Wolf 2012). Yet, little evidence supports this view, and many aspects of the gang remain unexplored to this day.

For this reason, this chapter will attempt to provide a concise picture of the background and functioning of the Mara Salvatrucha in Central and North America. The aim will be to understand the gang's causes, dynamics, and transformations. The transnational evolution and sophistication of MS-13 will be observed by applying the Third Generation Gang model developed by Sullivan (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008). Moreover, to gain a better sense of the phenomenon, an effort will be made to assess how institutional responses and political and media narratives influence the development and expansion of Mara Salvatrucha.

This perspective will provide a deeper knowledge of the phenomenon and serve as a benchmark for investigating gang expression in the Spanish context. The in-depth analysis of the background and political, socio-economic, and cultural conditions that facilitated the proliferation of MS-13 in Central America is essential to understand the eventual similarities and differences with the gang's nature and scope in Spain and attempt to determine and predict its potential prospects in Europe.

2.1 TRACING THE ROOTS OF MS-13

Although MS-13 is a phenomenon associated with Central America, especially El Salvador, its origins should be traced to the most marginalized neighbourhoods of Los Angeles in the 1980s (Arana 2005; Stiles 2012; Kinoshian 2017; InSight Crime 2021).

In the wake of Central American civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s, a substantial flow of refugees from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala fled the devastation, seeking opportunities in the U.S. Many of them ended up in California, living among the Mexican neighbourhoods of East and Central Los Angeles, and other areas in Southern California (Stiles 2012; InSight Crime 2021).

These areas, which offered few opportunities for young immigrants, were mainly controlled by urban Mexican gangs, and characterized by high violence and crime rates. Soon, Central

American refugees began to cluster in gangs, among which emerged the ancestor of MS-13 under the name Mara Salvatrucha Stoners, also known as MSS or Stoner (InSight Crime 2021). While the origins of the name are still uncertain, Mara Salvatrucha likely means "the clever gang from El Salvador" (*Mara* is the term for identifying a gang in Central America, "Salva" is a reference to El Salvador, and "Trucha" means smart) (InSight Crime 2021). At the same time, MS-13's longtime rival, Barrio 18, named after the 18th Street in Los Angeles where it was founded, was also forming with Central American immigrants joining existing local Mexican gangs (Stiles 2012). The wave of violence generated by the clashes between the rival gangs entailed a strong reaction from law enforcement authorities, which led to a series of raids to incarcerate as many members of the *maras* as possible in the 1980s and early 1990s (Kinosian 2017). In prison, Mara Salvatrucha consolidated through the establishment of alliances, working as contractors, with the Mexican Mafia, known as "La Eme," which controlled the penitentiary institutions. In the name of this alliance, the MSS becomes MS-13 since M is the 13th letter of the alphabet (InSight Crime 2021).

Through partnerships with Mexican and Latin American criminal organizations, MS-13 quickly became a major player in criminal networks in prison and the streets, earning a widespread reputation for brutality. In reaction to the rising violence in the mid-1990s, the U.S. government launched a campaign of mass deportation of foreign-born residents convicted (Kinosian 2017). Due to the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Laws in 1996, many members of MS-13 and Barrio 18 were sent back to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and neighbouring countries. Between 1996 and 2004, the U.S. sent nearly 31,000 convicted criminals to Central America (Stiles 2012). Central American governments, politically and economically fragile and trying to recover from the civil wars, could not handle the influx of deported criminals. Moreover, it is assumable that the deportations were targeted at eradicating gangs, as 90 percent of the deportees were allegedly gang members and not common criminals (Stiles 2012), and the U.S. implemented a non-disclosure policy on the deportees' criminal backgrounds (Arana 2005:101).

The returnees from Los Angeles arrived in Central America without any prospects other than gang life due to the lack of employment and their social stigma associated that made it impossible to reintegrate into society (Seelke 2016:8). As a result, most returnees resumed their criminal lifestyles, expanding local youth gangs into organized *maras* that still control vast neighbourhoods and areas throughout Central America (Arana 2005:100; Kinosian 2017). Therefore, U.S. anti-immigration policies have been the leading cause, combined with structural fragilities of the receiving countries, of the exportation of MS-13 and other gangs to Central America. Furthermore, the incessant forced deportations facilitated the strengthening of gangs, and the creation of transnational criminal networks (Prado Perez 2018).

The emergence of Mara Salvatrucha displays all the traits and facilitators of gang formation examined in the theoretical framework. The gang originated from the interplay of structural factors such as spatial, political, and economic exclusion, and psychological and identity drivers due to estrangement and lack of integration of the migrants in the U.S. society. Multiple marginalities perceived by immigrants from Central America converge in the emergence of street gangs. Here another element steps in, namely the implementation of more restrictive immigration policies and the stigmatization of diaspora communities as criminals, which exacerbates and accelerates the phenomenon of gang formation (Seelke 2016). Following deportations, the gang reproduces in the countries of origin, adjusting to and taking advantage of the socioeconomic and political contexts (Prado Perez 2018; InSight Crime & CLALS 2018).

2.2 MS-13 STRUCTURE, GEOGRAPHIES, AND TRANSFORMATIONS

As will be discussed in detail later, Mara Salvatrucha does not appear as a homogeneous organization replicated exactly in the countries in which it operates. Indeed, although MS-13 has technically a well-defined hierarchy and structure; in reality, the gang has no cohesive organization or recognized leader (InSight Crime 2021). Nevertheless, this section will outline the main features of Mara Salvatrucha organizational structure, activities, and network.

According to the report published by InSight Crime and the Center of Latin American & Latino Studies in 2018, Mara Salvatrucha counts roughly between 50000 and 70000 members, mostly concentrated in urban areas in Central America (InSight Crime 2018; Dudley and Alvalos 2018) or countries with a consistent Central American diaspora, like Mexico and the United States, where there are approximately 10,000 gang members operating in 40 states (Dudley 2020). In the U.S., Honduras, and Guatemala, the gang's presence is limited to urban areas, while in El Salvador, the MS-13 is increasingly spreading to rural areas (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018; OJP 2018).

