FROM HOMIE TO HERMANO:
CONVERSION AND GANG EXIT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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by

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Abstract

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The transnational youth gangs of Central America promote a hyper-machismo that idealizes violent, risk-prone codes of conduct and lifelong affiliation. Meanwhile, Central American evangelicals promote a "domesticated" machismo that prohibits drinking, promotes marriage, and eschews interpersonal violence. Yet several studies involving interviews with current and former members of Central American gangs report that conversion to evangelical Christianity and/or joining an evangelical-Pentecostal congregation may be a common pathway out of the gang. Using semi-structured interviews with more than sixty former members of transnational gangs in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador as well as field notes and interviews with gang exit promoters, this dissertation examines why many ex-gang members consider joining an evangelical-Pentecostal church a safe and effective means of leaving the gang despite the gangs’ claim of lifetime membership. I conclude that conversion to evangelical-Pentecostal religion provides former gang members with new access to social and symbolic resources crucial for keeping safe, building trust, and finding work after leaving the gang. But more
than strategic use of cultural “tools” is involved in the conversion process. In some cases, emotional conversion experiences actually helped to bring about gang exit by occasioning embodied, emotional experiences that transgressed the macho feeling rules of the gang, spoiling the gang member’s identity as a “homie.” In addition, highly public emotional conversion experiences provided some exiting gang members with opportunities for the discharge of chronic shame, a key emotion underlying male violence (Scheff 2004; Gilligan 1996). My findings challenge traditional assumptions of religious conversion as either the product of a rational-pragmatic choice on the one hand or of an ideological concession to the convert’s changing social networks on the other. Finally, I argue that an important factor in the ongoing popularity of evangelical-Pentecostal religion in Central America is its promotion of ritual contexts for the discharge of shame. While progressive Catholicism seeks to attack the structural sources of shame, evangelical-Pentecostalism offers powerful interaction rituals for dealing with the emotion itself at the individual level.
This dissertation is dedicated to Amèrica Gabriela—wife, friend, constructive critic, and
tireless supporter.
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INTRODUCTION:
JJ’S SECOND MARRIAGE

To get out of the gang alive is hard, HARD. Our leader, a ranflero [gang lord] once told me, “Here, there is only one way to get out, and that’s in your pine-box suit.”

- Ex-member of White Fence, Guatemala

Tattooed in bold cursive script across the shoulders of Juan Jose Gomez Tovar¹ are the words, “How can I fall in love with life when I’m married to death itself?”² Juan Jose, or “JJ” as his friends today call him, spent sixteen years as a member and then leader of a violent Guatemala City cell of the transnational gang called the “White Fence.” The twenty-eight-year-old Guatemalan has spent years of his life in Guatemala City’s juvenile detention centers, prisons and hospitals and has survived three gunshots, nine stabbings and the complete failure of one lung due to substance abuse. He candidly admits, though without any pride or pleasure, to having killed or ordered the deaths of multiple

¹ I use JJ’s name here with his full permission and endorsement. In most other cases in this book, I employ a pseudonym for ex-gang members.

² ¿Para què enamorarme de la vida si estoy casado con la muerte?
individuals, mostly rival gang members. These killings are symbolically represented by three tattooed tears underneath his right eye—the gang equivalent of a “stripe” for eliminating a rival. Tattooed on his eyelids are the letters “W” and “F.” Beneath the slogan on his shoulders, a mural of tattoos on his torso and arms depict the gang’s ethos, a visual creed composed of female genitalia, gang “homies” dressed in the “cholo” style, marijuana leaves, and the skulls, graves and flames that represent his gang “matrimony.” But JJ’s tattoos speak differently than they used to. Today they speak of a former life—one that ended three years ago when JJ took the dangerous step of leaving the gang for good. JJ is an ex-gang member.

When I first met JJ it was at his new place of employment, a computer hardware wholesaler located on a main thoroughfare of Guatemala’s upscale “Zona Viva.” Our meeting had been arranged by cell phone through the recommendation of a former member and cell leader of the gang, Mara Dieciocho, Daniel “the Breadmaker” Ochoa, whose brother, also a former gang member, had been killed only two months earlier by the opposing gang, Mara Salvatrucha. JJ himself had warned me over the phone that we would have to conduct the interview at his place of work since he had recently received a death threat and could not venture outside the warehouse compound except to go directly to his home in another area of the city. In his home neighborhood, he would tell me later, he feels safe, but on public transportation or on the street, he always has to keep an eye out.

In the taxi on the way to the meeting, I worried about what to expect. My wife, like most Guatemalans, fears gang members, “reformed” or not, and worried that I had not taken enough precautions this time in vetting the interviewee. She insisted that I call
just before and immediately after the interview to let her know I was safe. While most of my interviews with ex-gang members so far had been arranged through trusted gatekeepers, professionals in substance abuse, or at rehabilitation centers or tattoo-removal clinics, this meeting had been set up after a short telephone conversation in which JJ, in his husky voice and direct manner asked about my study and what kind of questions I wanted to ask and then told me to meet him at work on the following day. When I arrived at the warehouse and inquired at the security gate, a small, thin man emerged from the building wearing long sleeves under his dark company polo and a hat pulled low over his eyes. Although his co-workers are aware of his past and treat him cordially, JJ wears a ball-cap and long sleeves whenever he leaves the home in order to hide his tattoos and reduce the risk of being spotted by a former enemy. He wants to avoid the fate of many other ex-gang members, killed on account of bad decisions in a former life. The company manager, upon learning of the nature of my interview had given us permission to use the boardroom to carry out the interview. A soft-spoken Guatemalan about JJ’s age but with lighter skin and a degree in engineering, the boss had hired JJ six months earlier because he is a rare businessman who believes in giving ex-gang members a second chance. In the boardroom JJ began to tell the story of his life in the gang—a story alternately dramatic and tragic, all too common in the barrios of Central America. He spoke slowly at first but after a time he began to relax, demonstrating an eloquence far beyond his three years of formal schooling:

I entered the gang not because anyone told me to join but because my family was so poor that they could not provide me with an education, shoes, or clothing. And in addition to being poor, they treated me horribly. My mother would beat me.
My brother would kick me. They would torture me—a six-year-old—and it made me look to the streets for refuge.

Of his immediate family members, JJ spoke well only of his father, who was killed by poisoning when JJ was only eight years old. When that happened, “It was as if everything had died,” he said. “I saw him, dead on December 25th, 1989 and I got on my knees and promised that I would avenge his death. It was a promise I made to myself.” It was a promise that the young gang member would fulfill only a few years later.

Originally from Escuintla, a large, rough-and-tumble coastal town about an hour south of Guatemala City, JJ moved with his abusive older brother to the capital after his father’s death. There he hoped to finally be able to go to school and “become someone—maybe a doctor or a lawyer.” But the abuse continued and even worsened. “My brother wore cowboy boots and he would kick me in the face until my forehead bled. I couldn’t stand it so I took to the streets. There I found friends, companions who listened to me. They would say, ‘Yeah man. What a jerk. Why don’t you hang out with us?’”

But their moral support also carried an expectation. When JJ was nine, a group of older gang members asked him to “prove” his loyalty by robbing a corner store using a .38 revolver. Although the request was as much a dare as an assignment, JJ nevertheless decided to take the opportunity to show his mettle. He burst into the store, aimed his gun at the young man behind the counter and told him to give him the money in the cash register.

“Hey you, this is a stick-up!” I said. “Give me your money please, but right now!” The guy started to laugh. When he started to laugh, all at once I saw in his face the face of my brother and then I snapped and started shouting, “I’m going to kill you! I’m going to kill you!” I’m not sure what he saw in my face but right then he
opened the drawer and gave me the money and told me, “Get out of here but don’t kill me.” I went back to the gang and that’s when they knew I had potential. They started taking me with them to rob other places and pretty soon they didn’t do the robbing any more. Instead they would send me in to do it. I worked for them. But through this I started catching the vision of the gang.

In the experience of the armed robbery and through the ensuing crimes, JJ was learning how to translate shame from childhood abuse into anger, and anger into intimidation and violence. He was capturing the “vision” of the gang. During the next decade-and-a-half, JJ dedicated himself to expanding this vision. When “Skinny,” the local cell leader who had recruited him was killed, JJ saw his chance to become the new leader or ranflero. He called a meeting where he presented his “credentials” as the man for the job. “As a new ranflero I laid out my vision of making my clique the worst of all cliques—the most subversive, the most evil, the most powerful, the most murderous, the one that moved the most drugs and had the most power in prison, the most respected on the outside by all Guatemalans.” By then JJ’s resume was long. He had proven his ability to handle weapons and move drugs. Unimpeded by anyone else, he took the position and immediately began recruiting. Under his charge the cell grew to thirty-four gang members in his own neighborhood and fifteen in a start-up cell in Escuintla. “I started bringing in more people and they weren’t coming in because I was forcing them. The same thing was happening to them that happened to me. They were being abused too. They were looking for attention and they found it with me. I gave them attention and took an interest in them.” He also gave new names to in-coming members—English words with an oddly affectionate ring. A young girl with striking good looks he called “Baby.” A young boy known for his cleverness he called “Flipper” after the dolphin.
But as the gang grew so did JJ’s reputation and his growing notoriety made him a target both to other gangs and the police. His list of enemies grew and the police began arresting him for more and more serious crimes. In prison he continued to direct gang activities and his “homies” brought him news, money, and drugs. After spending several years in and out of juvenile detention and then prison, JJ begun to suffer from lung dysfunction due to the daily consumption of marijuana and cocaine. Meanwhile his growing list of enemies was making it almost impossible to sleep at night. “I would sleep with three or four weapons by my side. One in my belt, one under my pillow, another under the mattress and sometimes even one in my hand.” Even his own mother’s concern had turned to fear. “My mother came to fear me greatly. Greatly. And she decided not to speak to me anymore. She would just give me whatever I asked for and then some.” By the time JJ reached his twenties he had succeeded in establishing “respect”—he was feared by many—but only at the price of trust. Unable to trust or be trusted by anyone, his “marriage to death” had made him the ultimate outsider, cut off from everything but the gang and connected to that institution only through his weapons and his tattoos.

Conversion: The Move to another Planet

JJ’s descent into criminal violence is indicative of the wider phenomenon of gangs in Central America in the 1990s. The “White Fence” to which he belonged is a lesser-known group compared with the far more numerous Mara Salvatrucha and the Mara Dieciocho, but like these gangs, the White Fence traces its roots to the immigrant communities of Southern California (Vigil 1988). These gangs became established and
powerful in Central America after a series of deportation initiatives by the L.A.P.D. brought thousands of immigrant youth with criminal records back to Central America (Arana 2005; Quirk 2008). The increasing availability of drugs and weapons coupled with minimal social spending and a weak and corrupt police force allowed the gangs to grow exponentially during the 1990s while forging transnational ties through the increase of cell phone communication and migration. Meanwhile the increasing efficiency and organization was accompanied by more rigid rules regarding membership. The slogan etched on JJ’s body illustrates one of the major themes characterizing these new “transnational” gangs of Central America—a rule I heard so often that I came to call it “the morgue rule.” Most gang members are told when they join one of Central America’s transnational gang cells, that their new commitment must last “hasta la morgue” or “all the way to the morgue.” And many Central Americans, both gang members and onlookers have concluded that the morgue rule is true. Many believe that “once a gang member, always a gang member.” And yet, here was JJ, fully tattooed and looking very much like a gang member but working, paying bills and helping other youth to leave the gang or stay out altogether. Is it possible to truly leave the gang with no strings attached, to remain safe, leave drugs and violence, find work, start a family, and start over again? Many would say no. Father Jose “Pepe” Morataya of San Salvador, a Spanish Salesian who goes by “Padre Pepe” is one of them. Although he has helped a number of gang members leave the gang in the past by teaching them trades such as bread-baking or metalwork, he made it very clear to me that he believes that the Salvadoran gangs of today no longer allow for deserters. At best they allow gang members to become what some call pandilleros calmados or “settled-down gang members” who reduce their...
criminality and seek reintegration but continue to hold allegiance to the gang and often are expected to continue paying dues for weapons or to help out in the event of a major operation. But for Padre Pepe, becoming an “ex-gang member” is not an option for the gang youth today. Other experts are nearly as skeptical. The well-known Jesuit sociologist Ricardo Falla likens the gang to “a prison cell with many bars” including both the threat of physical death from the homies who view him as a traitor as well as the threat of a “social death” at the hands of a society that loathes him for what he represents (Cruz and Portillo 1998). For who can trust a gang member who has taken an oath of solidarity, burned his allegiance onto his body, and “married death”? In fact, when I asked a Guatemalan psychiatrist who treats gang youth what can be done to help a gang member leave his gang and reintegrate into society, he shook his head in silence for several moments and finally offered a suggestion: “Take them to another planet.”

With a few exceptions, the only alternative “planet” that governments have offered gang members like JJ as an attempt to persuade them to leave the gang is that of the prison. Police and military forces have taken to conducting neighborhood sweeps and these have led to massive arrests often based on little more than the presence of a tattoo. But in Central America’s overcrowded and under-funded prisons, gang members have simply congregated, honing their skills, networking with drug dealers, and directing operations with their homies on the outside. Instead of “corrections” or reform, the prisons have become “graduate schools of crime” where homies enhance their skills and “earn their stripes” by doing time for the gang. Understandably angry about the government’s inability to arrest the spiraling crime in the region, many Central American’s have concluded that the best way to “deal with” the violent and incorrigible
gang youth like JJ—especially given his vow of life-long commitment to the gang—is simply to eliminate him. Evidence of “social cleansing,” or extra-judicial killing of gang members by off-duty police or hit men associated with the military has begun to mount as bodies of gang members appear daily on the streets, often bearing the marks of torture that hearken back to the political violence of an earlier time. In Guatemala, a national newspaper reported in 2007 that sixty percent of Guatemalans polled supported social cleansing as one means of dealing with gang violence (Aguilar 2007b). In effect, these individuals believe, “If the gangs are so enamored of death, then why not let them have it?”

But despite the pessimism on the part of the government, the media, and even some social scientists, and despite ominous warnings from their erstwhile gang-mates, JJ and hundreds others like him, have indeed managed to find a way out of the gang leaving violence and drugs behind, land a steady job, and start over. In effect, JJ, despite his tattoos, his criminal record, and in spite of the “morgue rule,” has managed to live down his tattoo by “falling in love with life.” But in order to do this, he has done the next best thing to “moving to another planet”—he has become an evangelical Christian. To listen to JJ today is to hear the voice of an old-fashioned evangèlico who has thoroughly adopted the identity of an hermano or “brother in the faith” in place of his homie identity. He peppers his speech with Bible verses and thanks the Lord for everything. He has begun a ministry out of his home called “Freed by Christ” aimed at convincing gang members to leave the gang and join the church, and he speaks at evangelical and charismatic Catholic revival meetings for youth. Even his hair is combed in the decidedly old-fashioned evangelical manner, parted on the side instead of slicked back as it used to
be. JJ took the long route in leaving the gang by going in a very short time from the decidedly rough and macho homie to the domesticated hermano.

On the face of it, JJ’s approach to leaving seems both easy and unlikely. On the one hand, joining a church is uncomplicated. What could be easier than running into the open arms of the spiritualistic, conversionist Christianity of the Central American evangèlicos? On the other hand, joining an actual evangelical congregation, with its teetotaling moralism and “cold turkey” expectations for lifestyle changes seems less than likely. Evangelical congregations do not seem to present much in the way of attractions for the hyper-macho male gang member accustomed to trading female partners, toting weapons, and generating instant and often plentiful income through theft and extortion. What on earth could make possible such a drastic reversal of identity and what would cause a gang member to opt for what seems like the most unlikely of identity transformations?

This dissertation is a sociological exploration of the transformation that many gang youth take from homie to evangelical hermano. What makes a gang homie trade in his gun for a Bible? And what does this teach us more broadly about religious conversion, identity transformation, and the state of religion in Latin America? To answer this question I interviewed a total of sixty-three former gang members, fifty-nine men and four women, in all three countries of the “Northern Triangle” of Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—the only countries with high concentrations of gang members and gang
violence. I first learned of the phenomenon of conversion as a pathway out of the gang by reading a chapter on Salvadoran ex-gang members and evangelical ministries (Gomez and Vasquez 2001). As I read further in the fledgling literature on Central American gangs, the claim about evangelical conversions out of the gangs kept surfacing, whether cited by skeptics as a naive rumor (FEPAZ 2006) or noted in passing by researchers recounting interviews with residents of gang-controlled neighborhoods (López 2004; Winton 2005). Because I wanted to know how common conversion is among gang members, I contacted and interviewed ex-gang members in a variety of settings including evangelical and Catholic-sponsored organizations, non-religious NGO’s as well as prisons and dry-out centers. Some of the ex-gang members I contacted through “snowball sampling” using interviewees to generate new contacts while others were contacted through trusted gatekeepers such as priests, pastors, and government rehabilitation officers. Generating a random sample was out of the question, since no gang membership lists exist, much less a list of ex-members. However, by spending five weeks at a tattoo-removal clinic open to the public on a no-questions-asked basis, I was able to “randomize” a small portion of the sample by interviewing all ex-gang member clients who passed through the clinic. While none of these measures guarantees that the ex-gang members I interviewed are representative in a social scientific sense, both the variety of geographic contexts and the variety of stories I

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While gangs also exist in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, they are mostly local, are not well organized and do not engage in violence on anything close to the scale of their counterparts in the transnational gangs of the north.
encountered allow me a certain confidence in trusting that the sample is not overly biased toward religious ex-gang members.¹

In addition to my interviews with ex-gang members themselves, I interviewed more than thirty experts and practitioners working at twenty-seven organizations and ministries aimed at reducing gang violence. These interviews proved invaluable in helping me to understand the broader social context affecting gang exit. Because many of these experts knew the ex-gang members I interviewed, they were able to verify many of the incidents and experiences narrated by the ex-gang members themselves. Finally, in addition to the interviews with ex-gang members and experts, I took field notes during trips to prisons, pastoral visits, excursions in “red zone” neighborhoods, and an evangelistic campaign aimed specifically at “winning” gang members to evangelical faith. My goal was always to understand the challenge of leaving the gang and how and to what extent gang members who leave employ religion in that process.

Religion and the Problem of Gang Violence

My interest in the role of religion in Central America began in the early 1990s during a semester of cross-cultural study in Guatemala City. In a region marked by crippling foreign debt and political violence, we studied issues of poverty and war in the nascent democracies of the region. I returned to Guatemala shortly after the close of the civil war to live and work as a member of the Mennonite volunteer corps, leading cross-cultural seminars dealing with

¹ See the Appendix for a more complete description of my methods and the logic behind them.
violence, poverty, and culture in that country and its neighbors. During these years, the central issues and key concerns facing Central Americans of the “Northern Triangle” of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador began to shift perceptibly from land reform and poverty toward fighting political corruption and addressing rampant crime. Today, one of the most pressing and perhaps the most important social problem facing urban Central America is runaway violence (Albright 2002). I learned this fact during six years of living and working in Guatemala. From 1997 until 2003, I lived in Guatemala City, and watched and listened as the gangs became a daily topic of conversation, and a political and media obsession. Gang graffiti grew more and more common, the murder rate rose, and by the early 2000s it seemed no evening news report was complete without footage of police officers parading “captured” gang members into the back of a police pickup—tattoos and hand signals flashing, and heads held high for the cameras. In Honduras and El Salvador, conservative presidential candidates promising “iron-fist” polices rode a wave of anti-gang sentiment into office. Meanwhile, in Guatemala, the infamous Guatemalan army had found a new raison d’etre in the “joint” military/police forces dispatched to combat gangs by patrolling the streets with gun turrets and automatic weapons. Meanwhile avoiding assault by a gang member had become a daily concern for anyone riding public transportation, especially for those unfortunate enough to have to ride into a neighborhood “controlled” by the gang. By the time I left the region in 2003, gangs were collecting thousands of dollars in “war taxes” through mafia-style extortion of bus drivers, homeowners, and small business operators. Though the masterminds behind the spiking bank robberies and kidnappings continued to be drug lords and organized crime, gang members’ low social class and high
visibility made them easy targets for politicians and other “moral entrepreneurs” seeking a scapegoat. *Las maras* (the gangs) had become public enemy number one.