In terms of its structure, the gang does not have a unitary organization; it can be described as a diffuse organization with no clearly defined hierarchy or leadership controlling the entire organization. Nevertheless, Mara Salvatrucha subparts present a similar hierarchical substructure to coordinate members and activities. The main unit is the *cliqua* or cell, composed of a variable number of members linked to a specific area - although some cells can be transnational - and semi-independent in territorial governance and criminal economies (Insight Crime & CLALS 2018; InSight Crime 2021; Barak, León, and Maguire 2020:570). *Cliquas* have a complex internal hierarchical structure: the leaders are known as "*corredores*," or "runners." Moreover, some cells present a chain of command divided into "*primera palabra*" and "*segunda palabra*," or first and second-

in-command (InSight Crime 2021). In some regions, *cliquas* are grouped into "programs". Mara Salvatrucha is marked by a more organized hierarchical structure in El Salvador and the U.S. Cells and programs answer to a ruling council, known as *mesa* in Los Angeles and *ranfla* in El Salvador (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). The council members, or *ranfleros*, maximum leaders of the MS-13, are selected for seniority or for standing out for exceptionally violent actions against rivals (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018; Wolf 2012:81). In addition, the more structured subparts of MS-13 hold periodic meetings at the cliques or program level to choose their leaders and discuss gang activities (Wolf 2012:81).

Despite their differences, the various spin-offs of Mara Salvatrucha share a strong identity and symbolic connotation. At the heart of the ideology is protecting the *barrio*, not just the literal translation of the neighbourhood but the entire community, its values, and interests. Parallel to loyalty to the *barrio* and the gang, a core value is the demonization of rivals, especially Barrio 18 (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). All members follow certain precepts and guidelines common to the various manifestations of the gang (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). Finally, great value is given to gang symbology, like the use of graffiti to claim crimes and territory and the famous identifying tattoos on the body and face (Cruz 2010:38; InSight Crime & CLALS 2018)). However, tattoos are less common recently as they make members too recognizable to law enforcement (Giaritelli 2019).

Regarding recruiting new affiliates, MS-13 can rely on a vast pool of young people driven by poor living conditions, family ties, and a desire to gain prestige. MS-13 affiliation is a commitment for life; new members must undergo a meticulous trial process. Before becoming full members of Mara Salvatrucha, young people spend a period as "*paros*" in which they perform some simple tasks for the gang (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). If they pass the first stage, candidates are called "*chequeos*" (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020:571). Although they are yet to be full members, they are given more dangerous and compromising tasks to assess their devotion and commitment to the gang (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018; Barak, León, and Maguire 2020). This trial process can last up to years. When a candidate is deemed worthy of joining the gang, the next step is the initiation rite that consists of a real beating (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). Once admitted to the gang, members are tasked with participating in criminal activities and supporting and helping other gang members. What is fascinating is that the tasks, even the most violent ones, are not assigned by a superior but are carried out on a volunteer basis by members (InSight Crime and CLALS 2018).

Mara Salvatrucha criminal economy is very diversified. MS-13's operations include extortion of small businesses, the main founding sources of the group, petty drug market, auto theft, and "protection" of neighbourhoods (InSight Crime 2021). There is some evidence the gang

is also involved in more complex transnational criminal activities, notably international drug, and human trafficking networks (InSight Crime 2021). However, the gang plays a marginal supporting role in these activities. For example, considering international drug trafficking, MS-13 is not involved in the main stages of production and distribution but instead partners with or is contracted by other criminal organizations, especially Mexican and, to a lesser extent, Colombian drug cartels (Farah 2012; Coyne 2017; InSight Crime 2021).

2.2.1 Politicization, Internationalization and Sophistication of MS-13

Over time Mara Salvatrucha has evolved and branched out by undergoing a process of transnationalisation. In this section, the transformation and transnational expansion of MS-13 in Central America and the U.S. will be analysed through the lens of politicization, internationalization, and sophistication as suggested by Sullivan's model (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008).

The very origins of the gang have a strongly transnational component, making the internationalization of the gang a natural outcome. The gang emerged due to a process of migration from Central America to the United States. Upon appearing in the U.S. context, the MS-13 undergoes a second migration process due to immigrant deportations to their countries of origin in Central America. The "double" migration not only consolidates the group's identity and distinctive traits but also ensures a process of internationalization that relies on the connections and ties among community members across the different countries (Wolf 2012). These links consist of personal ties between nationals in the countries of origin and immigrants in the host country and establishing criminal networks between the various contexts (InSight Crime 2021). MS-13 members deported maintain and foster the criminal alliances built in the U.S., giving rise to a transnational criminal network (Farah 2012; Coyne 2017; InSight Crime 2021). Moreover, the gang and criminal culture internalized by deportees in the U.S. is transported and re-enacted in Central American countries (Arana 2005; Seelke 2016).

Parallel to internationalization, MS-13 has evolved while undergoing processes of politicization and sophistication (Sullivan 2006; 2008), but its transformations are not uniform across all gangs' structure in different countries. Even so, it is evident that in recent years Mara Salvatrucha has been operating with a more strategic logic in terms of its use of violence and pursuit of new economic and political opportunities (Farah and Babineau 2017:59-60).

Regarding the politicization process, MS-13 gradually developed political ambitions, especially in the Northern Triangle area and the U.S. East Coast. Some MS13 leaders are trying to consolidate a more structured top-down control expanding their social and political influence (Dudley and Alvalos 2018). Although it has not organized itself as a political force, the gang is

putting a lot of pressure on the political scene, mostly in El Salvador, proving capable of influencing electoral processes. The gang has managed to infiltrate the political scene through bribery and negotiation with some political figures (Dudley and Alvalos 2018), by financing election campaigns, albeit mainly at the local level, and violent coercion (Farah and Babineau 2017:64). Voting by citizens residing in neighbourhoods under MS-13's control is manipulated through threats and payments to favor politicians' elections on their payroll. In addition, Mara Salvatrucha constantly reinforces its governance and tight control over its territories. The gang's authority and legitimacy are widely recognized by communities and even by law enforcement agencies, which, in some cases, collaborate with the gang to manage social order (Farah and Babineau 2017:60). The political leverage, control over communities and prisons, and visibility of the gang open the way for further economic possibilities making MS-13 an attractive partner to other criminal organizations interested in collaborations (Cruz 2010). With its increased political and social influence, Mara Salvatrucha consolidates as a key stakeholder in Central American politics (Arana 2005).

Establishing transnational criminal networks and the ability to influence political decisions have resulted in the sophistication of Mara Salvatrucha. The gang has acquired more organized and strategic traits and established more formal and institutionalized relationships with other political actors, criminal groups, and communities (Dudley and Alvalos 2018). While the gang remains loosely cohesive in its structure and purpose, the organization proves highly sophisticated in its organizational skills, mobilization, and exploitation of profitable opportunities (InSight Crime 2021). Moreover, the metamorphosis toward sophistication can be easily discerned in the way MS-13 is changing its inclination toward violence and its relationship with civilians (Farah and Babineau 2017). While already holding significant influence over local communities, the gang is investing in cleaning up its reputation and giving the group a new image. In many Central American communities, besides providing security and employment in the informal market, the *maras* finance social projects to provide child-care, literacy programs, and support and dispute resolution services (Farah and Babineau 2017:65-66). The fact that MS-13 no longer relies on coercion or despair to recruit members and maintain territorial control but possesses widespread support is a tangible indication of its sophistication as an organization (Sullivan 2008).