But my interest went beyond the gangs and gang violence. I was also intrigued by the role of religion in an increasingly violent society. My work in Central America had been at a Mennonite seminary with a deep commitment to non-violence and “holistic” gospel of social and spiritual liberation. My colleagues on the theological faculty strove to “wake up” pastors and lay leaders to the realities of structural and political violence around them and a key concern in all of the courses was to counter the emotional, Pentecostalist tendencies increasingly apparent in many of the congregations of the denomination. For several among our faculty, the emotionalism of amped-up religious services and the emphasis on spiritual conversion smacked of escapism that could easily get in the way of the “real work” of teaching the faithful to practice justice and promote peace. And yet the Pentecostalized churches that made up many of our constituent congregations seemed mostly to be thriving among Mennonites as well as other historic Protestant churches of the region (Chesnut 2003; Smith and Higueros 2005). The members of these congregations often seemed more interested in a spiritual or emotional liberation than in liberation of a political nature. Some of these congregations were very involved in addressing the nagging social problems of their local communities. But invariably they used spiritual language to frame such involvement. Thus, my entrance into graduate school back in the United States came by way of the sociology of religion and an attempt better to understand the intersections between religion and society in violent, impoverished communities. Does religion in contemporary Central America make any difference now that the energy of Pentecostals and charismatics has eclipsed that of the liberationists? More specifically, what do the churches in Central
America—evangelical and Catholic—have to say or do about the gang violence that now scourges their neighborhoods?

Structure of the Dissertation

In Chapter One of this dissertation I give a brief overview of the current research on the Central American gangs, much of it published by scholars in the region, especially from the Jesuit Universidad de Centroamerica in San Salvador.5 By reviewing the findings of empirical literature to date, I set the gang phenomenon in its socio-historical context and explore some of the key social and political factors that contributed to the emergence of transnational gangs in northern Central America.

It is clear that the Central American gangs of today are not the mildly delinquent street gangs of a generation ago. Nor are they the same as their counterparts in the U.S., where most gang members are expected to “age out” of the gang by early adulthood. The influx of narco-business brought on by the squeezing of the traditional drug routes of the Caribbean in the early 1990s has vastly increased the income-generating opportunities for the gangs and helped them to acquire increasingly sophisticated weapons. In addition to providing opportunities for income through drug sales, many gangs have taken “turf protection” to a new extreme by levying “war taxes” on neighbors, bus and taxi drivers, and small business owners in their own communities, forcing them to pay hefty extortion

5 I also cite recent research from new, well-funded studies by scholars from Mexico, Colombia, and Guatemala.
fees or face the threat of death or abduction. In Guatemala alone in 2008, there were eighty-five murders of bus drivers, many alleged to be ordered by a single gang boss of the Mara Dieciocho (Notimex 2009). The income from drugs and extortion allows gang leaders to buy off woefully underpaid local police and gain a measure of impunity, at least for a time. It also makes recruiting and keeping youth much easier by allowing them to offer “real money” to active members. Such income is scarcely available to young men and women of the barrio, including those who manage to beat the odds and get an education. At the same time, gang members entering adulthood have few incentives to leave the gangs, given the poor job market they know they would face. Meanwhile, some gang cells have developed significant international ties through regular cell phone communication and the endless cycle of immigration and deportation, as well as inter-Central American travel. Such developments have led a few U.S. criminologists and sociologists, in an effort to underscore the dangerous and criminal nature of the gangs, to term them “third generation gangs,” likening them to “non-state soldiers” and “terrorists” (Bruneau 2005; Manwaring 2005; Sullivan 2002). While the gangs have certainly “evolved” and become far more dangerous, I think such comparisons are overwrought.

Most gang members still come from the poorest barrios, the reach of most gang cells does not go far beyond the neighborhood confines, and international communication is limited and sporadic. Though the names and symbols of the gangs have indeed become global, the best empirical research has not yet found evidence of a vertical structure or tight, well-developed command networks (Barnes 2007; Medina and Mateu-Gelabert 2009). Thus, I compare the transnational gangs to loose franchises that share symbols, strategies, and information while allowing significant local autonomy and adaptation.
Chapter two focuses on the causes that make gang membership attractive to youth and children like JJ. Most research on gang entrance has pointed to the “usual suspects” among factors: poverty, unemployment and dysfunctional or abusive families. These explanations are not untrue, but they do not explain enough. I employ the theoretical tools of symbolic interactionism and the sociology of emotions to more carefully specify what it is about the experience of poverty or abuse that “pushes” youth toward the gang and what it is about the gang that “pulls” them toward becoming a homie. Drawing heavily from testimonies of ex-gang members, I argue that joining the gang is not a one-time, momentary decision but an interactive process in which youth “try on” the gang member identity by becoming a gang “sympathizer” and spending time with the gang, learning about its rituals and symbols. Although not all sympathizers eventually join, those who do often reported “feeling good” when they experienced violence, even when it was directed at their own person, as in the jumping-in ritual called a “baptism.” Borrowing from Thomas Scheff’s concept of the “shame spiral” (Scheff 1988; Scheff 1991; Scheff 2004), I argue that disenfranchised youth are drawn to the gang because it offers the opportunity to avoid acknowledging feelings of shame, “bypassing” shame through the experience of violence, “adult” pastimes such as sex and drug abuse, and solidarity from feeling part of a group. Thus, for example, JJ discovered in his first armed robbery attempt a means of escaping chronic shame by turning shame into anger. Humiliating someone else with a weapon allowed him to access pride, or “respeto,” and gave him a taste for life in the gang. In the last portion of the chapter, I borrow from Klandermans’ theory of mobilization (Klandermans and Oegema 1987) in order to explore the reasons
why some gang sympathizers complete the affiliation process and join the gang while others do not.

But the “good feeling” experienced through participation in crime and violence tends to wear off after awhile and can in fact become a new source of shame. Chapter three examines what happens when the violence of the gang begins to “catch up” with the homies and the gang tattoos start to feel more like a “stain” than a source of pride. I examine the various motivations that ex-gang members reported began pushing them to consider leaving the gang, as well as the enormous obstacles standing in the way of their following through on that desire. Remarkably little research has been published on the matter of gang exit. Most studies of Central American gangs have preferred instead to examine the factors causing gang members to join. This emphasis makes sense to a point. After all, if the object is to arrest the growth of the gangs, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” But the result of this emphasis is that we know very little from empirical research about why and how some youth manage to leave the gang and what factors stand in the way of their doing so. In my interviews, former gang members reported three basic obstacles that made leaving difficult. First, the “morgue rule” causes many to fear that their former gang mates would kill them for leaving. Second, the prospects of finding a steady job seemed dim, both because most had little formal education and because their tattoos and their association with the gang made potential employers wary of hiring them even for the few low-paying jobs that might have been available. Finally, the addictions associated with la vida loca (the crazy life) make starting over difficult since drug abuse, relational conflicts, and an inability to manage
anger not only made finding a job even harder but put them at risk of further incarceration or elimination by the gang.

Nevertheless, clearly some gang members have made successful exits. Among the sixty-three gang members I interviewed for the study, I know of only one so far who was unable to overcome the first obstacle, that of staying alive. Among the other sixty-two, many are thriving, while others are at least getting by through help from family or friends who encouraged them to leave the gang in the first place. Interestingly, a majority of the ex-gang members I interviewed reported experiencing a religious conversion during or soon after leaving the gang. Like JJ, they found in evangelical religion an effective means for addressing the obstacles to leaving and starting over outside the gang. Chapter four examines the nature of these religious conversions and explores how ex-gang member converts found evangelical religion to be both advantageous and effective. The story there is both surprising and instructive.

On the one hand, religious conversion helped ex-gang members get a temporary “pass” from their own gang and the local cell leader. Oddly enough, the most common “exception” to the morgue rule reported by former gang members, religious and non-religious, in all three countries I studied was that of conversion or regular participation in an evangelical church. As one former gang member put it, “Around here there is permission to leave, though only so long as it’s to become a Christian. [But] if you leave and you leave [just] to get out -- uff! Barbecue!” So often was the conversion exception referenced by ex-gang members and those familiar with them that I came to call it “the evangelical escape clause.” In other words, most gang leaders extend a “pass” to members who report a conversion or have joined a church, though the self-described
convert will be observed to make sure his conversion was not simply a ruse to escape the morgue rule. Since nearly all evangelical churches, especially the small evangelical-Pentecostal congregations of the Central American barrios where gangs are common, practice teetotalism, restrict sexuality, and require frequent attendance at worship, ex-gang member converts possess a relatively simple means of “proving” the genuineness of their conversion—not that carrying out such pietistic morality comes easy for the former gang member accustomed to the hyper-macho lifestyle of the gang. Although some ex-gang members reported avoiding the morgue rule by other means than evangelical conversion, no exception was as widely referenced as the evangelical escape.

But evangelical conversion offers more than a “pass” on the morgue rule and a means of proving one’s sincerity. The converted ex-gang members reported a variety of other benefits, both social and psychological, as instrumental in helping them to find work, reorder their priorities, and rebuild networks of trust after the gang. Thus, my research builds on the work of others who have found that evangelical religion provides a resource for Latin American men who struggle with addiction, violence, and chaotic relationships by helping them to establish healthy routines through the social support and accountability of a small congregation with strict behavioral guidelines and an emphasis on the domestic sphere (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1993; Smilde 2005). Furthermore, Central American evangelical churches are clear examples of what sociologist Lewis Coser (Coser 1974) termed “greedy institutions,” whose “omnivorous” demands for time and loyalty make continuing in the gang or even participating in pastimes of the gang virtually impossible.
But what brings about a gang conversion? Do gang members who weary of the
gang lifestyle simply make a rational choice to opt for evangelical religion after
surveying the landscape of possible options for escape? Or is something else at work?
Some ex-gang members who converted did in fact describe their religious conversion in
highly rational terms. Well aware of the evangelical escape and cognizant of the need to
convince neighbors and family of the seriousness of their decision to start over, these
young men described embracing evangelical religion as simply a common-sense decision
involving a need for social support, moral order, and the rebuilding of trust in the
community. In many ways this description fits the conclusion of David Smilde, a
sociologist of culture who studied conversion among troubled Venezuelan men in the
early 2000s (Smilde 2007). In his book, Reason to Believe, Smilde attempts to improve
the quality of the debate regarding the primacy of culture versus that of agency in
explaining human action. To do this, Smilde introduces a concept he calls “imaginative
rationality” as a means of understanding “how people get things done by using concepts”
(Smilde 2007). Smilde argues that the Venezuelan men who converted found in
evangelical religion compelling reasons to believe and put those reasons to work to
address their own situational needs. Although clearly influenced by their social networks,
the men chose to convert based on their assessment of evangelical religion’s capacity to
help them face and overcome personal challenges.

Smilde’s overall explanation for why troubled men convert finds resonance in the
testimonies of some of the evangelical ex-gang members I interviewed. But I also argue that
it gives short shrift to another enormously important factor in conversion—that of the
subjective, embodied experience of emotion. In fact, many of the converted ex-gang
members reported experiences of conversion that came rather unexpectedly, when they found themselves emotionally overwhelmed by a sermon, a conversation, or a prayer service. In fact, in some cases ex-gang members reported that they had been trying, even hoping to convert for some time but had not been able to carry through with that desire. In these narratives, conversion came not as a mere purposive choice but rather through a powerful emotional experience, the embodied sensations of which caused them to conclude that they could no longer not be an evangelical Christian. Examining the emotional aspect of these conversion experiences highlights the embodied and symbolic nature of conversion. Many ex-gang members dated their conversion to a moment when they found themselves weeping in public—an embodied expression strictly forbidden according to the hyper-macho “emotion rules” of the gang but welcome and even encouraged within the context of the mostly Pentecostalized evangelicals of Central America. In such cases the experience of an intense state of emotional vulnerability had social repercussions that can be fruitfully compared with a phenomenon that criminologist John Braithwaite calls “reintegrative shaming” (Braithwaite 1989). Braithwaite argues, and others have proven, that societies that deal effectively with crime do so through traditional shaming mechanisms that allow offenders to recognize and admit to the damage caused by their actions while also reintegrating these offenders back into the social fabric of the community once again. I argue that the emotional experiences of conversion reported to me by several ex-gang members worked in part by allowing young men to acknowledge and effectively discharge chronic shame in a public setting thereby escaping the vicious shame spiral underlying their attachment to the gang and its violent code of el respeto. Although such experiences were often brief and were later followed up by months if not years of rehabilitation and
accompaniment, their power in engendering attachment to evangelical religion and to forging new lines of action and new identities must not be underestimated.

All of this adds significant depth to our understanding of the role of evangelical religion in Central America but there is more to learn. Chapter five begins with a discussion of the religiously-affiliated initiatives aimed at gang reduction in the region. Neither the Catholic nor the evangelical churches have launched massive programs or created large organizations for arresting gang violence. But within each, congregations and parishes as well as priests, pastors and lay workers have made impressive attempts at addressing the issue. Catholics have tended to found programs and invest in approaches that promote gang prevention through social programs and community development, while evangelicals have tended almost exclusively toward promoting gang exit, especially by means of religious conversion. Each of these approaches fits both the theology and the social shape of the tradition to which it belongs. Interestingly, however, not a single gang member in the sample of sixty-three participants I interviewed chose to embrace Catholicism as a means of addressing the challenge to unbecoming a homie. Perhaps this finding should come as no surprise since Catholic gang exit initiatives are relatively few. And yet even youth who passed through Catholic-affiliated gang exit programs were often evangelical converts themselves. After comparing the discourse of evangelical and Catholic gang ministries coordinators, I suggest that one of the reasons evangelicalism continues to gain ground in Central America relates to evangelicals’ framing of social problems in largely spiritual terms, casting such problems as personal obstacles and offering profiles of successful transformation by past converts. I offer preliminary evidence from a very recent poll of Salvadorians suggesting perhaps counterintuitively, that many Central American men find
evangelicalism attractive despite its relatively higher lifestyle expectations when compared with Catholicism. Furthermore, evangelicals offer Central American men the possibility of a developing a religious career even and especially for those whose lack of formal education and criminal past put them at a severe disadvantage for developing a professional identity or career. In short, I suggest that evangelical growth is not hindered but advanced by its promotion of an alternative masculinity.

In the conclusion of this dissertation I summarize my findings regarding gangs and religion, engage in a brief assessment of the impact of evangelicalism on the gangs and wider patterns of violence, and suggest broader strategies for arresting gang violence. One point I must make very clear. I do not by any means wish to suggest that a religious conversion is all that is needed for dealing with the gang phenomenon in Central America or anywhere else. If a surprising number of aging gang members have found a refuge of last resort in the evangelical churches of the region, this fact hardly means that religion, evangelical or otherwise, is the antidote for Central America’s struggle with gang violence. I would not be a sociologist if I did not believe that the principle factors leading to profound social problems such as the growth and hyper-militarization of the transnational gangs were linked to historic patterns of structural violence. The religiously-inspired gang prevention advocates and “promotores ambulantes” (walking neighborhood gang-exit promoters) are playing a courageous and important role in helping aging gang members find non-violent pathways toward social reintegration. But these programs are a single component of a much larger effort necessary for controlling, reducing and, someday, eliminating gang violence. Arresting gang violence must be an effort that is both deep and wide, including local, national, and international efforts to undermine the structures that produce the conditions for shame among
thousands of youth in the impoverished barrios of the region while severely eroding access to the weapons and drug money that provide these youth with a quick and easy route to bypassing shame. Congregations and parishes can and should increase their efforts to provide non-violent pathways out of the gang, but religious institutions will be hard-pressed to provide long-term solutions that keep children from viewing the gang as an attractive alternative in the first place.

Nevertheless, despite my skepticism regarding the overall impact of evangelicals’ conversionist approaches to gang ministry, one cannot help but be impressed by the far-reaching impact of such conversions in the lives individuals and families. One year after I first met JJ, I received an invitation to a wedding. This time the wedding was a real one and the bride was not the gang but rather JJ’s long-time partner and mother of his young son. Even though JJ had given up womanizing along with drugs, weapons, and the rest of la vida loca, as an evangelical Christian, he felt the need to “formalize” his conjugal relationship with a church wedding that included a long guest list and cake, a tamal, and a Coca-cola for everyone. The wedding service was long, including both the required legal marriage ceremony, followed by a festive religious program, complete with a sermon from the Bible’s most romantic book, the “Song of Songs.” Before it was over, JJ had wept several times, soaking the tattooed tears with his own and shedding any scrap of gang pride he had left. His marriage to death had been permanently annulled.
CHAPTER 1:

TRANSNATIONAL GANGS IN CONTEXT

Just who are the gang members and what have they done to generate so much anger and controversy? This chapter provides a brief history of the “transnational gangs,” their arrival and growth in Central America as well as the defining features of their organization. Although solid empirical research on the gangs is scarce due to the limitations of the setting, a few Central American scholars have published well-researched theses and chapters in Spanish and the oldest treatments of the gang in Guatemala and El Salvador were written over a decade ago (Cruz and Portillo 1998). Before launching into an examination of the intersections between the Central American gangs and religion I wish to clarify the nature of Central American gangs and how gang life in this context differs from that of traditional youth street gangs of the U.S. cities. Of course, gang life in Central America shares many similarities with life in a typical street gang in the U.S. where members are predominantly male, predominantly from the lower economic rungs of society, and many come from precarious family backgrounds (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Moore 1991). And yet the gangs of Central America display a variety of characteristics that set them apart qualitatively from their counterparts in the U.S. Understanding these differences is essential to grasping why leaving the Central
American gang presents such a unique set of challenges to gang members—and why religion seems to provide such a popular pathway out of the gang.

Origins of Transnational Gangs

War in the 1980s sent tens of thousands of Central American refugee families fleeing to the United States for safety. In El Salvador, where, by the late 1980s civil war had enveloped most of the country even reaching the outskirts of the capital, the emigration flow was especially intense. By 1990 the U.N. estimated that approximately 700,000 Salvadorans were living in the U.S. primarily in Los Angeles but also in the D.C. area and in New York City. Lacking a strong formal education, useful network ties, or clear prospects for employment, hundreds of Salvadoran youths joined local Chicano gangs, especially the Mexican-American *Mara Dieciocho* or Eighteenth Street gang. Many other young Salvadorans found the local gang territory hostile, and formed their own groups, especially in the Pico Union area of Los Angeles (Vigil 2002). These Salvadoran immigrant gangs eventually took the name *La Mara Salvatrucha*. Meanwhile underground economic activity became especially attractive to youth who lived in constant fear of being arrested and deported. For young, undocumented immigrants, it "made sense" to look for income to the street rather than to risk being detained while trying to produce false papers in search of an income in the formal economy.