Having completed the internationalization, sophistication, and politicization processes, MS-13, has transitioned from a street and prison gang to a proper and powerful transnational gang (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008). Nevertheless, it should not be confused with a transnational criminal organization (TCO) as MS-13 remains fragmented and a minor player in the intricate networks of international organized crime (Dudley and Alvalos 2018).

2.3 COUNTER-GANG RESPONSES: STATES' HARD-LINE POLICIES CONTRIBUTION TO MS-13 SPURRING

As mentioned, repression can exacerbate violence escalation (Kurtz and Smithey 2018). Hard-line policies can lead to unpredictable repercussions and, in the case of the MS-13 in Central America, the failure of anti-gang policies put in place by governments was a determining factor in the strengthening of the gang (Winton 2014). Generally, Northern Triangle governments, but also the U.S., have adopted extremely aggressive law-enforcement approaches in the mid-2000s to deal with the gangs. However, tough anti-gang strategies failed to contain and prevent gang violence, resulting in counterproductive unintended consequences (Seelke 2016:10). The backlash against the repressive accelerated the processes of politicization and sophistication of MS-13. *Mano Dura* policies provided greater support and legitimacy for the gang, expanded the recruitment pool, and strengthened feelings of deprivation and opposition toward governments (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020:581).

2.3.1 *The Legacy of Mano Dura Policies*

The term *Mano Dura* refers to the famous or perhaps infamous zero-tolerance anti-gang policies implemented by the Northern Triangle governments in the mid-2000s (Cruz 2016; Prado Perez 2018). *Mano dura* approaches have typically involved militarizing national security, enhanced police powers, institutionalized violence with thousands of military troops deployed, massive incarcerations for illicit association, and increasing sentences for gang membership and gang-related crimes (Seelke 2016:10-12; Prado Perez 2018). The first *Mano Dura* law was approved in El Salvador in 2003-2004, followed by Honduras and Guatemala (Seelke 2016:10; Cruz 2016; Prado Perez 2018).

Zero-tolerance approaches initially produced evident declines in the homicides rate, gathering enthusiastic reactions. In less than one year, between mid-2004 and late 2005, 14.000 youths have been incarcerated just in El Salvador (Seelke 2016:11). Nevertheless, repressive strategies have proven ineffective and counterproductive in the long run (van der Borgh and Savanije 2019). Indeed, large-scale incarceration encouraged the regrouping of members inside prisons. Moreover, gang members still on the "streets" reorganized to avoid capture, restarting the cycle of violence and crime (Seelke 2016:11).

Upon taking office in 2009, then-Salvadoran President Funes moved away from *mano dura* and toward a less repressive approach (Seelke 2016:11). The government initiated private negotiations with the gangs to facilitate a truce between MS-13 and Barrio 18 (van der Borgh and Savanije 2019:915). The talks were based on a delicate compromise. On one hand, the government

pledged to improve conditions in correctional institutions and transfer high-ranking gang members to ordinary penal institutions. In return, the leaders pledged to implement and enforce the truce by all members, both in and out of jail (van den Borgh and Savanije 2019:925; Seelke 2016:11). The negotiations resulted in a sharp decline in the number of murders in the country (van der Borgh and Savanije 2019:917). Nevertheless, the truce crumbled after only fifteen months due to the strong opposition from public opinion, political parties, the Church, and the U.S. (van der Borgh and Savanije 2019:922). From there on, the rate of violence and murders in the country began to rise dramatically again (van der Borgh and Savanije 2019:925).

More recently, in 2022, current President Bukele announced the state of exception by launching a new, extremely repressive policy against MS-13. Commonly referred to as the “war on the *maras*,” this strategy involves massive arrests, an extension of pre-trial detention up to 15 days, and the construction of mega prisons dedicated to *mareros* (Breda 2023). In less than a year, the government detained over 66,000 people, has brought El Salvador to have the highest prison population rate in the world, with 1 in every 50 citizens behind bars (Breda 2023).

2.3.2 U.S. *Anti-Immigration Rhetoric and the Media Misrepresentation of MS-13*

Much of the great clamour surrounding the Mara Salvatrucha – even in Europe - is a product of U.S. political rhetoric and ad hoc labelling practices of threat construction (Andersen Jones and Grow 2017) to justify anti-immigration policies (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020:582).

As seen, the transnationality of MS-13 is not only limited to the appearance of new cells or affiliated gangs in new countries but also involves the spread of narratives and stories. The collective imagery of MS-13 is a crucial component of the group identity and perception. This reputation precedes the gang in new contexts giving it legitimacy. Yet, at the same time, that notoriety can be counterproductive as it fosters mistrust, prejudice, and overreaction by the host society. While not the main topic of the dissertation, it is only possible to look at the MS-13 phenomenon by shedding light on the mainstream perception of the gang (Andersen Jones and Grow 2017). This section will guide the differentiation between misconceptions and exaggerations and the empirical evidence of MS-13 activity in the Spanish case study.

Just like Central American governments, the U.S. implemented repressive approaches toward the proliferation of immigrant gangs like Mara Salvatrucha (Seelke 2016:15). By the beginning of the 2000s, the MS-13 began to catch the attention of the government and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In 2004, under the George W. Bush administration, the FBI created

a special unit targeting the MS-13 (Seelke 2016:15; Avalos 2017). In 2012, President Obama recognized MS-13 as a transnational criminal group (Avalos 2017; Bunker and Sullivan 2018).

Nevertheless, the most aggressive turn toward MS-13 came with the Trump administration. During his speeches, President Trump has often referred to MS-13 as "monsters," or "animals" (McNeill 2019), blaming gangs and illegal immigrants in general for “the loss of innocent American lives” (De Cesare 2018). However, numbers do not confirm the widespread perception of an increase in MS-13-related violence and murders. In fact, according to estimates developed by the FBI, MS-13 in the United States accounts for less than one percent of the organized crime and gangs active in the country (Kinosian 2017). Rather than responding to a real emergency, the spread of anti-Mara Salvatrucha rhetoric in the U.S. seems to be a justification for criminalizing and stigmatizing migrants and facilitate the promulgation of restrictive immigration policies (De Cesare 2018; Barak, León and Maguire 2020:581). During his administration, Trump repeatedly emphasized the need to reform immigration laws to stop the "invasion" by limiting legal entrance to the U.S., limiting immigrants' rights and opportunities to participate in the economy and society (Barak, León and Maguire 2020:581). Indeed, continuous references to *maras* violence and drug trafficking involvement and circulation of false myths, facilitated by media, are intended to generate a climate of fear to manipulate the public opinion (Wolf 2012:91).