Following the riots and looting in the wake of the Rodney King trial, riots in which many young gang members took part, the L.A.P.D. spearheaded a campaign to arrest and prosecute gang members, even minors, as felons. The signing of the peace
accords that same year ended El Salvador’s civil war and gave L.A.P.D. further “justification” for its massive round-up and deportation. Thousands of Salvadoran youth and young men, many of whom had lived most of their lives in the U.S., were arrested, prosecuted as adults, and deported to their “home country” (Arana 2005; Ribando 2005). Nor were local authorities provided with information regarding the criminal background of the young men arriving in their communities. Set adrift in a context they barely knew and with even fewer prospects for legitimate employment, these young gang members set about organizing and recruiting a local youth population that treated the deportees with a combination of fear and reverence. For youths facing difficult circumstances in the impoverished marginal neighborhoods of El Salvador, the tattooed young deportees, who often spoke English far better than they spoke Spanish, displayed a worldly-wise self-confidence practically unheard of in the Central American barrio. Furthermore, many of the young deported gang members had access to resources and weapons hitherto unknown in the marginal barrios of El Salvador.

Gang developments in Guatemala and Honduras followed a similar path. Although far fewer gang youth were deported to these countries from the U.S. in the 1990s, many young men did indeed return with gang knowledge and experience, often acquired during a prison sentence before deportation. Just as important, Salvadoran gang members began traveling to Honduras and Guatemala in the mid-1990s to organize gang cells there (Loudis, del Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006; Sibaja, Roig, Rajaraman, Caldera, and Bardales 2006b). Until recently, Central Americans were able travel back
and forth between countries of the Central American “federation” without a passport, carrying instead a standard photo identification. Thus travel across borders was easy and afforded gang organizers a great deal of anonymity as they sought to expand their network of gang cells. By the late 1990s, two major gangs, the *Mara Salvatrucha*, also known by its abbreviation, MS-13, and the *Mara Dieciocho*, similarly represented by the abbreviation M-18, had obtained a clear position as the dominant gang rivals in the region. They accomplished this not only by recruiting disenfranchised youth in the impoverished urban neighborhoods of the Northern Triangle, but also by co-opting nearly all of the already-established local street gangs. Using a combination of superior networks, access to weapons, and the thrill of belonging to a gang whose experience and connections stretched all the way to Los Angeles, the *Salvatrucha* and *Dieciocho* organizers were able to replicate these local gang cells by the hundreds in cells called *clickas* or “cliques.”

One of the more important issues striking a chord among the experts and practitioners who study Central American gangs is that of origin. Many Central Americans see the Salvatrucha and Dieciocho *maras* as a brand new phenomenon, an export from the United States. While street gangs have been around for decades, the newer term *mara* is drawn from *marabunta*, a type of ant that overcomes its victims by attacking in swarms. For many, the *maras* need to be distinguished from the *pandillas*, an

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6 Under pressure from the United States and its worries regarding undocumented migration, Guatemala began requiring visas of Nicaraguans and Hondurans at its southern borders, thus creating a second, “virtual Rio Grande” even further south.
older term for gangs that loosely translates as “bands” of youth that hang out on the street. Although some gang members use pandilla to refer to the older M-18 and mara to refer to MS-13, Fr. Jose “Pepe” Moratalla, a Spanish Salesian who runs a vocational school in a tough neighborhood of San Salvador, is part of the camp that makes a strong distinction between the pandillas of an earlier era, and the maras of today. In a lively interview “Padre Pepe” described this difference as an important piece of evidence demonstrating the non-native character of the gangs:

Back in the 70s and 80s we had pandillas but not maras. That’s a new phenomenon and it came imported. It is not from here. In 1992 the U.S. started sending gang members back to El Salvador and these guys came back without skills and with no good access to jobs and they started organizing the gangs based on what they had learned in the North. They knew how to use weapons and how to sell drugs. They brought the real maras to this area. And my hats off to the U.S.—at least they waited until the war was over to start sending them back!

The sarcasm in Fr. Moratalla’s description of the gang phenomenon as an import bespeaks a frustration shared by police, government and non-profit organizations alike who point out that until very recently, U.S. Immigration law prohibited deportation officials from providing local police or governments with any information regarding the criminal records of deportees effectively handcuffing local authorities. Not that Central American police would have been well-prepared to incarcerate, monitor or otherwise deal with criminally-charged deportees. Rampant corruption and massive understaffing have hamstrung local security forces for decades, leaving them with neither the trust nor the capacity to appropriately handle the influx of deportees. Still, the notion that the gangs represent one more undesirable cultural export from the U.S. remains a mainstay for many Central Americans.
Who Are the Gangs?

The gangs of Central America go by many names. The most common by far are the *Mara Salvatrucha*, which uses the initials MS-13 or simply “MS,” and the Eighteenth Street Gang or *Mara Dieciocho*, which uses the shorthand M-18 or simply “18” to describe itself. Gang members sometimes refer to themselves as belonging simply to the *letras* (“letters,” that is, the MS-13) or *números* (“numbers,” that is, the M-18). There are many other gang names as well but in the Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, where by all accounts the gangs have “evolved” the most both in sophistication and in level of violent delinquency, the MS-13 and the M-18 have come to dominate the youth gang culture. In fact, as I learned from the young men and women in my interviews, many local *clickas* choose names that do not immediately identify them with the larger gangs. But as of the early 2000s if not earlier, nearly all local *clickas* had affiliated with one or the other of the larger gangs. In a few cases, other gangs with international ties managed to survive by brokering an informal truce with either the M-18 or the MS-13, thereby earning default enemy status with the opposite gang. The White Fence, an L.A.-based gang with roots reaching back at least to the 1950s (Vigil 1988) is one such gang. The gang, which developed several cliques in satellite neighborhoods of Guatemala City in the 1990s, had been all but swallowed up or eliminated by the MS-13 by the mid-2000s. In Honduras, a few neighborhoods developed several cells of the Batos Locos, a gang with origins in Chicago and represented by the initials BL or VL. Like the White Fence *clickas* in Guatemala, the Honduran Batos have all but disappeared in recent years. Thus, while a few other gangs have occasionally made headlines in the region, the Salvatruchas and the 18th street gang have come to dominate the street wars using a
mixture of conquest and co-optation and their presence in all three countries as well as the United States has given them international status. More than half of the youth interviewed for this study belonged to one or the other of these two “transnational” gangs.

What made the gangs “transnational” was a combination of social and political factors stemming from the late-twentieth century forces of globalization, especially in the increases in mediated communication and international immigration patterns. If the Central American gangs were simply characterized by small pockets of street gangs sharing a name and symbols across two or three countries, the “transnational” descriptor might be unwarranted. If a gang has active cells in Los Angeles and Toronto, this fact by itself hardly necessitates the development of a new term or concept to describe it. And yet the MS-13 and the M-18 display a variety of characteristics that set them apart from earlier manifestations of street gangs and reveal a surprising level of international communication and intercultural hybridity giving rise to the transnational qualifier. Indeed, it was the experience of international migration and coming of age in a new country that accompanied the birth of both gangs in the first place. Furthermore, police records as well as empirical studies show evidence of significant, successful, entrepreneurial organization by both gangs in at least five countries—from Honduras to the U.S., including, though to a much lesser extent, Mexico—leading to membership and income-generating crime in each country (Aguilar 2007a; Loudis, del Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006; Sibaja et al. 2006b). Nor do the gangs limit themselves to simultaneous international expansion. An array of studies have demonstrated a significant amount of international communication, by cell phone and through well-traveled
migration routes, taking place between clickas and their leaders, also known as ranfleros (Arana 2005; Kraul, Lopez, and Connell 2005; Ribando 2005; Vigil 2002). Indeed, what sets the MS-13 and M-18 apart from other multi-nation gangs such as the White Fence or the Vatos Locos is a cross-border network savvy that goes beyond one or two cities allowing for a new level of organization and underground economic activity. The transnational gangs thrive on the increasingly porous borders created in the wake of economic liberalization, and they “work the seams” of international borders, moving between them and communicating across them (Arana 2005) to establish a foothold in “growth industries” such as drug sales and the extortion and policing of migratory routes (Kraul, Lopez, and Connell 2005; Loudis, del Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006).

In choosing the term “transnational,” I have avoided other proposed terms. One common term advanced by some U.S. criminologists and military sociologists is that of “third generation” gangs. Military sociologist Max Manwaring uses data gathered from archives and interviews with El Salvadoran National Police to argue that the Salvatrucha and Dieciocho gangs represent a “new insurgency” of “urban guerillas” who desire nothing less than the overthrow of local and even national governments in order to enlarge their territory for extracting resources from the population. In order to distinguish these gangs from earlier, more traditional forms of localized street gangs, Manwaring uses the term “third generation gangs” to describe the Salvatrucha and Dieciocho (Manwaring 2005). Such gangs ultimately seek power and enrichment through crime and thus engage the legal political structures in “political war” with the intent of promoting the failure of state sovereignty. Manwaring borrows the term “third generation street gangs” from John Sullivan, a California gang researcher and member of the L.A.
Sheriff’s Department who considers members of the Dieciocho and Salvatrucha to be “non-state soldiers” who participate in transnational criminal organizations on par with international organized criminals and terrorists (Sullivan 2002). Sullivan’s term is part of a larger strategy to call attention to all manner of “non-state actors” such as war lords and mafia and other “transnational networks of crime” who are changing the “rules” of international warfare. As such, his inclusion of gangs and gang leaders in this list seems like a stretch. For while it is undeniably true that the MS-13 and M-18 have become far more violent than their local, territorial predecessors, theirs is a violence aimed largely at the poor of their own neighborhoods. Far from a war for geopolitical dominance, the violence of transnational gangs is largely, as one Catholic priest put it, “A war of the poor against the poor about which the state could care less” (Munaiiz 2005). While the transnational gangs have clearly evolved in ways both economic and violent, the data from the best empirical investigations simply do not support the conclusion that a high level of sophisticated communication networks exists or that they possess tightly streamlined vertical integration warranting the comparison to an army or mafia. Even the head of the FBI’s special unit dedicated to tracking and countering the MS-13 conceded this fact in 2007: “We tried to uncover a vertical structure but we couldn’t. What we see are different clickas or cells that operate in different parts of the United States and Central America using similar methods” (Boueke 2007a).

In point of fact, many local cells and cell leaders do maintain contact with higher-ups and “pay it up,” especially when securing weapons for local turf wars. Several of the ex-gang members I interviewed reported that access to guns was a key incentive to affiliate with the transnational gangs. But the same interviews revealed that rules and
procedures surrounding initiation and membership requirements vary widely from one clicka to another reflecting a good deal of local autonomy. From an organizational standpoint then, it may be more helpful to think of the transnational gangs as functioning more like a franchise than a single, monolithic corporation. In the franchise model, transnational gangs offer local clickas—“franchisees”—incentives for affiliating in the form of recognizable “logos” such as symbols and vocabulary and a proven method for attracting “clients” and generating income. Furthermore, any youth with enough chutzpah and enough daring may create a local affiliate so long as he remains clear of other local leaders—or manages to depose them. But as franchisees, clickas remain largely under “local” ownership so long as they do not grossly violate the norms of the “franchise.” Understanding transnational gangs as franchises sidesteps the debate between sensationalism of those that cast the transnational gang as a global criminal organization and those arguing that the communication between gang cells does not warrant such a conclusion, but who appear to underestimate the reach and role of the gangs.

Gang Membership: Who Belongs?

Since a region-wide “census” would be impossible, what we know about the membership of Central American transnational gangs must be pieced together from a variety of studies using a variety of methods. Table 1.1 below shows some of the membership totals often cited by those who study the gangs. No actual gang rolls exist and, given the criminalization of gang membership by national governments in recent years, no loyal insider is likely to provide help in identifying or quantifying members.
While a number of authors in the mid-2000s seemed to agree at least broadly on the size of the gangs, arriving at a total membership of about 70,000 in the entire region, such overlap seems to have resulted from analysts getting their figures from the same source—the El Salvador National Police.
### TABLE 1.1

**ESTIMATES OF GANG MEMBERSHIP BY COUNTRY AND SOURCE**

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<td>Guatemala</td>
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<td>13,450-170,000</td>
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<td>Honduras</td>
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<td>31,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>10,500</td>
<td>11,000 (active members)</td>
<td>39,000</td>
<td>10,500</td>
<td>10,000 (core) + 20,000 “young associates”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,700</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>2,201</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total* (for all of Central America)</td>
<td></td>
<td>69,145</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>70,000-100,000</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

In general, membership estimates for the entire region typically range from 70,000-100,000 but some estimates reach as high as 180,000 for the MS-13 gang alone (Spinelli 2006). Such wild variations in reporting stem in no small part from the motives of police officials, politicians, and non-profit workers who, in lieu of any hard evidence, are inclined to use the estimates for the purpose of generating electoral support or for accessing national and international funds for their work (CCM 2006). More importantly, what constitutes “membership” in the gang can vary greatly by perspective. Most gangs have varying degrees of affiliation, from entry-level members called, ironically enough, *missionaries*” to national leaders called *ranfla”* or *ranfleros.” Based on interviews with
local gang members and other insiders, one study of Guatemalan gang membership identified four levels of affiliation (Loudis et al. 2006).

Further complicating the measurement of gang membership is the fact that many youth who wear tattoos are not “officially” jumped-in members of the gang but rather seek to emulate the power and identity possessed by the local gang members. Sometimes called simpatizantes (sympathizers) some, but not all of these youth eventually join the gang after a period of chequeo or “check-out.” Other simpatizantes simply spend a year or two of their youth enjoying the thrill of keeping company with gang members but eventually choose not to join. Thus, estimates of local or national youth belonging to the gangs depend largely on the choice of whether or not to include the younger sympathizers, many of whom have only minimal if any criminal engagement.

My own research led me to be wary of the high numbers of gang members, especially when cited by analysts who all but equate being a gang member with having murdered dozens of civilians. In fact, it seemed that the more “first-hand” the knowledge of a particular source, the more modest were the numbers quoted. I know of only one “census” of gang members and that study focused on one metropolitan region. “Onward Youth,” a Honduran social research group directed by Ernesto Bardales, a Honduran sociologist and former director of the local youth detention center, conducted surveys of all gang members in the metropolitan region of San Pedro Sula, Honduras’s largest city. In 2007, using the close ties of the research team to both current and former gang

7 Although police estimates are often inflated at first, local and national police authorities often have political reasons for citing lower numbers after several years in leadership.
members, Bardales and his team found 1,462 gang members in the entire metropolitan region of over one million inhabitants (Bardales 2007). While he readily admits that his research team could hardly have expected to locate every jumped-in gang member in the region, Bardales himself is highly skeptical of the many studies estimating Honduran gang membership in the tens of thousands. Nevertheless, regardless of the wide disparities in estimates, there seems to be evidence that Honduras had especially high rates of gang membership in the early 2000s and that transnational gangs have made their “home” so to speak, in the Northern Triangle. Nicaragua and Costa Rica have yet to experience a gang wave on either the scale or the seriousness of that displayed in their neighbors to the north (Sibaja et al. 2006b).

Gang Demographics

Young men and adolescent boys dominate the gang. Although one recent study made waves by claiming that female gang members make up as many as forty percent of the gang rolls (Lacey 2008) most studies estimate female membership to be between five and ten percent (Bardales 2007; FEPAZ 2006). Female gang members, called “hynas” (HI- nuhs) in the language of the gang, carry out a number of tasks in the gang. Early research suggested that young girls are recruited to the gang for sexual purposes and my own interviews revealed that indeed, many female gang members provide sex, forced or consensual for many if not all of the male members of the clicka. Several informants reported that a girl can avoid becoming the sexual partner of the rest of the men if she becomes the girlfriend of a male gang member, preferably a leader.
However, not all young women in the gang serve as the sexual servants of the male population. Some girls and young women perform strategic tasks for the gang, though they rarely take part in planning or decision-making at a higher level. Because they are less likely to be suspected for crime by the police, the female gang members carry out important missions such as collecting extortion fees (Lopez 2005) or carrying weapons or drugs. Vera, a Guatemalan ex-gang member recalled that making, selling, and transporting weapons for the gang was by far the most important work she and her friends carried out.8 “The police always looked for the men, so we, as women, minors, they couldn’t touch us, right? [The police] had no right to touch us [unless] there were female officers present.” Vera remembered the exhilaration of firing handguns with her young friends as a fourteen-year-old. Another female member recalled being arrested after a police sweep of a local home turned up a homicide-linked weapon with her fingerprints on it. The girl had been asked to “store” the gun in an obvious and successful attempt to “clean” the weapon and link the girl to the crime.

The Mara Salvatrucha has by far the highest membership of the two major gangs with estimates ranging from 65-85 percent of all gang members in the region (Bruneau 2005; Loudis, del Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006; Thompson 2004). The Mara Dieciocho is significantly smaller with an estimated portion of the gang population between fifteen and thirty-five per cent. Other local gangs such as the “Batos Locos” (Honduras) or the “White Fence” (Guatemala) have followings in certain cities and

8 Unless otherwise indicated, I use pseudonyms for all ex-gang members interviewed.
regions but account for only a small minority of the gangs in the northern countries. In Nicaragua, authorities report that the international gangs of MS-13 and M-18 have yet to make inroads into the local gang population (Sibaja, Roig, Rajaraman, Bolaños, and Acuña 2006a). Researchers are divided as to whether the presence of M-18 and MS-13 is significant in Mexico. Mexican National Police estimate a national presence of five thousand current members of the transnational gangs but other studies have found no empirical evidence to support a presence of this magnitude (Barnes 2007).

Research in the early 2000s suggested that the median age of gang members at the time was nineteen (Arana 2005) and most experts estimate that typical gang members range in age from twelve to twenty-five years. There is recent evidence suggesting that the average age of gang members is rising, either because of a smaller cohort of entering adolescents or, as seems to be more likely, because “aging out” of the gang has become increasingly rare if not impossible (Bardales 2007; Boueke 2007b).

Race is an enormously important factor running through Central American politics and national identities (Miller 2004). In Guatemala, indigenous Mayan youth have been discriminated against for centuries by their mixed “ladino” compatriots while in El Salvador, a massacre of indigenous peoples in 1932 all but erased the population of indigenous peoples who openly embraced their ethnicity. Meanwhile Honduras, especially in the northern coastal region has a significant Garifuna population of Afro-Caribbean descent. While I am so far unaware of any empirical studies providing a clear picture of the racial-ethnic composition of the gangs, by taking notes on phenotype during my interviews I was able to anecdotally confirm what others have already suggested—that the majority of youth who enter the gangs have mixed, mestizo, features
tending toward darker skin and short stature. Very few of the sixty-three ex-gang members interviewed had clearly indigenous Mayan features and none were black. However, some of the young ex-gang members I interviewed were tall and fair-skinned. Interestingly, almost without exception, these few young men had been leaders in the gang at the local if not regional level. Thus, it appears that the gang perpetuates the racial pyramid typical of the broader society.

Gang Values

In one sense, many of the values of the gang present little contrast with those of the barrio itself, or, for that matter, with youth from the U.S. Gang youth value friendship, camaraderie, solidarity and, “having a good time” (el vacil). Drugs, alcohol and fighting, especially with weapons, are some of the common means of having a good time. Colombian sociologist Mauricio Rubio has argued that early and abundant sex is one of the most attractive features of gang life, especially young boys (Rubio 2007) and my interviews with ex-gang members supported this claim.