“Street gang MS-13, infamous for vicious machete killings, is first to be declared an international criminal group” - Daily Mail 2012

“Heinous and violent. The MS-13 becomes “Americanized” - Washington Post 2018

“Demonic Killing Linked to MS-13 Shocks Florida in Reminder That Vicious Gang Lurks in the U.S.” - The Sun 2023

The rhetoric of demonization of gangs is putting all U.S. immigrants at greater risk of discrimination and violence, fuelling xenophobic sentiments and distorted narrative that demonized all the Latino communities (Wolf 2012; De Cesare 2018; Barak, León, and Maguire 2020). Moreover, as happened in Central America, restrictive policies and anti-immigration legislation encourage the flourishing of MS-13 expansion and recruitment by creating a vulnerable pool of potential gang victims and members (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020:581). Strict immigration policies also produce a widespread lack of educational, occupational, and social support for immigrants, leaving gang membership as the only option for young people (Barak, León, and Maguire 2020:581).

3 MARA SALVATRUCHA IN SPAIN

The theoretical framework and the overview of gang origins, characteristics, and purposes in Central and North America provide the necessary background to examine the status and nature of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain.

This chapter intends to answer the sub-questions of the dissertation. First, the sub-question *What does Ms-13 present itself as in Spain?* will be considered by shedding light on the evidence of gang activity and occurrence in the country. Subsequently, the emphasis will be on investigating the transnational elements and the differences and similarities between the Spanish spin-off and the gang operating in Central America. A comparison of the formation processes, structural and psychological causes, and contextual drivers between MS-13 variants will be crucial to answering sub-questions: *What are the common elements and differences between the transnational expressions of MS-13? What is the extent of the transnational network and links between the "original" gang and the transplanted units in Spain?* The data collected, and the understanding of the dynamics and connections of the gang in Spain will make it possible to assess the actual threat to stability posed by MS-13 and answer to the last sub-question: *Does the Mara Salvatrucha genuinely pose a threat to Spanish, and more generally European, stability and security, or does this perception stem from exaggerations and misconceptions?*

Finally, the closing paragraph, devoted to the discussion of findings, will bring everything together to address the main investigative question *What are the nature and implications of the transnational spread of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain?* considering the new elements raised by the case study. At this juncture, the identified analytical framework, through the operationalization of gang formation and gang transnationalisation concepts will allow to mark the similarities and differences between Spain and gang manifestations in other contexts. Most valuable for the research will be to identify the distinctive and unique characteristics of MS-13 in Spain. Also, the finding will challenge the tendency to consider Mara Salvatrucha as unified and cohesive actors both structurally and as a criminal entity and threat to the status quo. In doing so, the discussion will introduce a critical re-conceptualization of Sullivan's 3 GEN Gang model (Sullivan 1997; 2000; 2006; 2008), which proves to be inadequate to unfold the differences between the expressions of Mara Salvatrucha in different countries, and to understand the local nuances and transnational connections of the gang in Spain.

3.1 ASSESSING MS-13 NATURE AND CONSOLIDATION IN SPAIN

Spain has proved to be a desirable destination for migrants from Latin and Central America. Attractive factors are the affinity of language and cultural background and the presence of established diaspora communities. In the 1990s, flows to Spain were facilitated by the need for foreign workers in sectors like construction and personal services (Pacheco 2018). Since the 2000s, there have been some changes in migration flows. These migrations were often aimed at family reunification. However, the economic crises experienced by Spain in recent decades led to precarious economic and labour situations for migrants in the host context, facilitating social exclusion and employment in illicit forms of economy.

Regarding the migrant population from Central America in Spain, some elements must be considered. These migrations were conditioned by a series of factors, like widespread violence in the homelands, precarious political and economic conditions, and restrictive post-2001 U.S. migration policies (Gatica 2008).

According to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE 2022), the country currently hosts considerable migrant communities from Central America. Spain hosts the largest Honduran diaspora in Europe, registering 130,119 migrants in 2022 (EPA 2022). By contrast, the communities from El Salvador (23467) and Guatemala (7674) are more limited (EPA 2022). The composition of migrants shows some trends: there is a high number of female migrants, about 70 percent, and youth between 16 and 25 years of age, primarily for family reunification (INE 2022). Central American diasporas are concentrated mainly in the provinces of Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, and Girona (EPA 2022). Besides regular migrants, undocumented ones should also be considered, for whom, however, no precise data are available.

Given the extensive influx of Central American migrants into the country, it is unsurprising that Mara Salvatrucha replicated rapidly in Spain. As seen, gang transnationalisation occurs through migration, and gangs reconstitute themselves in host contexts where a consistent diaspora community has been established (Dudley and Alvalos 2018; InSight Crime & CLALS 2018).

The first traces of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain date back to the early 2000s, when graffiti with the gang's identifying symbols started appearing in Barcelona and Madrid's suburbs (Herrero Blanco 2015). Subsequently, MS-13 involvement was suspected by the authorities in some crimes and murders but without supporting evidence (Herrero Blanco 2015).

The first major police operation against MS-13 is known as *Operación Cruasán*. The investigation, began in 2012, led authorities to the arrest in 2014 of 35 suspected members of the

main MS-13 *cliquas* active in Spanish territory (Robbins and Bargent 2014). At the time of the operation, the gang had formed five cells in the country - "Providence" in Madrid, "Normandi" in Girona, "*Dementes Locos*" and "*Demonios Locos*" in Barcelona, and "Big Crazy" in Alicante (Albaladejo 2018). According to the authorities, the operation had achieved much more than the arrest of prominent members of the organization; it had foiled an expansion plan coordinated directly by the leadership of El Salvador. This project, called "*Programa 34*", allegedly aimed to expand MS-13 control in Spain (Robbins and Bargent 2014). Authorities believed the program was financed and logistically supported by the "central" gang in El Salvador, which had sent high-level officials to handle the Spanish expansion. However, these insinuations were not verified in the trial. Although some defendants had previously been prominent members of some *cliquas* in El Salvador and thus held direct contact with the original gang, investigators failed to provide satisfactory evidence to confirm the expansion project (Gatica 2008). On the contrary, *Programa 34* appears to be financed by monthly dues paid by members of the Spanish cells and was simply intended to create a more organized and collaborative network for MS-13 illicit activities in Spain (Herrero 2018).

Nevertheless, the uproar generated by allegations of gang-led expansion in Spain has generated widespread panic and concern. Since then, every crime or murder linked, truthfully or not, to Mara Salvatrucha has received extensive media attention, lingering the gang brutality in Central America, fomenting a widespread climate of fear in the country (Herrero Blanco 2015:95). Below are a few of the numerous sensationalist headlines concerning MS-13 violence that have appeared in Spanish newspapers:

Mara Salvatrucha takes root in Spain (El Pais 2014, 29 March)

"Trial for the fearsome Mara Salvatrucha" (El Pais 2018, 21 February)

"The level of violence reached by the maras is beyond our comprehension"
(Cope 2018, 23 February)

However, little evidence supports a promising role for MS-13 and other *maras* in the Spanish criminal scenario. They tend to be classified by researchers and Spanish law enforcement agencies under the umbrella term of *pandillas* or *bandas latinas*, used to describe all delinquent organizations with Latin or Central American ethnic connotations (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006; Gatica 2008). The label *bandas latinas* identify all those organizations comprising a minimum of 5 persons, tending to be between 14 and 20 years old, possess a hierarchical structure, operate in a delimited urban territory, and share identity, cultural and symbolic traits (Buelga 2010). A transnational nature also characterizes these gangs, i.e., they reproduce the dynamics and gestures of gangs existing in their countries of origin (Gatica 2008).

The main transnational gangs active in Spain are the Latin Kings (founded in the U.S.) and the *Netas* (originated in the prisons of Puerto Rico). Also, the consolidation of the *Trinitanos* and Dominican Don't Play, gangs developed in New York by Dominican immigrants, is on the rise (Gatica 2008).

As far as Mara Salvatrucha is concerned, there is no accurate official information. Authorities believe there are a few hundred members of the *mara* in the country (OBL 2022). However, crimes and illegal activities are hardly directly linked to MS-13, whose violence tends to be associated with clashes with rival gangs, most notably the Latin Kings and Barrio 18 (Gatica 2008; Herrero Blanco 2015).

Regarding the ethnic composition of MS-13 in Spain, most members appear to be of Central American nationality - El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Nevertheless, a high rate of members from Latin American countries and a significant percentage of *pandilleros* of Spanish nationality can be observed (Pacheco 2018:14). Gangs, therefore, appear more heterogeneous in their ethnic composition in their Spanish expression.

This heterogeneity is not limited to the nationality of its members. In fact, Spanish MS-13 has an high female component compared to its Central American counterparts (Pacheco 2018). In Central America, MS-13 is characterized by a patriarchal structure and marked machismo. Women rarely participate in the gang or perform subordinate functions (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006). In Spain, however, there is significant female participation in MS-13 and other Latin gangs. Specifically, Spanish nationals gang affiliates are mostly female rather than male (Pacheco 2018).

Concerning the gang's means of financing in Spain, MS-13 is believed to support itself mainly through the sale of drugs, usually cocaine and marijuana, and monthly dues paid by members (Albaladejo 2018). Crimes such as extortion, the primary source of gang financing in Central America, are less relevant in the Spanish setting. MS-13 criminal activities in Spain appear to be unsophisticated and tend to be subordinate to more powerful and established criminal groups (Herrero Blanco 2015). This suggests that the gang does not enjoy sufficient governance and scale to establish itself as a major criminal actor (Pacheco 2018). It follows that the level of violence generated by the gang is also much lower. In fact, despite being continually pointed at by the media for its heinousness, around a dozen violent crimes a year are linked to the Mara Salvatrucha in Spain (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006). Moreover, the drastically lower level of violence generated by the MS-13 may also be dependent on the lack of easy availability of weapons, as is the case in Central America and the U.S. (Herrero Blanco 2018).

A further specificity of the MS-13 Spanish chapter is its relationship with the territory. As has been seen, the gang in Central America experiences a deep connection with the territory. The

barrios have enormous symbolic and reputational value. In Spain, however, the ties between gang and territory are much less close (Pacheco 2018). Although the Spanish cells also show affection for the neighbourhood where they originate, marked with symbols of affiliation, the relationship with the urban space is more functional. MS-13 sets up in public areas and places of social gatherings where it can conduct its criminal activities, such as squares, parks, or discos (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006), often shared with other gangs or criminal groups (Pacheco 2018).

3.2 DRIVERS OF GANG FORMATION IN THE SPANISH CONTEXT

Gangs form because of socioeconomic and cultural stresses in the context. Gang formation is a response to the conditions of disadvantage and marginalization of specific population segments. The confluence of structural factors, i.e., spatial, economic, and political exclusion, and psychological elements, such as identity struggles, alienation, and shared migratory background, can drive individuals to group together (Queirolo Palmas 2014; Feixa, Sánchez-García, Brisley 2020). Just as observed in Central American contexts, the formation of Mara Salvatrucha cells in Spain can also be traced to the concurrence of structural and psychological drivers. Nevertheless, some crucial differences can be identified. First, the target of gangs is mostly teenagers in the Spanish context. Furthermore, it will be observed how different external circumstances, e.g., institutional responses and the broader socioeconomic context, produce distinct impacts on the gang's evolution, characteristics, and violence (Martínez Martínez 2008; Buelga 2010).

The formation of *bandas latinas* or *pandillas*, including MS-13, in Spain can mainly be attributed to a shared migratory background. Most members are adolescents going through a process that Carlos Feixa (2006) defined the "triple journey," meaning young immigrants experiencing a geographical journey, one between different cultures, and one related to the adolescent phase (Buelga 2010). These conditions make them highly vulnerable, making migrant youth the perfect target for gangs. Young migrants are caught in an identity conflict: on the one hand, the desire to integrate and take advantage of the new opportunities provided by the host country and, on the other, the attachment to their Latino identity and the need to belong to a group of peers (Buelga 2010).

Resuming Virgil's concept of Multiple Marginality (2019), parallel to identity struggles, migrants experience a more generalized sense of exclusion. Diaspora communities, in most cases, are positioned in marginalized spaces and low social strata. In Spain, migrants tend to have precarious and poorly paid jobs (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006; Pacheco 2018). The lack of employment has serious repercussions, especially for young migrants.

Other structural factors that favor and accelerate gang affiliation processes can derive from family and school (Pacheco 2018). Young migrants are often exposed to unstable family environments, both economically and in terms of relationships. Disadvantageous conditions foster abuse and violence. In addition, young immigrants often find themselves without parental supervision due to the migration process or long working hours (Pacheco 2018).

School is also a crucial element concerning the involvement in gangs. Young *latinos* often struggle to keep up with their Spanish peers and do not feel socially integrated (Buelga 2010). The absenteeism and dropout rate among immigrant students is exceptionally high (Pacheco 2018). Moreover, schools adjacent to working-class neighbourhoods hosting diaspora communities tend to be depopulated by Spanish students, making integration between young Spaniards and Latin and Central Americans even more unlikely (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006).