Thus, the values of the gang go beyond the typical notions of temporary, innocuous rebellion often associated with adolescence and early adulthood. Gang members typically sell drugs in addition to using them for recreation. Accounts of group sex and even gang rape surfaced with frequency and firearms were reported as having become common to the point of ubiquity. Indeed, danger and risk-taking are the dominant themes in the gang. Many interviewees spoke of the ability to “rifar,” literally, to gamble, as the ultimate measure of one’s commitment to the gang and its values.
Demonstrating one’s ability to take chances or rifar by engaging in violent crime is the most direct pathway to gaining el respeto, respect, and the leadership that goes with it. Many gang members refer to the lifestyle of the gang as la vida loca (the crazy life). Gang leaders who have demonstrated their prowess at taking risks without getting caught or hurt are often bestowed with the English title “Crazy” or “Little Crazy” while many clickas adopt English monikers such as “Crazy Gangsters.”

Violence is a favorite pastime in the gang and access to weapons has turned the fist-fights and stabbings of an earlier era into the bullet-ridden street warfare of today. While in the late 1990s many local clickas fabricated their own weapons called “chimbas” in Honduras or “hechizas” in Guatemala, today handguns are plentiful and semi-automatic weapons are far from rare. Santos, a long-time youth worker in a tough neighborhood of San Salvador told of seeing a weapon that surprised even him:

The other day I saw a Salvatrucha with a grenade-launcher walking down the street. Imagine that—a grenade launcher. Now where are you going to get one of those? The military is the only place to get a grenade launcher. It had to be borrowed from an army member. And think about a weapon like that in a [densely-populated] neighborhood like this.

The young men did indeed fire the weapon later that day, hitting a weld shop that was, mercifully, unoccupied at the time. Such “recreation” reveals the role of violence and violent weapons in creating a mystique and a sense of empowerment in the gang. But power, weapons, and “la vida loca” are not the whole story of the gang values. Loyalty, to the neighborhood and the gang presents perhaps the single most important value in the gang. Indeed, gang members use the word “barrio,” literally, the neighborhood, to refer to both the neighborhood itself and to the gang. When interviewees spoke of “defending the
barrio” it was often unclear whether they were referring to their neighborhood, the clicka, or the transnational “barrio” of the MS-13 or M-18. Such ambiguity is indeed intentional for the young men who see the transnational brotherhood of the gang as simply an extension of the neighborhood.

Loyalty can take many forms. Upon initiation to the gang, new recruits must undergo a short period of beatings at the hands of their “homies”—here again, the English gang term is used. During the thirteen, eighteen “seconds” or longer of beating—seconds are not timed but counted out slowly—the new members may not strike back or protect themselves except for covering the face or genitals. Honduran gang members call this ritual the calentón or “warm-up.” Thus, new members “prove” their ability to “take heat” for the gang. Indeed, even before the “warm-up,” new recruits and sympathizers must spend three-to-six months in chequeo, a “check-out” period during which time they conduct missions for the gang. Risk-taking for the sake of the gang provides a sure sign of loyalty and solidarity with the rest. Volunteering for an especially dangerous or violent mission can shorten the time of chequeo.

Gang members display their loyalty not only with actions but on their bodies via dress, hair-style, manner of walk, and tattoos. Tattoos are the most obvious form of embodied loyalty. Typically, the more visible a tattoo, the more respeto accorded the wearer. Tattoos have become especially salient in the wake of the “zero tolerance” programs aimed at incarcerating and punishing gang members, sometimes with little or

9 Several informants, including two female ex-gang members reported that female recruits are usually given a choice between undergoing a beating or having sex with all male members of the clicka.
no solid evidence linking them to actual crimes. The tattoo has become the mark of
courage inside the gang, while outside the gang many regard it as a kind of “mark of
Cain.” Whereas in the U.S. tattoos have become one more means of individual
expression, in Central America they have come to be associated almost entirely with the
gang and criminality. Tattoos make gang members easy targets for opposing gangs,
police, and local vigilantes and many employers refuse to hire an applicant with a tattoo.
Thus, wearing a tattoo in a highly visible place on the body such as the face, neck or
hands represents for the gang a bold loyalty in spite of the risks.

Thus far I have avoided discussing any differences between the two main
transnational gangs in part because the language, dress and manner of Salvatrucha and
Dieciocho bear more similarities than differences, and among those interviewed, stated
“contrasts” did not hold up from one clicka to the next. Still, a few differences came up
frequently enough to be mentioned here. The MS-13 has the strongest nationalist identity.
Indeed, the word “Salvatrucha” is a combination of salvadoreño (Salvadorian) and trucha
(trout), a persistent, migratory fish with a knack for “slipping away” from its pursuers.
While the Salvatrucha has the strongest presence in El Salvador and Los Angeles, the
gang also dominates numerically in Guatemala and Honduras despite significant national
rivalry between especially Honduras and El Salvador. In spite of, or perhaps as a result of
the MS-13’s higher numbers in the region, members of the M-18 insist that theirs is a
gang with much stricter requirements than those held by the rival Salvatruchas. Several
ex-members of the M-18 reported with pride that their (former) gang was not a gang of
the masses but a selective one that preferred smaller numbers and greater commitment.
As for its identity, the Dieciocho has a Mexican-American character rooted in the “cholo”
culture of second- and third-generation Mexican-American immigrant experience of the 1950s and 1960s (Vigil 1988). The Virgin of Guadalupe figures prominently in many gang murals and tattoos, and rosaries are commonly worn by M-18 members though they are rarely worn by non-gang youth in the barrio. Strangely enough, the M-18 has little popularity in Mexico.

Transnational Gangs and Crime

A few commentators have downplayed the extent to which serious crime actually pervades the everyday activity of the transnational gangs (cf. Rubios 2007; FEPAZ 2007) but any serious study, sympathetic or not, must recognize the enormous increase in delinquent and serious criminal activity among the gangs in the 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, homicide and violent crime soared in the Northern Triangle during the years of the rise of the MS-13 and M-18 as Figure 1.1 below illustrates, and law enforcers became increasingly accustomed to cleaning up after gang wars.
Figure 1.1 shows the annual homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants for Mesoamerica (OCAVI 2007).

The National Police in El Salvador has estimated that sixty percent of all homicides are committed by gangs, and this figure was reproduced in a number of studies as evidence of the seriousness of the gang issue as well as political fodder for heavy-handed police tactics. And yet, simply equating increases in violent crime with gang growth is a mistake. Salvadoran researchers have pointed out that the police’s own records attribute only thirty percent of the homicides to the gangs. Furthermore, the same study notes that other, non-police organizations such as the Institute of Legal Medicine report a much lower figure—from 8 percent in 2003 to 13 percent in 2005 (Aguilar and Miranda 2006). Nor do reported crime rates correlate neatly with regions or neighborhoods with high gang membership. For example, Guatemala’s most violent Southeastern states have very little gang presence but a strong presence of organized
crime and former military officers. Thus, a great portion of the increase in violent crime seems to be related to other sectors such as organized crime and increasing activity among the drug cartels. Mexico’s recent, sudden increase in crime in spite of its relatively small transnational gang presence adds further weight to this perspective.

Still, gang members openly admit that engaging in crime is a common pastime of the youth of the transnational gangs. Armed violence has indeed become a part of the everyday vernacular of the Central American gangs and starting in the late 1990s this violence became increasingly economically-motivated and “strategic.” As firearms became more accessible and the drug trade became more lucrative and inviting, armed violent crime replaced street delinquency in the transnational gangs. Furthermore, the transnational nature of the new gangs made possible the transfer of criminal experience from one context to another. Beto, a former Honduran gang member reported that many of the local gang population in his own urban satellite neighborhood were either displaced or migrated after the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. When some of these youth returned or were deported in 2000, they helped to organize younger youth into clickas of the M-18.

In the beginning it took some getting used to because [the deported M-18 organizers] outlawed some of the things we were used to like petty crime. They had come back stronger and they established strict rules with more respect. Now we had to take care of the name of the barrio [M-18]. We had to uphold our image. “No more of this stealing chickens and ducks,” we were told.

Instead, Beto and his friends were instructed to do their stealing in other neighborhoods and were instructed to prioritize the acquisition of bigger and better weapons.
Many clickas have been able to establish themselves as semi-permanent institutions in the community by bribing local police and intimidating the local population. In addition to selling drugs, many local clickas collect *la renta*, a monthly extortion fee, from local business owners and bus and taxi drivers. Antonio, a Guatemalan ex-member of the M-18, recalled collecting weekly “rent” from families and businesses in his community. He described the logic of the “rent” system with unusual forthrightness:

[T]he gang needs to survive and looks for the easiest way like we all look for the easiest way to survive, right? [They do it] charging people rent (*renteando la gente*) and if people don’t pay rent, they kill them so that other people will understand what the deal is and pay up because what is the rent money for? To buy weapons to defend yourself so they don’t kill you. In other words it’s a circle. That’s the thing so many people don’t understand. They only see that somebody killed somebody and that’s all they get. They don’t stop to think.

As Antonio’s comment demonstrates, gang violence in Central America is not limited to turf wars or paybacks. In recent years some homeowners have had to either pay *la renta* or sell their homes at a loss, often to the gang itself, if the payments become too burdensome. Thus, turf wars and “protecting the barrio” from other gangs seeking to gain real estate have become a matter of protecting the gang’s source of income, not just pride in one’s neighborhood. In fact, the other common term for such extortion fees is *el impuesto de guerra*—the war tax.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to conclude that such local extortion practices make up part of a vast “insurgency” campaign or ideological warfare comparable to the civil wars of the 1980s. The gangs have not established broad and clearly-articulated chains of command of national or international scope. In one of the
most extensive empirical studies yet available, researchers from several countries concluded that while in the countries of the Northern Triangle, the transnational gangs are indeed “a serious public security problem,” they have yet to match the level of organized sophistication exhibited by organized crime and the drug cartels. The group reported that, “[W]hile gang-related violence is a problem it is not tightly linked to narco-traffic and organized crime. Additionally, within all the countries, the primary victims of youth gang-related violence are other youth, both gang and non-gang involved” (Barnes 2007).

The report drew its conclusions from a written survey of incarcerated gang members, noting that “only a small minority of gang members in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, possess transnational ties with other gang members, or ties with organized crime and/or narco-trafficking” (Barnes 2007). Of course, one could argue that only a handful of gang leaders actually need to possess transnational ties in order to orchestrate international cooperation between clickas, but the point stands and my research corroborates the finding that most local clickas are not taking part in a vast conspiracy to destabilize the region.

On the other hand, crime in the transnational gangs is indeed abundant and serious even though it tends toward the local and is both expressive and economically-motivated. And to the extent that local and national governments have been unable to protect the residents of the neighborhoods where gangs are the most active, they have failed to show that democracy can “deliver” security and well-being. Thus, the gangs and fear of gangs have given rise to a growing desire for the “strong-armed” populism of the past. In Honduras and El Salvador, presidential candidates campaigned and won on heavy-handed, crime-fighting mano dura (iron fist) platforms aimed at arresting and prosecuting
gang members and “suspected” gang members sometimes with little evidence of criminality beyond the possession of a tattoo. Meanwhile in Guatemala, the rise of gangs provided the Guatemalan military, fully discredited by its rampant abuse of human rights during the civil war, with the perfect opportunity to reassert itself in the domestic sphere. In 2003 the president redeployed military units in street-level “joint patrols” with police in direct violation of the Peace Accords of 1996 (Loudis, del Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006). In sum, local and national governments are right to take the gang phenomenon seriously, but their policies for dealing with the gangs usually tend toward punitive measures that make headlines but do little to address the issues underlying gang violence (Aguilar and Miranda 2006).

Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter has been to provide a broad overview of the transnational gangs of Central America by briefly showing where and when they emerged, who populates them, what they value, and to what extent they engage in crime. I have tried to familiarize readers who know little about gangs or whose knowledge is limited to the more local street gangs of the United States. I have employed the metaphor of the franchise in order to stake out a “middle ground” between the sensationalism that views the transnational gangs as well-articulated and vertically-integrated international “guerilla” organizations on the one hand and on the other, the analysts that underplay the violent, criminal activity of the gang and its repercussions on communities and families living in marginal neighborhoods. The franchise-like character of these gangs has
allowed them to grow dramatically both in their ability to attract members and their
capacity to adjust to the local terrain with its weak and corrupt security structures. But my
overview is admittedly brief. I have avoided laying out a detailed argument for a
particular set of causes that led to the emergence of the gangs. That task has been
undertaken by other studies with varying results (Cruz 1999; Cruz 2004; Loudis, del
Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006; Thale and Falkenburger 2006; Vigil 1988; Vigil
2002). Some see the main cause as a “culture of violence” rooted in the civil wars of the
1980s while others point to a lack of social capital, unemployment and poverty. Still
others emphasize the role of immigration experience and globalization. Nor do I attempt
here to compile an exhaustive list of the symbols, pastimes, or values of the MS-13 and
M-18 in particular since more in-depth discussion of these issues will illuminate the
topics of later chapters.

Instead, I have tried to show the social significance of the Central American gangs
as a transnational social phenomenon whose emergence coincided with particular social,
economic, and historical shifts such as war, migration-and-deportation, and weak and
corrupt security structures in Central America and whose presence deeply affects
communities across the region. Though no one single social, political or economic factor
can be said to have produced the gangs, a variety of macro-social forces set the stage for
their growth by creating thousands of micro-situations—biographies—in which joining
the gang became an especially attractive option. The next chapter narrows its focus more
specifically on a handful of those biographies, better to understand why some gang youth
choose to join the gang and how gang life further shapes these biographies. For only by
understanding the macro- and micro-social phenomena that encourage youth to join the
gang and shape their lives within the gang will we be able to grasp what is truly at stake for the gang member who considers deserting.
CHAPTER 2:

BECOMING A HOMIE: WHEN SHAME BECOMES VIOLENCE

She told me that she was not my mother. At that moment a dog was passing by on the street and she said ‘No, that’s your mother. Look.’ Hearing her say that marked my life.

Camilo, former M-18 cell leader

The truth is, man, I wanted to sow in other people what other people had sown in me since I was little. The only thing that mattered to me was hatred, you know? Vengeance.

Pancho, former MS-13 cell leader

Shame and anger have a deep affinity.

Helen B. Lewis, from Shame and Guilt in Neurosis

When you run with wolves, you learn to bite.

Leonardo, former MS-13 cell leader

Pancho is a 23-year-old Honduran with a thick frame and an energetic voice. A former leader of an MS-13 cell in San Pedro Sula, Pancho is now president of a group of thirty-eight former gang members, including former rivals, a voluntary organization that calls itself “Generation X.” The challenges faced by Pancho and the other members of the
group include finding employers who trust them, avoiding problems with former rivals still in the gang, and avoiding becoming a victim of “social cleansing.” On the day after I interviewed Pancho, another member of his group was killed.

Pancho had agreed to meet me after-hours in the back patio of a small home in San Pedro that houses the offices of Onward Youth, the organization that advises Generation X. Like any self-respecting sociologist I try not to judge a book by its cover, but Pancho’s physical appearance was hard to ignore. He is taller-than-average, well-built, and most of his body is covered with tattoos and the scars left by “erased” tattoos. When he removed a baseball cap worn low over his eyes I had to take care not to react visibly to the scar tissue that completely covered his face. Later in the interview Pancho told me that to remove the tattoos on his face as well as sixteen other tattoos on his body, he had simply applied acidic cream, the kind used widely to remove body hair, and then waited for ninety minutes (instead of the five to ten minutes recommended for hair removal) while the acid ate into his skin—a process he described as “excruciating” but necessary. “If I hadn’t done it, I’d be dead by now,” he said.

Since the occasion for our interview was our first meeting, Pancho wasted no time in sizing me up as well. Even after looking over the consent form and signing it, he pressed me to know why a gringo had asked to interview him and “what this study is all about and what is its motive?” I explained that my research was part of a dissertation, but that I hoped to publish a book that would increase people’s awareness about the difficulties associated with leaving the gang. Once satisfied that the study was not meant to sensationalize the gang nor to demonize those who belonged to it, Pancho began to tell the story of his entrance in the gang, his rise within its ranks, and his eventual exit, after
several years of prison. I spoke very little during the course of the interview, stopping him only momentarily in order to guide the direction of the interview and clarify certain details. His candor, evidenced by his unwillingness to hide his emotions, even when they betrayed “weakness” or vulnerability, soon expelled my concerns about safety or forthrightness and we were able to establish a trust and rapport that allowed the interview to delve deeply into matters of family, the gang, and religion, in spite of the newness of our acquaintance. He delivered his personal story, punctuated by two or three moments of quiet weeping, much like a confession. The first half of his story helps to answer the question of this chapter: What would possess anyone to join a society so dangerous and widely loathed as the gang and to inscribe its symbols on most of his body?

The truth is that I never thought I would be a gang member, you know? I was raised with my grandmother. When I was five years old my mother became ashamed of me and left me to grow up with my grandmother. That’s when I started to suffer because I didn’t have a father or a mother. I was raised with my grandmother and an uncle of mine and some grandchildren of my grandmother. But this uncle was an alcoholic. He would get drunk every day and on account of the alcohol he would beat us and he would curse at us.

Pancho observed that this experience left him with *una estigma* (a stigma). What did he mean exactly by this word, which he sometimes mispronounced as “extigma.” During the course of the interview, the word would crop up several times:

And so I grew up with this stigma of suffering without a family. I remember that when I was six my grandmother wanted to put me in school which, no, for me was something very difficult, you know? Mother’s day would come, Children’s Day, Father’s Day and I would see that all of the parents would visit their classes, eh, these important days for them—Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, their birthdays.
Pancho’s voice faltered as he struggles to convey the trauma of getting through such holidays without the accompaniment of any adult relative. He wept silently for a moment, remembering the “stigma” of being a virtual orphan in a society that elevates family relations to near sacred status. Swallowing to regain composure he continued, “I didn’t have anyone to come for me because my grandmother suffered from a sickness in the brain and couldn’t visit the school. And when I left classes the only thing waiting for me at home was a beating from this uncle who drank almost every day and would shout at us constantly.”

Even more distant than his relationship with his mother was Pancho’s relationship to his father whom he met only on a couple of occasions as a child:

I hadn’t known him at all before then. He would send me things but I never knew him because my mother must have told my grandmother not to let my father near me. That was the obstacle. But I didn’t even have her close by because, I don’t know—maybe I was the ugliest of my mother’s children. I don’t know, but she was embarrassed by me and she went to Tegucigalpa. She is the director of a school in Tegucigalpa.

Pancho described the trauma of being singled out for abandonment by a mother who, by all appearances, seemed to be a capable professional. His father, however, was involved in a gang in another part of the country and in a violent confrontation between two gangs, Pancho’s father was killed when Pancho was only eight. The news devastated the boy who had only recently been allowed to meet his father. Again, Pancho became
emotional as he related the experience of meeting his father as a six-year-old and the sheer joy of knowing that he mattered to someone:

¡Pucha!\(^{10}\) For me, that hit hard. For me to have met my father was, well, to be in contact with him was [trying not to weep], to be able to say that I had contact with him [pause], well, to be able to say that I had a father, you know? Because when I lost my father, when they told me that he had been killed, it was something painful. [pause] I said to myself, “Well, I’m going to start suffering again with this uncle of mine.”

Pancho went on to tell about his move to the city. Worried about the way his uncle beat and mistreat her grandson, Pancho’s grandmother took him to the city of San Pedro Sula to live with a different uncle who had several children of his own. “But things got even worse for me. He had is own wife and his own kids and for them I was always on the sidelines.” Once again Pancho suffered the beatings and verbal abuse of an uncle who, undoubtedly, resented having to raise his sister’s unwanted child. It was at this point, in the city of San Pedro, that Pancho began to notice the gangs:

When I was ten I learned about the famous gangs. In those times the gangs went around in their hobby—they would walk around bien chulos [in the baggy, Mexican style], with their money in their pockets, you know, attracting the attention of the best girls of the neighborhood. I watched all of this, this hobby of theirs and I wanted to arrive to where they were but I didn’t know how. I saw that they had it nice (macizo) compared to me, original you know. Well dressed, on the corner, taking it easy. I saw that nobody messed with them. I said, “Why am I suffering like this?” So at ten years old, almost eleven, I decided to seek these guys out. . .

So I started to sneak out at night. I would escape at eleven or twelve and I would

\(^{10}\) This is a minced oath for expressing shock or emotion. It is derived from the far more vulgar term puta or “son of a bitch.”
go to the disco at three in the morning and return to go back to sleep and no one in my family even noticed that I was leaving. All just to get closer to this group of guys. At eleven I remember I met a youth they called the Owl, and the Owl met another that they called Smopy, guys that were sympathizers with the gang. And of the sympathizers in those days there was only one that wore a tattoo and he was the one that told us what the MS was about. Because I had never seen a tattoo like this before, it hit me hard and I said to myself, “What is this about?” So this guy said, “If you want to know more about the gang, let’s go to Medina.” And we started to visit other places and we started to get involved with other youth. I remember when we had a fight in a disco and my family didn’t even know that I was going out at night and hanging out with these guys. I remember a fight one time between the Dieciocho and the MS because in those days it wasn’t like it is now. In the old days what happened was that if one gang member got a hold of another member of another gang they didn’t kill each other. Maybe some blows but then they would let him go. Anyway, those guys told me, “You look like a guy that has something to offer the gang, so walk with us for awhile and then we’ll see what you’re made of.”

So I got to know more guys from the same gangs but [from] other sectors you know. By now the sympathizer who had introduced us to the gang was a [real] gang member. I started going around with these guys, started to get to know a little about the gang but not too deep you know? I wanted to get in but at the same time I was afraid. I wanted to get in because I came from a family with a stigma, with so many beatings, insults of different kinds and I wanted to meet that group of guys and find out what it was like to live like that. I remember that at the age of twelve the gang members told me, “We don’t want you to go around like a sympathizer anymore. We want you to get jumped-in,” they told me. They took me to a place here in Armentra. I didn’t know what was going to happen to me. I remember that that day they took me there there were approximately eighty-five to ninety youth, gang members identified by their tattoos you know and they told me, “Do you want to be part of the gang?”

“Yes,” I said. “I want to join this. I don’t want to live with my family, I want to live with you all. I want to know what it’s like to live what you live.”

Pancho described his bautizo (baptism), the word the Central American gangs use for a jumping-in ceremony, as an exciting day in which he experienced a mixture of fear, curiosity, and excitement. The gang explained the ceremony to him, calling the beating he would receive from other gang members a “warm-up” (calentón). The ceremony also included a reading of the thirteen rules of the MS-13.
Look man. I remember that that day they beat me—but I mean a REAL beating—afterward everybody was like, “Welcome to the barrio. Welcome to the barrio. Welcome to the barrio. You know, the beating didn’t matter to me because now I could call myself a gang member. After being beaten and kicked like that they tattooed me. I had a tattoo put on my leg.

Pancho did not leave his home immediately after the baptism, but he kept his new identity a secret from his relatives. In any case, they showed little concern for his state even though he was so sore and bruised that he “spent two weeks in bed” recovering from the beatings. Just to make sure, he made up a story about being assaulted by thieves just to be sure.

But by then I felt a little better because I said to myself, “The blows are nothing—I’m a pandillero now!” So I started to hang out with those guys, to sneak out every night to go to the discos. I started consuming marijuana, the popular drug, and other drugs. For me when I smoked drugs it made me feel like a man. Like, “That little Pancho, the one that didn’t matter to his family one bit?” Well, now I felt stronger. I would say to myself, “The day that my family says anything to me, what I’m going to do is run away and they’d better not say anything to me ‘coz we’ll see what happens [to them] you know? So at the age of thirteen, with my blood brother (mi carnal) Jacobo, the Shark, the two of us would always hang out. Together we met another guy named Billy, his name was Dennis and he’s dead now. The three of us made a pact to look out for each other. And we used to go around together, running the show (corriendo el rollo). And whenever anyone had anything to do with one of us, it was the business of all three. We started building the gang in that same sector where we hung out. I now felt like that other guy, the sympathizer who had introduced us to the gang. I’d wanted people to be afraid of me, for people to say, “There go those brotheres [sic].”

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11 Gang members refer to their closest friends in the gang as carnales. Although the term is probably at least related to primo carnal or “first cousin,” my rendering of it as “blood brother” is a loose translation intended to convey the sense of “companion in the flesh.”

12 Here Pancho uses the English word “brother” in a Spanish accent and with the Spanish plural (-es) ending.
Pancho’s developed his “homie” identity only gradually. He was torn, he said. On the one hand he was proud of his new status as a gang member but at the same time worried about what would happen when his family and the neighbors would find out. His first tattoos were on parts of the body that could be covered with everyday clothing. But secretly he wished that he could tattoo his face or arms “where people could see it and know that I was a gang member.” He was, in a sense, building up self-confidence for the day when he would “come out” with his identity, angering, intimidating, and shaming his uncle and his relatives.

The truth is, man, I wanted to sow in other people what other people had sown in me since I was little. The only thing that mattered to me was hatred, you know? Vengeance. When they killed my father I used to say, “When I grow up, as soon as I’m old enough, I’m going to avenge the death of my father.” I carried around a stigma of that vengeance, you know, and hatred at the same time. We started hanging out, the three of us and one time I got a tattoo right here on my chest and I said to the others, “I’m the most tattooed homie of all, and what of it?!” The other guys from the sector started getting tattoos on more and more of their bodies too.

Finally, the day came when his homie identity could no longer be kept secret.

Nobody in my house had realized yet that I was a young gang member and they still would shout at me and everything. During the day it was my mission to water the street [to keep the dust down] and if I didn’t do it I would have problems with them. The day I got that tattoo on my chest I came home stoned on marijuana and I went to bed. When I woke up, my uncle had pulled up my shirt to expose the tattoo. And my uncle looked at the tattoo . . . and my aunt was there, the wife of my uncle, and he started to insult me. “WHY did you get a tattoo!?” and call me all kinds of names. And I said to him, “I’m a gang member and you can’t say anything to me anymore so please don’t mess with me,” you know. “SO WHICH DO YOU WANT?” He shouted. Did I prefer the family or the gang and so I told him, “You know what? Don’t ever mess with me again, because if you ever raise you hand against me, we’re going to kill you.”

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Pancho placed considerable emphasis on this crisis moment when his relatives discovered his homie identity. Important for Pancho was the fact that this time, he was able to “stand up” to their verbal abuse rather than simply accepting it and feeling ashamed or bitter afterward. Like JJ, who imagined the face of his brother on the store owner in order to screw up his courage to follow through with the assault, Pancho also learned to turn the shame of domestic abuse into a resource for anger, hatred, and later, violence. He continued:

I felt like more—how can I tell you—like filled with more hatred, you know? I felt like I was a pandillero. I felt like my [real] family was that group of guys, you know? I left the house that day and I started doing the gig, you know. Already I was fourteen, and it wasn’t the same gig anymore where you grab a guy and beat him up, give him a good working-over, and then let him go. By now we had the famous chimbos. So now if you ran across another [enemy] gang member, now the thing to do was to fire away with the chimbas (proporcionarle un chimabazo) and if it killed him, good, and if it didn’t kill him, you left him there with a hole in the back or wherever you’d hit him. So we started to hang out with the other guys, raising the gang to almost eighty youth in the sector of Lomas del Carmen. I felt like I had more respect, you know, more respect. I liked when people would say, “What’s going on with that brother? He’s a gang member you know.” I didn’t want to have just the tattoo on my chest anymore. I wanted to tattoo my whole body you know, to identify me as a respected gang member among the other youth. So we decided to carry out a mission you know. And whoever participated in that mission that day would tattoo his face. The mission was to go assault an enemy gang, and then get tattoos. Well, we went, man, we hit them, and the three of us together went and tattooed our faces. We had more respect with the gang you know. We were now leaders in the sector. . .

We started sowing terror in the neighborhood. We started identifying ourselves with gangs of other sectors. . . We always stayed together, the three of us, Billy, Busu, and me. When I was seventeen, man, I remember that the police were sick of me. ‘Coz every time we would get caught, they would take us to the station and then to El Carmen [the juvenile justice center]. We would go there time and again. We would go to El Carmen and then, after a bit, we would escape. We would just be there long enough to eat and then we would escape, back out to sow terror in our own sector and in other sectors. And because of this, well, society itself couldn’t stand us anymore, in our sector. The [neighbors] were so afraid of the gang because there were approximately eighty of us. And when the discos were
open, there was chaos. Almost daily a death, two deaths. And the people were 
terribly afraid of the gang, man, and we had chimbas, machetes, knives. So when 
a gang member got into a fight with another, he would kill him. And at the age of 
17, I remember that the police arrested me because we had been pulling all kinds 
of jobs for a whole week straight—all kinds of stuff in an area that was identified 
with the MS. . . [This time] the police sent me to prison. . .

Pancho’s story of “becoming a homie” shares much in common with many of the 
other ex-gang members I interviewed. Like most of the sixty-three former gang members 
I interviewed for this study, Pancho remembered his experience in the gang with 
nostalgia at times but also with regret. He was not proud of his actions but neither did he 
paint the story of a bloodthirsty villain, eager to take advantage of any and every innocent 
bystander as his victim. But the level of detail he provided in his account is exceptional. 
Thus, Pancho’s account offers an excellent opportunity for exploring why and how tens 
of thousands of Central American youth have joined the transnational gangs. The 
excerpts above represent only the first portion of the interview. Although getting arrested 
was by no means the end of his gang career—Pancho gave orders from prison to gang 
members on the outside for nearly three years—it offers a good place to stop and 
examine the story in order to understand both gang affiliation and the development of the 
deviant gang lifestyle.

Methods

My analysis draws heavily from the transcripts of the interviews in spite of the 
limits of using self-reports of ex-gang members to understand gang affiliation. Quoting 
liberally from the stories of the former gang members does not mean that this study is 
based on a blind faith that no former gang member would ever rearrange, omit, or
amplify events in his or her personal story or that the memory of every participant is perfect and unencumbered by a desire to tell a compelling story. But my review of the narratives offered by these young men (and four women) led me to conclude that few if any ex-gang members were engaging in rampant self-deceit or fabrication and my interaction with professionals confirmed this observation. By all accounts, the interviews convey real-life events passed through the lens of personal experience. This is, after all, sometimes the only access we have to such events. At the same time, by virtue of my having interviewed a wide variety of youth from three countries, all former members of the major and minor gangs, I was able to achieve general confidence that, in most cases—certainly in those selected and cited in this book—the participants shared openly and sincerely in ways no more prone to memory bias than the thousands of U.S. citizens surveyed for major data sets every year.

My goal here is not to construct an air-tight causal model that explains why any and all youth who join the transnational gangs do so while other youth do not. For that goal, a more comprehensive sample of gang youth with equal representation from several communities as well as a sizeable control group of non-joiners from the same communities would be in order. My interviews include only about a dozen former gang

13 I am not convinced by the arguments of the ethnographic positivists who insist that, from a methodological view, “If you didn’t see it happen, it didn’t happen.” While I appreciate the importance of collecting field notes through firsthand observation when possible, I disagree fundamentally with the notion that as a sociologist, my “birds-eye view” always provides a more insightful observation of “what happened” than that of the true participant whose immersion in the culture and the organization can sometimes more aptly sensitize her to what is really “happening.”

14 For a more complete discussion of methodological issues involved with qualitative data-gathering, see Appendix: Methodological Approach.
“sympathizers”—that is, youth who walked with the gang for a time, trying it out from the sidelines but without making a final commitment but who later decided not to join. Since these individuals can offer some insight into the reasons why otherwise “prime candidates” for the gang would choose not to join, I will quote from their narratives occasionally. Such interviews are helpful in that they provide us with an idea of the alternative paths that lead otherwise typical gang recruits away from the gang and toward other outcomes, but since these interviews with sympathizers are few in number they can only go so far.

A few studies have obtained much larger samples with large control groups, but some of these studies are hampered by other methodological problems such as the use of a written survey instrument among a population that is marginally literate (Rubio 2007) or the selection effect of interviewing only incarcerated gang members (Ranum 2007). In any case my goal in this chapter is not the causal explanation or formal completeness of a positivistic approach but rather what sociologist Andrew Abbot has called the “semantic” mode of explanation (Abbott 2004). In the semantic mode often preferred by scholars of culture, theorists seek to understand social phenomena not by measuring them but by translating observations from one set of phenomena into the explanatory realm of another in such a way that they become more understandable and more concise. Thus, I relate Pancho’s story and quote from many other former gang members, note patterns and exceptions in their narratives of joining the gang, and translate these narratives into the conceptual language of microsociology in such a way that violent, self-destructive actions
and life choices that appear shocking or outrageous on the surface become more comprehensible and “rational.”

A final note about my methods and the interviews quoted here. I have included notes about emotions carefully noted in transcription because I believe that examining the content of open-ended interviews about deeply personal matters in the past warrants paying attention to the fine-grained features of emotion in communication, not merely the words on the lips of participants (Charmaz 2000).

Theoretical Lenses: Microsociology and the Sociology of Emotions

The last chapter examined the emergence of the Central American transnational gangs as a social phenomenon. In this chapter the focus is on how and why youth choose to join the gang. These two questions—why the gangs emerged and why youth join them—are not always treated separately and the result is that many studies, especially in Central America, have concluded that youth join the gang due to macro-social ills such as poverty, weak school systems, or “family breakdown.” As the responses of ex-gang members in this study will show, it is certainly the case that many gang members come from impoverished families, dropped out of school early, or experienced domestic abuse or abandonment, and for this reason, I call these social characteristics “pre-disposing

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15 Some of the best, most widely-cited sociological studies of the 20th century, most notably the many classic works by Erving Goffman, simply employed the astute comparison of everyday behavior with concepts from another context such as theater or gambling. Such comparisons made possible abundant insights into human behavior hitherto ignored or misunderstood.
factors.” But to simply assume that poverty, bad schools, or abuse “drives youth into the
gang” is to adopt an oversocialized view of Central American gang members as wholly
subject to the social forces that shape them. There are many other ways to respond to
poverty than joining a violent gang. In fact, joining a gang is, in Central America, a first
step to sabotaging one’s future prospects. Similarly, when Pancho took the step of
placing a tattoo on his face, he severely undermined his potential for ever finding a job
and made himself an easy-to-spot target for the police and enemy gang members. There
is a logic here that escapes everyday common sense.

An alternative approach to understanding gang affiliation is to look for
psychological indicators, such as low self-esteem or a propensity to violent anger, that
characterize gang members. I did not subject ex-gang members to psychological tests that
could establish their own internal dynamics in the present much less at the time of
joining, but their reports of entering the gang made clear that anger and low self-esteem
were psychological traits common if not ubiquitous among joiners. But from a
sociological perspective, this approach is even less helpful because it fails to
acknowledge or investigate the social factors at the macro- and the meso-level that shape
the psychological terrain of the Central American youth who join the gang. This
perspective yields the impression that youth who join the gang do so because they
possess a particular set of innate psychological or psycho-social characteristics conducive
to gang life. What we need is a perspective that connects social contextual pressures with
individual-level experiences and responses.

One promising perspective for understanding the connection between macro-level
social forces and individual-level responses to these forces is that of the microsociology.
This relatively recent term describes an approach attempting to identify the mechanisms by which socialization and social control exert their influence in the concrete sphere of everyday life. The best-known advocates of this approach, which emphasizes the symbolic and interactive aspects of human emotions, are the theorists Randall Collins and Thomas Scheff. These theorists are at least as well-known for their work in other areas such as social psychology or the sociology of violence as they are within microsociology.

I use the lens of microsociology for two reasons. First, as Pancho’s account and others make clear, “becoming a homie” is a highly interactive process that takes place gradually over time. Central American youth join the gang not because they are “forced” into joining by poverty or unemployment nor do most gang youth simply “choose” to join after rationally weighing the costs and benefits. Rather, as Colombian sociologist Mauricio Rubio (Rubio 2007) argues, most youth join the gang through a “step-by-step process” over a period of several months or longer. During this process a child or a youth “tries on” the gang member identity by *caminando* (walking) alongside other gang members. Often they become gang “sympathizers,” engaging in gang-related delinquent acts, reflecting on that experience and the sentiments it conjured in them, and deciding whether to engage or affiliate further. To be sure, there are important events in the affiliation process, most notably the baptism and the acquisition of the first tattoo, but these points need to be understood as “key moments” rather than once-for-all actions on which the rest of the gang career rests. Furthermore, the symbolic interactionist aspect of microsociology offers a number of advantages for understanding an organization such as the gang which places a great deal of importance on the creation and maintenance of
group symbols. Tattoos, graffiti, dress, and hairstyle all play an enormous role in cultivating the solidarity of both the local cell and the transnational gang itself.

Even more important than the symbolic and interactive emphases of microsociology is its attention to human emotion. It is impossible to understand the nature of gang affiliation, or, for that matter, of disaffiliation, without paying attention to the emotions expressed and reported by the ex-gang members who recount their stories. This is especially true if we seek to understand not merely which social contextual factors characterize the lives of most gang joiners but how and why these factors contribute to that process. Both Collins and Scheff incorporate emotion as key to understanding how structures, through the process of interaction, come to shape individual action and choices. Furthermore, the sociology of emotions from which microsociology borrows heavily, provides a means of making sense of especially those actions and decisions, such as joining a violent gang, that elude everyday reason or common sense. By paying attention to emotions such as pride and shame, we can better understand gang entrance and how this process is shaped by poverty and domestic abuse.

There is one more reason I have chosen to incorporate microsociology’s emphasis on the sociology of emotions—deep emotions were present in many, many of the interviews with ex-gang members. Several ex-gang members wept when recounting their stories of joining the gang or of committing acts for which they were particularly ashamed while belonging to the gang. Even more recounted particularly emotional moments as life-altering or symbolic of a significant change. Thus, I became convinced that a theoretical lens that took emotion seriously was essential to understanding the trajectories of the individuals who told me their stories.
Beginning in the 1970s a number of contemporary social theorists began to more
directly address the role of emotions in human society. Traditionally, sociologists had
more-or-less ignored emotion in their conceptual schemes probably because the emotions
were too closely identified with the individual and the body (Turner and Stets 2005) and
sociology sought to avoid these topics as terrain more appropriate to psychology or
biology (Turner 1997). As a result of this avoidance, social theories tended to posit the
shaping influence of socio-cultural forces without specifying how or why individuals
might be subject to such forces. This was especially true in the case of cultural theory,
where it was assumed that “cultural norms” shaped individual action but little explanation
was given for why individuals might obey such norms. The actual source of an
individual’s motivation, either to follow a norm or to violate it, was a kind of “black box”
the contents of which social theorists had tacitly agreed not to examine. The sociology of
emotions emerged as an attempt to rectify this weakness by conceptualizing both the
experience and expression of human emotions as central to the shaping and motivating of
human action in society.