These feelings of exclusion, deprivation, and loneliness foster gang formation. Young immigrants seek to surround themselves with individuals with similar backgrounds, or at least who have experienced forms of deprivation and marginalization (Hennigan and Kelber 2012). The group becomes the primary social support network for young Latin and Central Americans who do not feel they belong to the host society (Buelga 2010). The creation and membership of *bandas latinas* satisfy the need for belonging, providing the sense of family and the social bonds lacking in other aspects of members' lives. In a society where young immigrants feel robbed of their aspirations, they take back what is denied them in other areas, such as self-esteem, by creating forms of organization and norms in contraposition to society (Pacheco 2018:32). *Bandas* arise in response to the rupture with the society that has let these young people down.

In many cases, these groups approach criminal and delinquent activities (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006). However, the violence is not generalized or linked to high-level criminal activities, such as international drug trafficking, arms trading, or prostitution. This violence manifests mainly in the form of violent language, vandalism, and petty crime to demonstrate superiority over rival groups (Martínez Martínez 2008; Gilberti 2014). Moreover, the adolescent nature of group members must be considered at this point. The attraction to delinquency is not necessarily the harbinger of gang formation or linked to ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds but could simply be transgressive and impulsive behaviour typical of adolescence (Buelga 2010).

In any case, most of these groups tend to disintegrate or evolve at the end of adolescence. This evolution can follow two paths (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006:141). On the one hand, these groups may consolidate into more organized criminal groups and continue to orbit in the Spanish criminal scenario, strengthening themselves through alliances with other organizations (Gilberti 2014). This is the case of the Spanish cells of MS-13. On the other hand, the second direction these

juvenile *pandillas* may take is to undergo a process of politicization, abandoning their delinquent character and seeking to promote societal changes. There are many examples of youth gangs that have converted into youth associations or social and cultural movements (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006:142).

Hence, MS-13 and other Latino gangs develop in Spain due to a combination of socio-economic structural factors, stigmatization, and psychological factors, just like in Central America (Seelke 2016; Prado Perez 2018). Yet, the gang's nature, scope, and leverage are substantially different. So, why is the outcome so different? What contextual elements prevent the spread of Mara Salvatrucha violence and influence in Spain?

The answer lies in the context of the country and society in which the gang is formed. Indeed, gangs as social organizations cannot disregard the context that shapes them. Being young in Spain is different from being young in El Salvador or any other context. Likewise, joining gangs developed in Spain will have different repercussions and implications from the same gangs formed in another country (Martínez Martínez 2008:72). Specifically, although Spanish society presents acute criticalities, it does not allow rampant gang expansion and reproduction.

Young immigrants experience socio-economic exclusion and stigmatization but have more opportunities and options to escape the crime circle and leave the gang. Although reduced due to the economic crisis, young people eventually manage to enter the workforce (Buelga 2010). In addition, compulsory schooling and the state's implementation of services and subsidies for poorer groups serve as preventive tools for juvenile crime (Buelga 2010). Moreover, the level of violence in the Spanish context is infinitely lower than in Central American countries and the U.S. The lack of free gun circulation, the presence of law enforcement in every neighbourhood, and a more peaceful culture decrease the risk of youth gangs evolving into real criminal gangs (Pacheco 2018).

Finally, a last aspect concerns the policies implemented by Spanish administrations. Although most municipalities react to gang-related violence in a suppressive approach, state violence does not reach the levels experienced in Latin America. Moreover, there are alternatives that attempt to prevent the phenomenon of gang formation and consolidation, such as the model applied by the city of Barcelona (López Corral 2008; Lahosa I Cañellas 2008; Martínez Martínez 2008).

3.2.1 *Looking for an Alternative Approach: The Barcelona Model*

The approach implemented by Barcelona's municipality to deal with the increase in *pandillas* stands out as an interesting alternative to *mano dura's* policies. Starting with a series of mediations with the largest gangs, which began in 2006-2008, the administration proposed an innovative model

to prevent juvenile crime and provide opportunities to facilitate gang exit (Feixa, Aramayona, Ballesté and Páez de la Torre 2021).

Barcelona's so-called *mano blanda* (Feixa, Aramayona, Ballesté and Páez de la Torre 2021:157) focuses on addressing the inequalities from which gangs originate. Gangs should not be “hidden”, but recognized as social actors whose opinions and needs are relevant to the entire society (Feixa, Aramayona, Ballesté and Páez de la Torre 2021). The municipality implemented a series of prevention measures to foster young immigrants’ integration into Spanish society, such as school and community awareness projects, rehabilitation programs, and services for job placement (Martínez Martínez 2008). It also aimed to change the institutional and generalized perception of gangs. For example, to de-sensationalize the news related to Latin and Central American gangs, training programs were set up for journalists to provide them with adequate knowledge and language to talk about the phenomenon without confusing it with the violence of *maras* and gangs in other countries (Martínez Martínez 2008).

Over the past 15 years, this policy had a remarkable impact: many gangs have gradually developed into cultural associations, and violence have decreased (Feixa, Aramayona, Ballesté and Páez de la Torre 2021).

3.3 RECONSIDERING MARA SALVATRUCHA AS A TRANSNATIONAL THREAT – LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SPANISH CASE STUDY

The data and literature collected confirm the transnationality of the gang. Over time, MS-13 has evolved, sophisticated, and politicized, extending its influence and power beyond Central American countries as demonstrated by its emergence in Spain. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the erroneous tendency to compare and equate the *mara* experience in Central America with the growth of this gang in the Spanish and European context should be discouraged (Martínez Martínez 2008).

Youth *maras* and *bandas* are entirely different in each country. Hence, although it is a transnational issue, each case has precise and non-reproducible peculiarities (Martínez Martínez 2008). Gangs are first and foremost social actors and, as such, cannot prescind from the social context in which they originate (Sullivan 2006). Although the cells of Mara Salvatrucha develop everywhere through the convergence of multiple marginalities (Virgil 2019), the group's form, structure, identity, and permanence will depend on contextual factors. MS-13 in Central America, the U.S., Mexico, or Spain never presents similarly. Although they shared common traits, they are different organisms.

Looking at the phenomenon from this angle, it is quite evident that a gang cannot have the same evolutionary trajectory in contexts like El Salvador and Spain. While the possibility of MS-13

strengthening and sophisticating in Spain over time is not to be dismissed, the chance it could reach the same levels of organization and power experienced in El Salvador is quite unlikely. Spanish Mara Salvatrucha should be diverged from the sensationalist media representation of the gang, as it not only presents different characteristics, but it is practically impossible for the same dynamics to be reproduced in Europe. Although presenting widespread and varied criticalities, the institutional, security, and socio-economic context in Europe does not present the conditions to facilitate the growth of groups such as Mara Salvatrucha (De Cesare 2018). Moreover, the Spanish and European organized crime scenario is already saturated with local and international criminal groups. Given the specificities of MS-13's power dynamics that hardly fit the context, it is unlikely that the gang will evolve into a prominent criminal and political actor in the foreseeable future.

Evidence demonstrates that the emergence of MS-13 cells in Spain is not part of the gang's master plan to take over new territories or implementing a systematic expansion (Dudley and Alvalos 2018; InSight Crime & CLALS 2018:62). While a certain level of communication and coordination across borders can be identified in some instances (Sulbarán and Valencia 2021), nothing suggests a MS-13 top-down strategy of sending members to emigrate and recreate the group abroad (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). Instead, the gang reproduction occurs spontaneously through a combination of migration and socio-economic conditions and political characteristics of the host country (Dudley and Alvalos 2018; InSight Crime & CLALS 2018:62)

For the moment, MS-13 remains a social rather than a criminal matter in Spain. Youth aggregation in the form of gangs manifests a series of grievances experienced by the migrant population. The combination of socio-economic exclusion and the struggle for cultural recognition favours the formation of juvenile gangs. Although these groups are involved in petty crime and, in some cases, in more relevant criminal networks, they remain spontaneous social formations. The symbolism, name, and gang culture are "imported" to reinforce the group's collective identity. Within the diaspora community, the new group may adopt a resembling ideology, symbology, and structure of the well-institutionalized gang without necessarily reflecting any links or dependence from the original group. Wolf (2012:74) suggests that many gangs are nothing more than copycat and emulation phenomena. New groups may use the MS-13 "brand" for identitarian reasons, to feel more connected with the homeland, as well as to obtain greater legitimacy and instil more fear in the host setting (Wolf 2012:74).

A proper understanding of the nature of the phenomenon in Spain is necessary to address it in the societal and institutional spheres. A distorted and prejudiced view of MS-13 runs the risk of resulting in the implementation of policies that are inadequate to solve the issue. Policies with a preventive and integrative approach would be preferable to hard-line strategies. Institutions must

target the integration and protection of vulnerable segments in society by ensuring integration and providing alternatives to gang affiliation (InSight Crime & CLALS 2018:71). In this sense, the *mano blanda* model put into practice in Barcelona provides an interesting example of prevention strategies.

Finally, while taking it for granted the transnationality of Mara Salvatrucha, it cannot be deduced that it is also automatically an international threat. To develop effective institutional responses to reduce the phenomenon, it will be necessary to focus on the specificities and criminal/violent patterns of MS-13 in the country.

3.3.1 *MS-13 in Spain: A Third Generation Gang or Not?*

The Third Generation Gang Model developed by Sullivan (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008) has proven extremely useful in assessing the transnational dimensions of Mara Salvatrucha. As remarked in the previous chapter, MS-13 has transformed over time through spontaneous politicization, internationalization, and sophistication processes (Sullivan 2006). These transformations were facilitated by the co-occurrence of contextual agents such as migratory phenomena, socio-economic conditions that favoured the consolidation of the gang, and external agents such as repressive policies (Dudley and Alvalos 2018; InSight Crime 2021). Such developments have caused Mara Salvatrucha to expand in new contexts.

Nevertheless, the analysis conducted on the nature and purposes of the Mara Salvatrucha in Spain emphasizes substantial differences between the sophisticated version of the gang presented by Sullivan and its manifestation in Spain, so much so that it is possible to claim that the "original" MS-13 and the local *bandas* are essentially distinct and independent realities, linked just by common identity traits such as symbols, narratives, and personal relationships (Pacheco 2018). It is arguable that although MS-13 as a whole can be considered a transnational third-generation gang, not all of its constituents display the attributes that Sullivan (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008) identifies as distinctive of third-generation gangs. Indeed, according to the data collected and evidence on the country's nature and gang-related criminal activities, Spanish MS-13 could be positioned, under Sullivan's model, at the intersection of first- and second-generation gangs (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008).

An unsophisticated and poorly organized structure characterizes MS-13 in Spain. Cells develop locally and are limited in composition and capacity. These characteristics fall under the categorization of Sullivan's first-generation gangs (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008). Moreover, the Spanish Mara Salvatrucha demonstrates subordinate ties to other criminal groups, a characteristic that Sullivan identifies primarily in second-generation gangs (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008). MS-13 in Spain thus appears to be unstructured, limited in its aims and organizational capabilities, and subordinate

to other local groups and gangs. Its activities are limited to involvement in small-scale criminal networks. Moreover, it does not have any political aspiration or capacity to assert its governance and control in the country (Dudley and Alvalos 2018).

The gang presents a predominant identity and aggregation-oriented nature rather than predatory motivations, as it mainly occurs in the form of youth street gangs (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006; Buelga 2010). The expression of MS-13 in Spain lacks the features of politicization, internationalization, and sophistication typical of third-generation gangs. Instead, what is observed is a minor phenomenon with few prospects for development and transformation, given the specificities of the Spanish context (Martínez Martínez 2008).

At this point, it is necessary to rethink the 3 GEN Gang model proposed by Sullivan critically. This tool is effective in assessing the macro trends and transnational transformations of gangs but fails to capture the nuances and context-specific characteristics of the subparts that make up the “supra-gang” Mara Salvatrucha. This research shows how the different manifestations of MS-13 depend inescapably on the context in which they develop. Not only do gangs originate due to specific contextual characteristics, but their development and prospects are affected and shaped by their surroundings.

A revisiting of the Third Generation Gang model would be necessary to enable a more adequate interpretation of the internal distinctions between the different national and local manifestations of the transnational entity understood as Mara Salvatrucha. To prevent misconceptions, it would be necessary to evaluate each cell or network of cells that develop in the same context individually to assess their specificities and attributes and evaluate their transnational implications and connections afterwards.

CONCLUSION

The research intended to ascertain the actual organizational status and sophistication of Mara Salvatrucha Spain, investigating its nature, scopes, and peculiarities to answer the research question *What are the nature and implications of the transnational spread of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain?*

Several cells of Mara Salvatrucha have been identified in Spain in recent years, demonstrating how the gang's transnational expansion reached the European continent (Albaladejo 2018). The growth of MS-13 in the country is observed and monitored closely by policymakers and journalists concerned about the eventual outbreak of violence. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that the gang has the potential and capacity to emerge as a prominent criminal and political actor in Spain (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006). Although portrayed, mainly by the media, as a threat to stability and security, MS-13 takes a minor, poorly organized, and subordinate role in the Spanish criminal scenario. Moreover, despite the gang's reputation, little evidence exists to substantiate that the MS-13 gang is more violent than other street gangs or criminal groups in the country (Franco 2008).