The early social psychologist Charles Horton Cooley observed that the self is a
product of social interaction in which the individual judges herself in the “looking glass”
of others’ assessments of her. But for Cooley, those judgments are not purely cognitive
but involve emotion. When we imagine our own appearance to others, we imagine a
judgment, and our imagination of this judgment produces “some sort of self-feeling, such
as pride or mortification” (Cooley 1902). In other words, peering into the “looking glass”
of others’ judgments about us is an emotion-laden process. This emotional character of
everyday interaction (and imagined interaction) is an aspect of interaction that George
Herbert Mead, the founding source of the school of thought known as symbolic interactionism, never explored. While Cooley addressed the role of emotion in the development of the self, his French contemporary, Emile Durkheim examined the role of emotion in rituals in *The Elementary Forms of Religion* (Durkheim 1995 [1903]). In his classic work, Durkheim highlighted the power of social and religious rituals in generating emotion, or “collective effervescence” that can be harnessed by communities and individuals for further action and to create solidarity. Later, Erving Goffman developed Durkheim’s observations into a dramaturgical approach using the metaphor of a theatrical stage and script to suggest that all human interaction, including everyday encounters, is guided by ritual and shaped by cultural rules for interaction. Following these rules leads to “successful” interaction and a positive emotional payoff for participants in the ritual (Goffman 1959). More importantly, Goffman argued that “failed” interaction leads to embarrassment, a negative emotion which all humans take great pains to avoid and to rectify.

As we will see, more recently, microsociologists such as Collins and Scheff, as well as sociologist of culture Arlie Hochschild, have built upon the work of Cooley, Durkheim, and Goffman advancing the study of emotions by highlighting the links between felt emotions and the social structures and cultural norms that shape them and are shaped by them. Their theoretical insights promise to enlighten our analysis of gang life, especially at the individual level.
Reviewing the Evidence: Factors Associated with Joining

My interviews usually began with a question about gang entrance such as, “Tell me how you came to belong to the gang.” The responses to this request varied greatly in both length and content but a number of patterns are visible in the stories of entering the gang. Most ex-gang members grew up in very difficult social contexts. For example, the overwhelming majority of the former gang members I interviewed reported growing up in poverty and in marginal neighborhoods—enough to make it clear that while poverty does not by itself drive youth into the gang, the experience of poverty plays an important role in the process of joining the gang. For this reason it is best to think of poverty as a social contextual feature that pre-disposes Central American youth to joining the gang. In addition to household poverty, I identify two additional social contextual factors pre-disposing youth to take an interest in the gang. They are family problems and educational difficulty. None of these contextual factors are “necessary” nor sufficient causes that drive youth into the gang but each appear with great regularity among the stories of the gang youth prior to joining and when two or three factors coincide in a single household, the chances of the youth joining the gang appear to increase greatly. In each sub-section I begin with Pancho’s account of his own pathway into the gang and follow this with excerpts from interviews with other gang members.

Interestingly, Pancho does not underscore or even directly mention poverty as a direct contributor to his decision to join the gang. But a close examination of his story shows that his upbringing was hardly one of privilege or even modest financial stability. He did not attend private schools and was shunted from one relative to another to be cared for. Furthermore, during early adolescence, Pancho reported being obliged to
“water the street” every afternoon to keep the dust down. This detail indicates that Pancho’s neighborhood did not have paved streets even though located in urban San Pedro. Though Pancho does not report ever going hungry, he spoke of admiring the gang members, who “went around with their money in their pockets.” Testimonies from other former gang members show a much deeper resentment tied to growing up in poverty. For example, Leonardo, a Honduran who belonged to the “South 16” gang remembers that after his parents separated when he was very young, his mother had difficulty finding work to support her four children. “My heart was full of hate,” he recalls:

> I wanted to escape all of that poverty and I couldn’t see any other way out. And I was young and had to watch my mother suffering like that. . . And sometimes I would watch other people that went around all well-dressed and everything and, well, I wanted to experience the same thing. . . That’s why I got involved in the gangs around the age of twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

Leonardo resents the “stain” of growing up poor in a class society. He saw the gang as an opportunity to escape the grinding poverty in which he was raised and experience a lifestyle with the means to purchase the accessories symbolic of full-fledged consumer. For a few youth, however, joining the gang was simply a matter of survival. These youth lacked adult caretakers and needed a source of provision. Saul left an abusive home at age twelve to live on the streets of Guatemala City. Soon afterward he met members of the MS-13 gang. “They picked me up and helped me,” he said. “They gave me a place to stay, clothing and shoes.” Ernesto remembered encountering a similar ethic of sharing when he joined the gang. Asked how he came to join the gang he reported:
I started entering the gang *(fui entrando)* because I was looking—how do I say it—I was looking for what I couldn’t find in my home. . . They treated me well and whenever they got ahold of money, they would share it with me, half-and-half. So that’s what I liked, that whole movement.

These testimonies and others show that poverty, both in absolute terms and as relative deprivation is an important factor pre-disposing children and youth to consider the gang as a possible means not only to survive but to achieve the consumer lifestyle so important to urban Central Americans seeking to distinguish themselves from the impoverished masses.

By far the most common negative social contextual factor mentioned by the ex-gang members interviewed for this study was that of family problems. Time and again the young adults looked back with sadness and anger at a lost childhood filled with the pain of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Pancho reported that his mother left him in the care of his grandmother and prohibited his father from visiting him until Pancho was six or seven. His voice cracked as he struggled to hold back the emotion when recalling the special days dedicated to the family at his school. In the traditionalist societies of Central America, such days carry enormous symbolic weight. Children receive gifts on Día del Niño, parents who have jobs in the formal economy are given the day off on Día del Padre and Día de la Madre and none of these days are “programmed” to land on a weekend, for what is the point of a “holiday” that always lands on a weekend? Thus it is common for children to be visited on Father’s Day and Mother’s Day as well as the Day of the Child. Whatever its complex status in everyday reality, the idea of the family continues to be held aloft as a sacred institution and blood relations are deeply revered. Thus, the absence of a mother or a father, or the marginal presence of an uncaring one in
these family-oriented societies is especially devastating to children since it is felt as “relative deprivation” of a cultural nature. Furthermore, when the veracity of blood relations are thrown into question, the results can be devastating. Camilo, a former member of the M-18 from the North coast of Honduras, was raised by his grandparents. When his grandfather died, he went to live with his parents—or so he thought. As his sixth grade graduation approached, he asked his mother for money to buy graduation pictures, but she refused to give him any:

She told me that she was not my mother. At that moment a dog was passing by on the street and she said ‘No, that’s your mother. Look.’ That word marked my life. What word?

Saying that she was not my mother, that my mother was a dog. [She said] they weren’t my parents and I should stop bothering them. . . That left a mark on my heart because afterward I went to my dad to ask for money and he told me to work for it myself. All this affected my life. I remember that a week later I left for San Pedro.

A few months later, Camilo, at thirteen years of age, was living on the streets of San Pedro, owned a pistol, and belonged to the M-18.

Many of the youth recalled experiencing abuse at the hands of family members. Pancho recalled receiving both verbal and physical abuse from two different uncles, one at his grandmother’s home and another at the home of his aunt in San Pedro. Vera, an attractive young Guatemalan who spent several years in the late 1990s as a member of Los Chacales (The Jackals) in Guatemala City’s rough El Milagro neighborhood reported that poverty had nothing to do with her decision to join the gang. Her father, now deceased, had owned a store and a pick-up truck and the family lived in a decent home.
When I asked her why youth continue to join gangs based on her experience, she reported that neglect and abuse were instrumental in convincing her to leave home and join the gang. Tired of being locked inside her home everyday while her mother and father worked from dawn to dusk, Vera escaped by a window and was sitting on the curb when her father returned from work.

I had long hair at the time. He grabbed my hair in his hand, dragged me into the house and there gave me a kick so hard in my mid-section that I doubled over and fell on my knees. So it’s the beatings that you get that oblige you to leave your home. Because if I’m going to suffer here, I might as well suffer in the street. On the street I don’t have to let them and I have friends who can defend me.

While domestic abuse caused some youth to seek protection in the gang, others saw in the gang a means of seeking vengeance for violence experienced at the hands of a family member. Ismael, a Guatemalan member of a local gang stated: “I remember when I was seven I would watch my father arrive in a state of inebriation to beat my mother. That was very sad and painful for me. I didn’t have any way to defend her and I started to feel the need to have, to belong to a gang in order to get help from my companions in the gang in order to kill my father.” Although Ismael never followed through with his plan, he stole a pistol shortly after joining the gang and felt better at least for having the power to kill his father if he so chose. Emerson’s memory of anger at abuse was similar:

When I was fifteen or sixteen I was still calm (tranquilo) you know. I did my studies and all. But you know in my case there was a lot of alcoholism and the truth is my dad drank. Not every day but when he would drink he would arrive home to do things to my mom, to hit her and to hit us and everything. I suppose that sounds like an excuse that somebody clings to you know? Like, “It’s just that my dad drank!” or this or that. But something always stays with you, a scar you know, in your mind and all. I didn’t like to see my dad hit my mom. I had to hold him back so that he wouldn’t do anything while my mom would escape running
and soon enough he would turn and take it out on me for getting in the way, you know?

The experience of domestic abuse, even more than poverty, leaves a “scar that stays with you.” But other family problems are equally traumatic. A disproportionate number of gang members grew up removed from both parents. Part of the reason for such parental absence must be attributed to the increase in migration among the urban poor. Although exact numbers reporting the increase in emigration of Central Americans are difficult to find, data abounds regarding a general increase in the rate of migratory flows northward in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Undocumented migration from Mexico and Central America appears to have reached its peak around 2000 (Passel 2004). Perhaps even more important than the overall increase in migration is what a number of scholars have come to call the “feminization of migration” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Globalization patterns have eroded the traditional industrial and agricultural employment opportunities in the “middle countries” of the developing world such as Mexico and Central America, while a new class of global financiers has developed in “global cities” of the North. More and more upper-middle class women have entered the professional workplace and few men have bothered to alter their work or career patterns to compensate, thus creating a “care deficit” in the private realm that has increasingly been addressed through the influx of “global women” who migrate in order to send remittances to address the increasingly precarious finances of their own homes. This care deficit has generated increasing demand for domestic and cleaning work in the homes, daycare
centers, and elder homes of the industrialized world (Sassen 2003). Central American mothers, like millions of their counterparts around the world find themselves saddled with the Herculean task of providing both nurture and income—from afar. Not surprisingly, many of the youth left behind in the care of grandparents, aunts, uncles, or even siblings, have difficulty coming to grips with their parents’ decision to migrate. Lacho, fifteen years old and already struggling with alcohol and drugs in the Guatemalan barrio remembered the day he learned of his mother’s departure:

I was in early high school and I was having problems getting through it. I had a problem. My mother, well, she left for the United States and that affected me greatly. She didn’t tell us anything. She just left a piece of paper, a letter with a neighbor and she left for the U.S. and that affected me greatly. That she would leave, that she would just take off. After that there was no one to tell me anything.

Lacho reported that his criminal career took off after this experience. Tomàs, a Salvadoran member of the M-18 reported that his mother had left for Los Angeles in the mid-1980s when he was two months old. “I lived with my uncle and aunt in El Salvador. The home was a crazy place. There was no such thing as mutual respect.” Where was his father, I wondered? His answer was curt. “I don’t like to talk about my father,” he said. “I’ve seen him twice in my whole life.”

Lachi was more understanding of her mother’s decision to leave.

My mom went undocumented to the United States [de mojada] but what she wanted was for us to live better. We were very poor but I was very young. I was

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16 Although men still outnumber women among Central American emigrants, this is only due to an enormous increase in male emigrants that has kept ahead of the increasing migration among women.
six. When she left, she left us in the care of my brother. He was barely thirteen or fourteen. We stayed in the house. We went about raising ourselves with his help. Later an aunt took us in, my sister, and brother and me, the youngest. And then we started to feel afraid because the husband of my aunt wanted to abuse us, my sister and me. He was always harassing us in those days. Time went by but we looked out for each other, always. Later, the gangs hit and we started to feel their presence.

Leti left her aunt’s home at fifteen to live with an abusive boyfriend but shortly thereafter, a friend invited her to join her in a gang cell called Torres 13, a decision she made gladly in order to escape the abuse of her boyfriend. The stories of Lacho, Tomás, and Leti all demonstrate the added social strain placed on families in which a parent, especially a mother, an ancient ideal in macho Central American society, sets out for el Norte. Of course, not all children of migrating mothers join gangs or experience tragedy as a result of their mother’s absence. Some are fortunate enough to experience strong support from an extended family network and perhaps benefit as well from the financial boost provided by their parents’ remittances. But the stories of children feeling abandoned and of experiencing abuse at the hands of family members or in-laws incapable or unmotivated to care for them make the impact of migration impossible to ignore. For in Central America, where the family has for generations provided the most important, and sometimes the only social safety net for children living in impoverished conditions at the urban margins, the absence of one or both parents is an important social factor pre-disposing the already disadvantaged children of the barrio to seek safety, provision and belonging on the street.

Lastly, Pancho’s account of his gang entrance reveals one more important pre-disposing factor present in many of the lives of those joining the gang—difficulty in
school. Like many of the other ex-gang members I interviewed, Pancho reported never fitting in quite right in his school. Ashamed by the lack of visitors on special days, he decided early on that school was not for him and thus never finished his primary education. Similarly, Ricardo, a Honduran former gang leader recalled that his difficulties in the school system began early. “I was in first grade when they expelled me for being violent,” he said. “A boy was hitting me, picking on me, and I went and grabbed a broom stick and broke it over his arm, his left arm. So in first grade they expelled me for being violent.”

Ricardo, who grew up in a traditional, two-parent home, blamed his violent tendencies as a child on the neighborhood where he lived, claiming that the abundance of market vendors created an atmosphere of hectic distrust among neighbors. Whatever the reason, his propensity to fight was soon catalyzed by the traditionalist authoritarian approach to discipline he encountered in the classroom.

Once [in the third grade] I threw a piece of paper on the floor in the hallway and [the teacher] came up and said, ‘Ricardo, come here and pick up that piece of paper. Open your mouth.’ I opened my mouth but when I looked I realized she was going to stick the paper in my mouth, the one I’d dropped. So I pushed her hand away like this [makes a motion] and I went running out the door. After that, I never went back.

Dropping out of school compounds the problems of poverty and elevates the attraction of the gang because it provides children and adolescents with a surplus of “free time” and virtually eliminates the already meager possibility of someday gaining a job in the formal sector. Furthermore, dropping out of school greatly enhances the possibility that a child will build friendships with children of the same age as well as older
adolescents who have also abandoned traditional pathways to adulthood and employment. Some, though not all, of these grade school drop-outs, join the gang.

Pancho’s account of “becoming a gang member” as well as excerpts from many others, reveals the commonality among ex-gang members of a variety of negative social experiences early in life. Poverty, family problems, and dropping out of school can be conceptualized as “pre-disposing factors” causing children in the barrio to be especially at risk for joining the gang. Of course, the short list of factors provided here is hardly exhaustive. Combing through the dozens of accounts of joining the gang would generate other commonalities less prominent but still shared across numerous stories of entrance. But the factors reviewed here were by far the most frequently cited in the narratives of joining the gang.

Shame: The “Scar That Stays with You”

Quoting the responses offered by the former gang members themselves is only part of the task of understanding gang affiliation. We are still left with the question: What is it about the experience of poverty, family problems, or school difficulties that “pre-disposes” youth to consider joining the gang? It is not enough to point out, as some Central American gang analysts do, that youth who are poor and have little formal education are attracted to the gang for its offer of economic support via non-legal means (Sibaja et al. 2006b). That purely Marxian, essentially rationalistic explanation seems too simplistic after listening to Pancho’s first-hand account. Nor is it enough to point out that Central American youth who experience severe abuse or abandonment at home seek an
alternative family in the gang experience. The observation is certainly true but it only gets us so far. It fails to adequately address the root cause of this search for solidarity—one so desperate that it can bring youth to both commit and undergo extreme acts of violence on the way to becoming a homie.

In addition to the search for survival and community, the reports from ex-gang members of experiencing poverty, family problems, and difficulty in school share a common element—the experience of shame. Let us return to Pancho’s account of his early childhood experiences, an account delivered in response to my question, “Tell me the story of how you came to be involved in the gang?” Pancho begins by making it clear that he never “intended” to be a gang member, at least not as a young child. From there he immediately recounts being abandoned by his mother who “became ashamed of me and left me by myself.” Although Pancho uses the term “suffering” to describe his early experiences of abandonment, abuse, and the loss of his father, it is clear that shame is at the heart of this suffering. He uses the term “stigma” three times, sometimes slightly mispronouncing the term as extigma, in order to describe both the experience of abandonment by his mother, abuse from other relatives, and the death of his father. That Pancho is in fact describing a first-hand experience of shame seems clear among other things from the fact that at multiple points in the interview, always when describing his family experience, he finds himself weeping or pausing in order to control his emotion. Even today Pancho has trouble coming to grips with the pain of being singled out for abandonment by his mother—his siblings were not similarly abandoned. “Maybe I was the ugliest of my mother’s children, I don’t know, but she was embarrassed by me,” he recalls.
Pancho’s experience of shame at being abandoned or abused is hardly unique in the interviews. Camilo’s experience of being disowned by his mother—of being called, quite literally, a son of a bitch, in his own words, “marked my life.” Later in the interview, he returned to the theme of family: “I remember watching parents with their children and it was hard to see them there together when you know you can’t have that, [begins to weep] when you know you’ll never have that opportunity.” Similarly, the experience of poverty generated a feeling of shame in the lives of many youth who later joined the gang. It was not so much the experience of going without that was prominent in the interviews—indeed, actual malnourishment among children is relatively uncommon among children in urban Central America. Instead, it was the feeling of belonging to an invisible underclass that characterized the frustration of growing up poor. “I was young and had to watch my mother suffering [in poverty],” remembered Leonardo. Even difficulties in school are expressed as experiences of shame as in Jose Antonio’s story of the teacher attempting to stuff a wad of paper into his mouth. The experience of being shamed in public was enough to drive Jose Antonio from school for good. Once outside the school system, he experienced further shaming from his father who put him to work in view of his “incorrigible” character.

I must emphasize that by pointing to the role of shame in the lives of gang members prior to affiliation, I am by no means trying to exonerate the youth from their participation in gang violence later on by painting them as mere victims of psycho-social trauma. Rather, I am trying to identify what it is about early experiences of poverty and family and school problems that allows or prepares these youth to see the gang as a viable option. That is, I am trying to go one step further in revealing the actual links between
micro-behavior and macro-structures. The payoff for doing so will be clearer later in this chapter as I attempt to show the connection between the “push” and “pull” factors associated with joining the gang. But identifying the role of shame will be even more useful in later chapters as well, when we examine the process of “un-becoming” a gang member and how evangelical religion often contributes to that process.

Thomas Scheff, in his book *Microsociology: Discourse, Emotion, and Social Structure* develops the concept of the “social bond” in order to explain and specify the mechanism by which social ties gain leverage over human behavior. When the social bond is intact, participants in a relationship (however fleeting it may be) feel pride. When the social bond is broken or damaged, participants feel a sense of shame. Mild shame is a normal part of human interaction and plays a necessary role in conscience, modesty, and remorse. When shame is brought to the attention of the other, it can be dealt with or “discharged” and the sense of pride restored. But when the damaged social bond is not addressed, for example when one member is at a severe power disadvantage, shame is often bypassed, resulting in what Scheff calls a “spiral of shame.” This shame spiral describes well the process set off by the experience of domestic abuse and especially abandonment. But it also extends to experiences of public shaming by a person of authority such as a teacher. In relationships in which one member holds considerable power, as in the case of a parent over her child, or a teacher over his student, an abused or abandoned child has little recourse for confronting the other. Scheff argues that persons suffering from what psychologists call “low self-esteem” are those who have experienced shame and are unable to manage or discharge it. These individuals therefore suffer from “chronic” or “pathological” shame. Such persons are unable to access the energy
necessary for expressive action and thus they “will do anything to avoid pain” (Scheff’ 1991). In the next section I propose that what makes the gang most attractive to youth who experience pathological shame is its offer of a set of strategies for masking shame and accessing pride, albeit temporarily, through rituals of solidarity, violence, and sex.

Attraction

So far I have examined those negative contextual factors in Pancho’s life and many other pre-gang youth that “push” them toward the gang. Pre-disposing factors provide the conditions that make many youth of the barrio susceptible to the gang recruiters. Durkheimian functionalists might call these the “anomic” factors that explain social deviance among those who experience firsthand the chaos of social change. I have tried to specify more exactly how these negative social factors are experienced by barrio youth, especially boys, as shame and how such experiences of shame can result in a shame spiral. But what about the gang makes it attractive to barrio youth? After all, Pancho’s account makes it clear that he was not obliged to join the gang against his will. Nor did he simply weigh the costs and benefits of joining versus not joining and then proceed rationally. Rather, he began learning about the gang and “walking with” gang members because it “felt good.” What is it then, about the gang that attracts youth experiencing rejection and marginalization? Although a few ex-gang members emphasized the gang as a mode of survival, most, like Pancho, spoke of the allure presented by the gang with its symbols, its rituals, its camaraderie, and its pastimes. Any examination of gang entrance then, needs to take account not only the “push” of pre-
disposing factors creating a situation of uncertainty and suffering in the lives of the gang joiners, but also the “pull” factors that make the gang such an attractive option for the same youth. For example, Pancho remembered that at the age of ten or eleven, by which time he had already dropped out of school, he began to notice the gangs and their “hobby: ”

They would walk around bien cholos [in the baggy Mexican style] with their money in their pockets, getting the attention of the best girls of the neighborhood. I watched all of this, this hobby of theirs you know. I wanted to arrive where they were but I didn’t know how. I saw that they had it nice compared to me. Original you know?

What was it about the gang that so impressed the 10-year-old Pancho? I believe it was the youths’ exhibition of shame’s opposite—pride. Pancho watched as the young boys and men flaunted their freedom, making their presence known through “original” clothing, tattoos, speech and violence even as they engaged in “adult” pastimes such as drinking, taking drugs, and engaging in frequent sex. The quotations in the following section focus on three of the most commonly-cited features of attraction in my interviews. These could be categorized under the broad categories of solidarity, violence, and sex.

Many youth spoke of the sense of solidarity experienced within the gang—at least in the early stages. For example, Saul remembered that the gang provided him with clothing and shoes in his early days after he had left his family for the street. But solidarity is more than simply a means of meeting one’s needs. The experience of solidarity produces a feeling. Melchor, a Honduran former gang member remembered how being a part of the gang made him *feel strong:*
What gets your attention most is the idea of the companionship of everyone. If one [person] has a problem, maybe you have some enemies in another area and you can’t go there. Just being with the gang makes you feel stronger. So you lose your fear and you feel like you’ve got others around. You go out stronger, ready to fight with everybody else.

Just being together with other peers who seek companionship makes the gang attractive. But the gang offers more than this “co-presence.” Gang cells build strong identities through interaction with neighboring cells. Nestor, a former member of the Guatemalan White Fence remembered,

[The gang] offered to bring me in, to integrate me into the gang so that whatever problem I might have, they would help me. They offered to help, you know, whenever I might have a problem.

What kind of help and what kind of problems?

Help in the sense that, help with problems that I might have with other guys that might do something, beat me up or threaten me. So the help they offered was to help me defend myself or to go do something to [the other guys].

As Nestor’s comments illustrate, solidarity can be fashioned through conflict. While there is a sense of camaraderie built around simply spending time together, the excitement and mutual focus generated by the experience of confrontation with a common enemy adds an even greater emotional thrill. Indeed, Nestor’s description of the gang’s “offer” of membership sounds like a petition for enemies. “Join us!” the gang seems to say, “and bring your list of enemies.” For when each new gang member brings with them a set of enemies, additional opportunities emerge for confrontation and the building of in-group solidarity. To the child or youth who has experienced rejection at home and in school, the possibility of being a part of a unified group of peers ready to
back each other up in a conflict must appear as a unique opportunity to escape the shame spiral.

Another key aspect of the experience of solidarity is the cultivation of symbols via embodied identity markers including clothing and tattoos. Pancho reported that seeing the tattoo of the young sympathizer was an important component of his early curiosity with and attraction to the gang. The baggy clothing of the *cholo* style also attracted him. Many local gangs have their own clothing and hairstyle parameters although these often overlap. Members of cells belonging to the M-18 tend to keep their hair very short and prefer baggy clothing representative of the Mexican-American oppositional subculture that emerged in the mid-20th century in the U.S. Southwest. Rosaries and the Virgin of Guadalupe appear in many M-18 murals and tattoos, (often right next to images of sexualized women). Such markers set off members and provide youth with a strengthened sense of self through identification with a recognizable local group. Oscar, a former leader in the Honduran M-18 attributed his own entrance to the gang to the arrival of an uncle, an ex-gang member who was deported from Los Angeles. Although Oscar’s parents sent generous remittances to pay for private schooling, he hated school and remembered watching his uncle with fascination. He used the present tense when describing the experience of observing his uncle’s body and his way of carrying himself. “I start to watch him, tattooed and with a great muscle-bound body. I start to admire the way he walks, his way of changing clothes, his manner of speech.” Soon afterward, Oscar’s uncle was killed by members of the rival MS-13. Angry and in search of revenge, Oscar joined the M-18 gang to which his uncle had formerly belonged. Although Oscar emphasized the death of his uncle as instrumental in his decision to join the gang, his
account revealed the extent to which the gang manner—a way of dressing, walking, and talking built on the self-confidence of strength-in-numbers—attracts the attention of youth who feel isolated and vulnerable. Several ex-gang members remembered being attracted by the possibility of learning the insider vocabulary employed by gang members. Table 2.1 shows a sampling of some of these terms and their meaning.
### TABLE 2.1

**A SAMPLING OF GANG VOCABULARY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Translation/origin</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jomi</td>
<td>Homie/homeboy</td>
<td>gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carnal</td>
<td>probably related to <em>primo carnal</em> or “first cousin”</td>
<td>blood brother or close friend in the gang; sometimes used interchangeably with jomi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clicka</td>
<td>clique</td>
<td>local cell of a transnational gang composed of 15-75 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maje</td>
<td>clique</td>
<td>dude (can be masculine or feminine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ranfla</td>
<td>the local cell or <em>clicka</em>; sometimes refers to gang activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ranflero</td>
<td>ranfla</td>
<td>A local or regional leader of one or several gang cells; many <em>ranfleros</em> are currently incarcerated; also called <em>el mashin</em> (machine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letras</td>
<td>letters</td>
<td>referring to the <em>Mara Salvatrucha</em>, represented by the letters “MS”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>números</td>
<td>numbers</td>
<td>referring to the Eighteenth Street gang, represented by the numbers “18”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vivo</td>
<td>alive</td>
<td>“on the ball”; smart, driven, ready for anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crazy</td>
<td>crazy</td>
<td>name or title given to the most daring local gang member; usually this title is reserved for <em>ranfleros</em> and sometimes distinguished from others as in “Crazy Little” or “Crazy II”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clecha</td>
<td>from the Calo word for school or grade</td>
<td>Rules, code, or vision; sometimes associated with tattoos, as a kind of military badge of honor that must be earned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la nueva clecha</td>
<td>the new code</td>
<td>The new environment brought about with the breaking of the &quot;Pacto Sur&quot; or Southern peace treaty that had formerly held for all MS-13 and M-18 interaction in non-disputed public territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>placas</td>
<td>license plates</td>
<td>tattoos; sometimes used as a verb, as in “Me plaquéé.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jaina</td>
<td>perhaps related to gyn-a</td>
<td>female gang member or sympathizer; sometimes used to refer to young women in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paisa</td>
<td>from “paisano” or countryman</td>
<td>Youth who does not belong to a gang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peseta (Honduras)</td>
<td>(Spanish currency)</td>
<td>gang deserter or traitor; most serious when tattoos are crossed out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cuadros</td>
<td>squares</td>
<td>permission to leave the gang and settle down without repercussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cohete</td>
<td>Rocket/firecracker</td>
<td>pistol or gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sortear</td>
<td>to gamble</td>
<td>to shake down or rob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chavalear</td>
<td>from <em>chava</em> or girl</td>
<td>to back down or back out “like a girl”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>livar</td>
<td>live</td>
<td>to drink, have a good time and “live it up”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 2.1 (CONTD.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Translation/origin</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rifar</td>
<td>to gamble</td>
<td>to risk, gamble or hazard one’s safety for the gang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tirar barrio</td>
<td>to “throw” the neighborhood (symbol)</td>
<td>to make the sign of the gang using special hand signals; a sign of camaraderie when done among fellow members but a first-class offense when done “outside” the gang's own territory or in disputed territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chequeo</td>
<td>checking</td>
<td>time of checking out during which sympathizers are observed for their worthiness of membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luz verde</td>
<td>green light</td>
<td>a “go-ahead” sometimes issued as a release from the gang; often issued as a death warrant, granting permission for a kill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luz rojo</td>
<td>red light</td>
<td>a “stop” sometimes meant to stop gang members from killing, but most often issued as a death warrant to “stop” a deserter or traitor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another attractive feature of gang life is violence in a variety of forms. On the one hand, a good deal of gang violence is strategic and economically-motivated. Selling drugs, robbing residents of neighboring communities and extorting taxi and bus drivers as well as members of one’s own community are all violent activities that provide the gang with resources for buying “original” clothing such as Domba athletic shoes and gold chains. It also allows them to purchase recreational drugs and alcohol. In other words, such strategic violence makes possible the display of some of the accoutrements of a consumer society otherwise unavailable to impoverished barrio youth. In this sense even strategic violence offers a partial escape from the shame associated with the grinding poverty of the barrio.

But not all of the violence practiced by the gang members is strategic or economically motivated. In the act of violence, gang members deepen their shared
identity as a “band of brothers” and prove their worth and belonging individually. The brinco or “jumping-in,” also called a bautismo (baptism), provides one of the most important moments in both the life of the individual gang member and an exciting ritual for the group as a whole. Examining the emotional underpinnings of this practice through the lens of microsociology helps make sense of the ritual and of the attractive nature of other forms of violence in the gang.

Sociologists at least since Durkheim (Durkheim 1995 [1903]) have underscored the importance of rituals in promoting solidarity and a sense of pride among participants. But more recently Randall Collins, a sociologist of emotion, has attempted to show exactly how it is that rituals generate connection and belonging for individual participants and what is the impact of a ritual at the individual level (Collins 2004). Collins appropriates Durkheim’s concept of “effervescence” renaming it “emotional energy” in order to communicate the emotional impact of social interaction on the individual. He defines emotional energy as “a feeling of confidence,” and “courage to take action” (2004:39), and argues that individuals with high levels of emotional energy feel pride while those who have very low emotional energy usually experience some form of shame. Emotional energy is not innate or constant but is rather enhanced or eroded in the “transformer” of social interaction. Just as in Cooley’s “looking glass self,” which experiences a “feeling of pride or mortification” when judging others’ assessment of one’s performance, Collins argues that successful interaction, that is, interaction in which participants “play by the rules,” charges up the emotional energy of participants. Failed interaction or interaction in which some actors are humiliated at the expense of others saps the emotional energy of the victims in what Goffman called “embarrassment” and
Scheff terms shame. Since rituals are “chained” over time, individuals carry the emotional energy generated or eroded from past encounters into new situations. Those that experience embarrassment or shame repeatedly over a period of time eventually become depressed or experience low self-esteem. This experience of low emotional energy is what Scheff refers to as “chronic shame.” Such low levels of emotional energy characterize impoverished youth experiencing abandonment or abuse at home or at school. On the other hand high levels of emotional energy produce enormous self-confidence and a sense of personal efficacy. Rituals then, especially the interaction rituals of normal, healthy everyday relations between parents and children, between siblings or among companions at school, produce long-term patterns of emotional energy. Rejection and abandonment drain emotional energy and can lead to the depression or chronic low self-esteem of a shame spiral. In effect, Collins conceptualizes a resource held individually and communally, the absence of which is characterized by shame and the abundance of which can be described as pride or self-confidence. Interaction ritual chains are the mechanism by which pride and shame are generated.

How does emotional energy relate to the baptism? The baptism offers an attractive opportunity to access emotional energy and feel pride by proving one’s ability to “take heat” for the gang. Having already undergone a months-long process of chequeo as a sympathizer, Pancho was given his opportunity to demonstrate his ultimate loyalty to the gang by undergoing violence in the midst of a group of dozens of peers. Pancho’s description of his own baptism reveals the depth of his own excitement during the process. Although he, like many others, described the beating as physically agonizing, the payoff in emotional energy is clear. “The beating didn’t matter to me [because] I could
call myself a gang member. . . I said to myself, “The blows are nothing—I’m a pandillero now!”’” In a sense, Pancho sacrificed his physical well-being in order to experience the solidarity and emotional energy of being a pandillero. The gang cell benefited by the excitement offered in observing an act of violence. The bautizo allowed Pancho to begin to overcome, at least for a time, the shame of having been rejected by his mother and beaten by his relatives. And becoming a full-fledged pandillero meant that he could at last access the el respeto (respect) that had so far eluded him.

Although almost all of those interviewed reported having undergone a baptism, only a few described the event with as much detail as Pancho. Nor was there any general agreement as to the specific parameters of the ritual. Most reported that the baptism lasted thirteen or eighteen “seconds” and that the seconds were counted out slowly by the leader. A few, like Pancho, reported that the rules are recited during the physical beating, although it is difficult to imagine how this takes place. One gang member even reported that the brinco lasts thirteen or eighteen minutes for the MS-13 and M-18 gangs respectively. Such discrepancies are probably indicative of the level of variation from one cell to the next. What is certain is that initiation rites involve violence and that the interactive ritual allows access to pride, el respeto, thus providing at least a temporary reprieve from the shame spiral.

Not only the baptism but crime itself is a ritual means of escaping the shame spiral and accessing emotional energy. The opportunity to witness and participate in criminal violence further enhances the attractive nature of the gang for barrio youth experiencing shame. Other research has acknowledged the attractive nature of crime and violence to youth although without addressing the language of emotions per se. In his
book, *Seductions of Crime* Jack Katz noted that crime itself can be attractive because it provides people with a sense of “thrill” and agency (Katz 1988). Breaking the law allows delinquent youth to feel powerful (Matza 1964). Here the resemblance to Collins’s “emotional energy” is clear. For youth frustrated by situations of vulnerability and impotence, the emotional high of committing a crime, especially a violent one that abruptly subjects another to one’s own whim is all the more enticing. Pancho’s description of the “hit” preceding the tattooing of his face is a good example of violence as a means of “making something happen.” Although he does not detail the actual nature or impact of the “mission,” the payoff to the perpetrators is obvious and made even more potent through the self-inflicted “violence” of the facial tattoos. “We had more respect with the gang you know. We were now leaders in the sector. . .” Scheff describes violence as a form of “bypassing” shame, especially among males who, in most cultures, are taught to avoid affective attachment: “One ingredient of violence, its incredible energy, is produced by masking shame with blankness or anger” (Scheff 2004). Violent crime offers a temporary escape from chronic shame in part because it is an interactive encounter that humiliates the other, subjecting her or him to the power and whim of the offender. JJ “dedicated himself” to carjacking even though he couldn’t drive and had to enlist the help of a nephew to drive the stolen vehicles. “I liked to take people’s cars because I liked to watch their faces fill with fear. I liked to humiliate people because people had humiliated me so much. I was trying to get rid of all that (desquitar toda esa).” JJ was trying desperately to discharge his own shame and he found in violence a means of experiencing the “thrill” of emotional energy.
Not just overt violence but weapons themselves also provide access to emotional energy. When small arms began to circulate more freely in the 1990s, gangs with access to these weapons became even more attractive to youth experiencing the powerlessness of shame. Where formal firearms were not available, homemade pistols called *chimbas* or *hechizas* [home-made’s] were crafted out of steel tubing in local weld shops. I asked Emerson, formerly of the Guatemalan cell “SPL-18,” an M-18 cell whose initials stand for “Only For the Crazy” what it felt like when his all-male gang was presented with a .38 special and three *hechizas* provided by the Eighteenth street liason. “Aaaaay!” he exclaimed recalling the feeling. “When we had—just the .38 we felt like we were the greatest in the neighborhood. Just with the .38’s. Because the [enemies] had pistols but only a .22 and some *hechizas.*”

Similarly, Calin’s description of life after his initiation reveals the connection between carrying weapons and an invincible feeling of masculine power.

Being in the gang I felt was a man’s thing (*cosa de hombres*). I started to feel untouchable, like I believed I was bigger than God already. I used to say that being in the gang, nobody could touch me, nobody had the right to tell me anything. I remember that many times I carried automatic weapons, aka’s [AK-47’s], Mini-Uzzi’s, M-16’s, M-14’s, 9 mm’s, .38’s—all kinds of weapons the majority at the age of 14. And on January 5th or 6th of 2000, I tattooed the number [18] on my chest.

Although it is doubtful that Calin, at fourteen, actually owned the automatic weapons he describes, it is not uncommon for the younger members of the gang to carry major weapons from time to time. In fact, some gang leaders, recognizing the fascination with guns among young males in the barrio, use the weapons as recruiting devices. Gustavo, a Guatemalan youth who had belonged to the M-18 remembered:
I started junior high at the public school in the neighborhood of Belen. That’s when I started to meet members from the other side and hang out with them. I even got to meet the leader of that gang. Then they started lending me their weapons. First a 12-gauge, then a .22, then a .38. This started to make me curious so I asked them to show me how to use them and they took me to a firing range.

Gustavo did not fire the weapons at first. But merely handling them was an incentive for becoming more involved in the gang. Meanwhile gang leaders, mindful that they are often under scrutiny by local police, are often glad to dole out both the responsibility to carry weapons and to use them, to the youngest recruits, who see in the guns an opportunity to prove their mettle and earn more “respect.” This was the case for JJ, who “proved” himself as a nine-year-old by robbing a store with a handgun lent to him by the gang. Later, JJ described the emotional high from a particular instance in which he fired the gun to commit a crime in another city:

I went to my mother’s house, washed my face, changed clothes and went racing back to the capital and I told the homies, “Now I’m a real man, I just [describes the crime] with this [referring to gun]. And anyone who gets mixed up with me is going to meet with this mother. That weapon had been my, like my God.

Finally, in addition to violent initiation rites, crime, and the aura of weapons, drug and alcohol abuse, a form of violence directed at the self, also make the gang lifestyle attractive to many. Over and over the ex-gang members spoke of drugs as an important feature of the gang that garners both the curiosity and the longevity of barrio youth. A simple word search on “drugs” [droga/s] among the interview transcripts produced 492 hits. Melchor described it this way, “What [kids] like the most [about the gang] is to be crazy, to get high, to do what you want.” Why is access to drugs and alcohol such an attractive feature of the gang? First, substance abuse offers an immediate escape in the
form of a high that dulls the pain of having been rejected or marginalized. Several youth reported using drugs, especially chemical glue in order to escape the pain of an abusive home. Second, drug and alcohol abuse, understood to be “grown-up behavior,” are a means for adolescents and pre-adolescents to feel like adults. Pancho remembered that smoking dope made him “feel like a man.” Last, drinking and taking illegal drugs allow gang members to assert their independence by breaking cultural taboos. “Doing your own thing” means demonstrating one’s independence in the face of cultural norms. In addition to the “chemical” high produced by the narcotic itself, barrio youth experience an emotional high from asserting their independence through risky “adult” behavior while building solidarity through participating in a corporate ritual.