Mara Salvatrucha in Spain mainly occurs in the form of youth gangs, composed of young individuals with migratory backgrounds joining together to cope with stigmatization and the struggles to integrate into the host country (Pacheco 2018). The gang demonstrates a strong identity and psychological value. The group proves to be more of a socio-cultural formation than a criminal organization (Recio, Feixa, Porzio 2006; Sullivan 2006; Pacheco 2018). The main motivations for gang affiliation are socio-economic exclusion, cultural disorientation, and discrimination towards migrant communities. MS-13 reproduction flourish in Spain to provide a community, a sense of family, and purpose for young immigrants who cannot find a place in the host country (Wolf 2012).

The comparison conducted between MS-13 chapters in different countries proves that the spin-off in Spain diverges in characteristics, purposes, and scale from the phenomenon in Central America. Although some links with gang cells operating overseas can be detected, the formation and functioning of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain appear to be largely disconnected from the original organization (Recio, Feixa, and Porzio 2006). Indeed, although the gang reveals its transnational nature by being replicated in different contexts and displaying common traits, it manifests differently from country to country (Martínez Martínez 2008). The transnationality that characterizes MS-13 occurs through spontaneous processes of migration, alienation, and reconstruction of socio-cultural formations resembling those experienced in the country of origin.

The transnational nature of the gang results in family and personal connections, flows of social, cultural, and economic remittances, and identity bonds that transcend national borders.

Nonetheless, it is crucial not to fall into the error of perceiving MS-13 as a homogeneous organization but rather to consider it a "superstructure" or umbrella organization that culturally accumulates a variegated and highly diverse set of separate, independent, and diverse subparts across the globe (Kinosian 2017). MS-13 has been demonstrated to be highly adaptive, altering its path and scope depending on the characteristics and opportunities available in the context (Sullivan 2006; InSight Crime & CLALS 2018). Therefore, it is expected that MS-13 developments in Spain will take a different trajectory from its evolution in any other contexts.

It is believed that the research has produced extensive results to answer the research question and sub-questions effectively. The data collected from the analysis of the status and prospects of Mara Salvatrucha in Spain demonstrate both societal and academic-theoretical relevance.

First, the dissertation contributed to providing concrete awareness and knowledge about the extent of MS-13 in Spain. Knowledge and understanding of the peculiarities of the phenomenon and its repercussions on Spanish society are crucial to avoid further instigating the spread of distorted perceptions of gang-related danger. It has been proven that, so far, MS-13 does not pose a particular threat in the Spanish context since it is a minor criminal actor mainly composed of immigrant adolescents. The marginalization of these segments of the population and the subsequent gang affiliation largely depends on their inability to integrate into the host society (Recio, Feixa and Porzio 2006). The prejudices and feelings of distrust and fear that tend to be associated with Mara Salvatrucha and Central American diasporas only exacerbate the gap between Spanish society and immigrant communities, facilitating the emergence of new MS-13s cells.

Moreover, as seen, not only is the mainstream perception of the Mara Salvatrucha disseminated by the media counterproductive, but it is objectively erroneous in representing the manifestation of the phenomenon in Spain as it relies on gang activities and *modus operandi* from across the ocean in a context entirely different from the Spanish reality. Thus, the dissertation could also be relevant from the perspective of policymakers. Indeed, Mara Salvatrucha and other transnational gangs pose new challenges to contemporary policymakers and societies. Their diffuse nature, adaptability, and capacity to fit into different criminal contexts make them challenging to frame. These gangs are mutable; they never replicate in the same form, taking on different meanings and purposes depending on the context. Gangs require a precise examination of their manifestations and implications to be addressed. Regarding the case study of MS-13 expansion to

Spain and Europe, the perception of threat associated with the gang must be reconsidered according to its influence in the specific context. The dissertation briefly mentioned the alternative prevention-based approach implemented by the city of Barcelona (Feixa, Aramayona, Ballesté and Páez de la Torre 2021). Although this model may not necessarily apply to other contexts, it paves the way for the development of institutional responses customized specifically to the forms of expression and causes of the emergence of MS-13 in the context. The research proves that repressive strategies are not a fitting approach to dealing with gangs, even more the Spanish context. Given the limited extent and nature of the gang in Spain, institutional solutions based on prevention and the promotion of integration are to be preferred to prevent the escalation of the phenomenon, still relatively limited (Queirolo Palmas 2014). Addressing structural causes proves to be the most effective strategy for containing gang formation and proliferation. Nevertheless, since the gang is structured according to context, it is necessary to prioritize identifying and developing local solutions to address the local expression of MS-13.

On the other hand, regarding the theoretical relevance of the dissertation, it is believed that a revisitation of Sullivan's Third Generation Gang Model (1997; 2000; 2006; 2008) is required to include the local nuances of transnational gangs. As mentioned earlier, while extremely useful for recognizing and categorizing transnational gangs, the model focuses only on the macro dimension of the phenomenon. The 3 GEN Gang model tends to assess the characteristics of the supra-gang Mara Salvatrucha, conveying the perception that it is a cohesive, structured, and homogeneous entity. However, the study conducted showed that MS-13 is composed of a myriad of subparts with different characteristics and misaligned levels of politicization, internationalization, and sophistication. As for the Spanish variant of the Mara Salvatrucha, the gang exhibits traits that can be traced back to first- and second-generation gangs but does not suggest any upcoming process of sophistication and politicization (Dudley and Alvalos 2018). Therefore, the Third Generation Model should be complemented by an approach more oriented to the micro-dynamics of individual cells or national networks of MS-13. Devoting more space and relevance to the local characteristics of MS-13 could be crucial in filling the academic gaps identified in the existing literature. Indeed, a discontinuity has been found in the study of the transnational phenomenon that Mara Salvatrucha constitutes. Although generating valid and reliable knowledge and data, the selected literature tends to focus either only on the general aspect of Mara Salvatrucha or solely on its particularities in a specific context. It is therefore believed that any future investigations on MS-13 should favor a holistic approach that addresses both transnational dimensions and local dynamics of the gang by evaluating how the macro and micro layers influence and reinforce each other.

In closing the dissertation, the findings of this study must be interpreted considering some limitations and shortcomings. First, time constraints did not make it possible to conduct more in-depth research. While gaining access to a substantial body of secondary data was possible, the research lacked original and primary data. If more time had been available, conducting the research through fieldwork and using qualitative methods, would have been interesting and relevant.

Finally, while focusing on observing MS-13 developments in Spain, the research aspires partly to assess its prospects at the European scale. Nevertheless, while the Spanish case study may be relevant for visualizing the possible trajectory of Mara Salvatrucha in Europe, it is not sufficient for the purpose. To understand the impact and implications of MS-13 for Europe, it will be necessary to broaden the scope of observation by conducting extensive qualitative research in other national contexts, such as Italy, to compare the characteristics of local MS-13 spin-offs in different European countries and try to identify any patterns and trends or divergences.

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