Solidarity and violence, including substance abuse, important though they are as “pull” factors making the gang attractive, do not tell the whole story. A third factor attracts especially young boys—sex. The Colombian scholar, Mauricio Rubio observes that access to sex and girls is an often-overlooked feature of gang life perhaps because it does not fit the Marxian paradigm interpreting the gang as a means of economic survival (Rubio 2007). Pancho remembered watching with awe as the gang members attracted the attention of the “best girls” of his neighborhood. The same impression was shared widely among the youth who cited sex as instrumental in their early fascination with the gang. Osvaldo, a former Honduran leader of the MS-13 remembered his own experience:

The truth is, when you enter the gang you’re young, a kid, you don’t reason well. . . . It’s a flock, a hobby right? At first it’s all, “Look at all the nice women!” you know, “. . . drugs, alcohol.” . . . There are times when women [have sex with] three, four, five six, even sometimes the whole gang. That was their thing. So when I joined the gang I saw all of this as really nice.
Osvaldo reported that gang leaders would “use” women as a recruiting tool in order to attract young boys to their cell before they joined an opposing cell. Young joiners were allowed to “choose” among three or four “available” female partners. Gangs refer to women, especially those that associate with the gang, as “hynas” [HIGH-nuhs], generally associating them with loose sexuality and opportunities for exploitation.¹⁷

On the one hand, the “attractiveness” of early and abundant sex for young males requires little explanation. What could possibly provide more attraction to adolescent and pre-adolescent boys than sex? But to simply address this feature of the gang as a biological desire would be to miss an important point. Part of what makes sex attractive to young males is its symbolic association with power and manhood. Sex is, after all, an interactive ritual, not merely a biological act (Collins 2004). And in the context of the machista barrio, sex, to young boys, represents a combination of adult independence and self-assertion. Ronaldo’s description of the “access” to girls makes this symbolic attraction of sex clear when describing his own reasons for joining the gang:

First when I was small, when I was like nine, it started when we would go down to swim in the river, since the river was close and maybe we used to look at the guys that had tattoos and they would tell us how great [macizo] was the gang, that it was nice, that they had lots of hynas, lots of women. They used to talk a lot about the chicks. “The girls pay attention to you!” they would say. When you’re just a kid, that’s what you want, girls. You want to be the Daddy of all the girls right? The Rich Daddy of all of the girls. That’s what it was like when we’d go swimming.

¹⁷ I am unclear regarding the origin of this word. Although the term appears to have biological roots—as in “gyna-“—the Spanish-speaking youth I interviewed seemed unaware of the relationship. If there is a physiological etymology, it is an Anglicism that was “lost in translation” so to speak.
And did they have a lot of women?

Yes, they had a lot.

More than simply a means of meeting a biological need or of experiencing recreation, Ronaldo’s account illustrates how sex for the male gang members is a means of accessing and communicating power. Nor was his account exceptional. I asked many former gang members what they liked best about life in the gang and although many spoke of camaraderie and drugs, sex and access to women was usually near the top for the men. Enrique, who helped form a local Salvadoran street gang in the early 1990’s that was later subsumed by the MS-13, answered my inquiry about the “best part” of being a gang member rather crudely: “To fuck. To have the best chicks.”

Occasionally sex is forced. Some of the ex-gang members told of participating in individual and gang rape. Such mixing of violence and sexuality was sometimes aimed at shaming a rival gang leader by attacking his partner or his sister or by simply spreading fear and insecurity in the territory of a rival gang. But in most cases, interviewees reported that young girls participated willingly, enamored themselves of the power and manner of the gang members. Unfortunately my data do not allow for a thorough comparison of perspectives on the same topic from a sizeable sample of female gang members. Nevertheless, none of the four women I interviewed named sex as an attractive aspect of gang life. Although one did mention having taken part in the practice of sharing partners, two others named female companionship and solidarity as key in their decision to join and reported “looking out for each other” in view of the male gang members’ well-known intentions toward them. There can hardly be any doubt that these rituals are
rarely mutually satisfying and it may be that the young women who provide sex for the male youth are obtaining other goods while allowing the male gang members to build a macho persona as, in the words of Ronaldo, “Papi Rico.” Furthermore, as is the case with drug and alcohol use, having sex is associated with adulthood. The pre-adolescent who visits a prostitute or “chooses” his partner feels as though he has come of age. Thus abundant sex, more than just a biological attraction, provides a means, fleeting though it may be, for male barrio youth to assert their own efficacy, accessing emotional energy, often by humiliating young women, and escaping, for a time, the shame spiral.

Diverging Pathways: Why Some Youth Do Not Join

Not everyone who lives in an impoverished Central American barrio or who experiences shame-inducing abuse or abandonment joins a gang. In fact, many urban youth may even “walk” with the gang for a time, even becoming sympathizers, but ultimately choose not to join for one reason or another. Although many of these youth also experience the disenfranchisement of poverty and family or school problems, they never follow through completely to formally join the gang. Though my research design was not created in order to establish causal certainty regarding the reasons for joining the gang, I did interview nearly a dozen Central American youth or young men who had been gang sympathizers but had eventually chosen not to be jumped-in. In addition, some of the men who currently work with gang members to try to help them escape and establish alternative lifestyles, were themselves natives of the same communities in which they worked. In a few cases, these young men had grown up alongside the young men they
were now assisting in leaving the gang, but the facilitators themselves had never joined the gang. Their reasons for not joining the gang varied widely. Not surprisingly, some youth cited strong family ties as factors that caused them to second-guess their decision to become sympathizers, and to ultimately reject the gang lifestyle. Thus, parents providing stable or even semi-stable homes could play a key role in helping sympathizers break ties with gang members, and, in some cases could, by sending their adolescent or teenager to another region, help him or her to break ties with the local gang cell. On the other hand, some parents’ best efforts were thwarted by youth who seemed determined to join the gang.

Other youths reported success in school as key to helping them decide to keep studying and move away from the gang. During the “chequeo” stage in which sympathizers are being “checked-out” for their gang promise—and are themselves evaluating at some level the costs and benefits of actually joining—some youth discovered, often because of an encouraging teacher, that they showed academic promise. One such Honduran youth, Aldo, decided to stay in school rather than continue into the gang as most of his friends were doing, and he seemed proud to report that he was nearing his high school graduation and planning already to attend the university—a rare story of success for a youth in his neighborhood. In other cases, the reasons for not joining the gang seemed more random. Nathàn, the eldest sibling of Leti, never joined his sister or his friends in affiliating with the gang. When their mother left for Los Angeles, Nathàn was already thirteen years old and for a time the responsibility of looking after his three younger siblings fell on him. Nathàn became a father at fifteen, soon after his siblings were taken in by an aunt and her abusive husband. Although the relationship
with the mother of his daughter did not last, Nathàn soon became involved with another woman whom he later married and with whom he had four children. Thus, while many of his friends were founding the local Batos Locos clicka, Nathàn became “sidetracked” by family responsibilities—both to his siblings and to his children. Nor was early fatherhood the only factor distracting Nathàn from la vida loca enjoyed by his friends in the gang. Soon after uniting with his second partner, Nathàn and his fourteen-year-old partner began attending the local Mennonite church, and, at the behest of the pastor, were later married. It appears then that in Nathàn’s case, early fatherhood may have been instrumental in causing him to seek stability in the church, rather than the risk-prone lifestyle offered by the gang. Affiliating with the church took him even further in the direction of a domestic lifestyle and made gang life seem even more alien, even though Nathàn continued to live in poverty and had long since abandoned his studies.

How then do we make sense of these diverging pathways? If joining the gang is indeed a process that only some youth complete, what theoretical tools might help us make sense of the divergence? One way to do so is to borrow theoretical insights from another, related subfield of sociology, that of social movements. In an important paper published in the 1980s Dutch sociologists Bert Klandermans and Dirk Oegema developed a four-stage model for determining why some people join a social movement while others do not (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Their explanation, growing out of a survey of a random sample of Dutch residents polled before and after a national peace demonstration, attempted to combine “structural and cognitive” factors leading to an ultimate decision to participate in the demonstration. Although the comparison between joining a gang and participating in a social movement is far from perfect—taking a Saturday to join a
peaceful demonstration requires nowhere near the same commitment asked for by gang leaders from new members—Klandermans’s processual model does combine structural and social-psychological factors in a way that is conceptually helpful when we consider why some individuals choose to join an organization and others do not. In other words, to return to Abbot’s concept of “semantic explanation,” we can gain conceptual leverage on the process of joining a gang by translating this social phenomenon into the theoretical language of joining a social movement.

Klandermans and Oegema argue that individuals must pass through four stages or steps before ultimately participating in the movement. At each stage, some potential participants drop out such that the ultimate proportion of rally-attending activists to the overall population is quite small. First, not everyone holds views that are in line with those espoused by the movement. Those who do may be called the “mobilization potential.” Of this relatively large population (in the case of the peace rally, about three quarters of the Dutch population actually agreed with the peace movement’s position opposing the installation of new cruise missiles) only a fraction are contacted or invited to participate in the movement. The authors dub this fraction the “mobilization target.” All of the sampled respondents who later participated in the protest held views in line with the movement and had been “targeted” in mobilization efforts by activist groups. So far so good. But many of the eventual participants held similar views and had been “mobilized” but, in the end, chose not to attend the protest. This group dropped out at the stage Klandermans and Oegema call “motivation”—they believed in the campaign’s principles and knew about the protest, but they were not motivated to make plans to attend the protest. It was at this stage that the highest proportion of would-be participants
dropped out. While nearly half of the sample supported the movement and were made aware of the protest, only ten percent of the overall sample actually made plans to attend. Of this ten percent, only four percent made the fourth and final step of participating by overcoming what the authors call “barriers to participation.” These participating individuals either had no other plans or commitments or were so highly motivated to attend that their decision to join the protest trumped all other commitments.

The conceptual “fit” of Klandermans and Oegema’s four-step model explaining non-participation in social movements is not perfect for explaining gang affiliation. Indeed, social movements themselves vary greatly in the radical-ness of their cause and the levels of commitments they seek from members, but the four-step model does offer some helpful insights for understanding the processual nature of gang membership. Figure 2.1 provides a graphic illustration of the adaptation of Klandermans and Oegema’s four-stage model to the phenomenon of the gangs.
Almost all Central American gang members come from impoverished urban neighborhoods. Very few middle-class youth or youth from agricultural communities join gangs. Middle-class youth, nearly all of whom attend private schools, and many of whom are involved in extra-curricular activities or simply not allowed to spend time in unstructured activity *en la calle* (on the street), are both protected from the gang environment and encouraged to develop concrete life plans and trajectories. Whether or not they share the oppositional “ideology” of the gang is, in this case, probably less

Figure 2.1 provides a visual illustration of a four-stage model for understanding how Central American youth are recruited to join the gang. An explanation of the model is provided below.
relevant than simple exposure to the gang and its pastimes. In other words, in contrast to the mobilization potential of a political protest, the “mobilization potential” for joining a gang is formed largely by youth’s socio-economic context rather than by a political ideology shared with the gang. As we have seen, the experience of being disenfranchised at home, on the street, and at school generates experiences of shame which can lead to “chronic shame” that makes the violence, energy, and solidarity of the gang especially attractive. Thus, “ideological openness” to gang values grows out of the urban barrio experience. Furthermore, the extremely high population density in the urban barrios of Central America’s largest cities makes congregating easy. Gangs have an audience in the barrio since most children in these dense neighborhoods walk to school and run errands to the corner store or tortillerìa every day. For all of these reasons gang leaders and members spend little time or energy recruiting sympathizers in middle-class gated communities, at exclusive private schools, or in very rural areas. Among Central American youth, the mobilization potential is made up of children and adolescents from the impoverished, densely populated, urban barrio. Using the UNDP’s most current estimates of “percent urban” (about half) and “percent living under the national poverty line” (again, about half) in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, we can estimate that the population making up the mobilization potential—disenfranchised urban youth in northern Central America—is roughly one quarter of the juvenile population in the region.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Obviously, only a minority of Central American youth are ever even “at-risk” of joining a gang. For this
But many urban, disenfranchised youth are never actively recruited by a gang member. These youth are, in effect, never “targeted” for mobilization by the gang. Gang leaders know that even in the urban barrio where family resources are limited and schools weak, many children and youth make poor candidates for the gang. Gang members are far more likely to invest their mobilization efforts strategically by targeting children and adolescents from precarious or violent families or by approaching children who have already demonstrated an ability to use “street logic” in petty crime or violence. Furthermore, social networks, especially those of siblings and extended family provide common means of “reaching out” to mobilize youth. Children and teens from strong families are less likely to be targeted for recruitment simply because their friends, siblings, and cousins do not belong to the gang.

Thirdly, many urban, disenfranchised youth who are actively recruited by the gang resist these attempts, choosing not to become “sympathizers” because they lack sufficient motivation. They may share the gang’s oppositional sub-culture and admire its symbols and pastimes, but these youth do not decide to enter the three-to-six month long period of chequeo and therefore never become “sympathizers” in any formal sense. Instead, they become “sidetracked” by other activities and life plans. Nathàn was far too

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19 The term *simpatizante* is used in many different ways by gang members and experts alike. Here I use the term in the same way that many, though not all, of the ex-gang members interviewed used it—to denote youth and children who shared both an affinity and a low-level commitment to the gang but were never officially “jumped-in” and were therefore free to pursue other pathways when their interest in the gang waned.
busy taking care of siblings and, soon afterward, with finding a steady income to support his own family, to be interested in the gang. Joining a local congregation, with its high demands on personal lifestyle issues and its many evening services, further helped to restrict his time and energies to the domestic sphere.

Youth who do become sympathizers and enter chequeo do so because they are highly motivated. Their motivation stems from a combination of both the “push” factors of having experienced shame as a result of poverty, abuse, and school problems and the “pull” factors of attraction to the gang’s offer of solidarity, violence, and sex. It is the job of the jumped-in gang members and the leaders to present these attractions in the best light possible without making them entirely accessible, since doing so would eliminate the need to actually join the gang. In other words, an “at-risk” youth targeted for recruitment (mobilization) into the gang may be more or less motivated to join based not only on the gang’s ability to promote its ideology, symbols, and lifestyle benefits, but also on a youth’s own prior experiences of abandonment and rejection. Scheff’s “shame spiral” helps to explain the intense motivation of youth attracted to the gang’s high-risk offer of escape through exciting, solidarity-inducing rituals of crime and violence. Youth caught in a “shame spiral” are especially susceptible to viewing the gang’s offer of solidarity, sex, and violence as a highly attractive means of escaping shame and accessing pride or emotional energy.

Not all sympathizers decide in the end to become formally jumped-in members. In the final stage, one that Klandermans and Oegema call “removal of barriers” only a fraction of sympathizers undergo baptism and formally join the gang. Of course, their reasons for not joining have little to do with busy schedules or conflicting commitments,
but rather respond to serious doubts about the relationship of costs and benefits to becoming a full-fledged gang member. For some sympathizers, probably a minority, the time of chequeo proves ultimately unconvincing or too risky. A police crack-down or a spate of gang killings in the neighborhood may cause them to second guess their earlier decision before it’s “too late”—that is, before their own baptism makes them permanent members. Such events, be they local or national, can sometimes serve to remind sympathizers of the high costs associated with being a gang member. A few former sympathizers in Honduras who came of age in the early 2000s mentioned the “hunt-down” of gang members unleashed by the Maduro administration in 2002-2006 as a factor in causing them to re-evaluate their intentions to join the gang. The fear of being killed or arrested presents a psycho-social “barrier” to joining the gang. Just as important as “barriers” though, are the distractions which can ultimately sidetrack sympathizers no less than recruits. Aldo, a Honduran sympathizer, cited success in school as well as increasing gang violence as factors ultimately leading him to abandon his friends and avoid following through with a baptism.

But such barriers or distractions are not enough to sidetrack highly motivated youth. Beto became more active in the gang after the birth of his daughter despite the potential such an event held for distracting him by shifting his attention to a different moment in the life course. Nor were increases in gang killings or mass arrests and incarcerations of gang members enough to stop Central American youth from joining the gang. For youth experiencing a spiral of shame, “rational” evaluations of long-term costs (incarceration or death) versus short-term benefits (respeto and la vida loca) may be difficult if not impossible. Similarly, Klandermans and Oegema note that in the final
stage, overcoming “barriers” to participation may have more to do with a sympathizer’s level of motivation than the movements’ supposed ability to “remove” such barriers (1987:529).

My point here is not to try to bestow legitimacy on a violent organization by comparing it with a social movement as some scholars have done with less-violent gangs in the U.S. (Barrios 2007; Brotherton 2007). Rather, viewing gang affiliation as a “weeding out” process reminds us of the processual nature of joining the gang and highlights the impact of social structures on the interactive experience of joining the gang. Social structural factors such as poverty, migration, and meager social spending expand the population of disenfranchised barrio youth, making them more susceptible to being targeted for gang recruitment than rural or middle-class youth even while micro-contextual factors such as abuse, abandonment, and school problems contribute to the likelihood that youths will be motivated to join the gang by laying the psycho-social groundwork for the experience of chronic shame. In this environment, the gang markets its symbols, values, and pastimes to frustrated youth as attractive and “worth the risk.” They accomplish this by allowing children and youth a “taste” of the gang life in recruitment and chequeo. Sympathizers are then encouraged and further “motivated” to join the gang during the time of chequeo through increased interaction and new access to weapons, drugs, and sex. Eventually, some youth decide that the benefits do not outweigh the risks of joining. Others, the choose to go through with baptism. By the time these youth have received their first tattoo, they have passed through several stages of selection and no doubt view themselves as an elite few, ready to experience the benefits and take on the risks of the gang lifestyle—permanently.
Conclusion

Most studies of Central American gangs tend toward either an individualistic account or an oversocialized explanation of why Central American youth join gangs. For some, Central American youth join a gang because they have an innate psychological tendency toward violence (Bruneau 2005) or because poverty or social exclusion literally drives them into the gang. But a microsociological approach that takes into account the role of emotions such as pride and shame and the effect of interaction ritual on these emotions allows us to more closely specify how social forces actually shape youth toward joining the gang and which features of gang life make the gang attractive for precisely these youth. My goal in this chapter has been to illuminate the interactive process by which a muchacho becomes a homie. In order to do this I have sought to examine the reasons cited by ex-gang members themselves for joining the gang. I have divided these phenomena into “push” and “pull” forces—that is, negative social contextual features that “pre-dispose” barrio youth for joining the gang and social characteristics and pastimes of the gang itself that “attract” the youth to the gang. I have employed the sociology of emotions in order to more adequately specify how the social forces of “push” and “pull” interact in the process of bringing youth into the gang. In short, the experience of poverty, family problems and educational difficulties contribute to a spiral of shame among some barrio youth. This experience of “chronic shame” gives rise to a desperate search for pride and self-confidence. The gang, with its symbolic rituals of baptism and tattooing, its participatory violence and access to drugs and weapons, and its macho sexuality looms large as a potential source of the seemingly-elusive pride known as el respeto (respect). Barrio youth in search of el respeto can “try out” the gang lifestyle as a sympathizer,
walking with the gang, learning of its symbols and structure, and tasting the thrill of emotional energy provided by its access to weapons, drugs, and sexuality. When such youth are deemed ready for entrance, they can choose, like Pancho, to take the final step of ritual solidarity and prove their loyalty in an act of symbolic sacrifice. And while many sympathizers choose not to join the gang, perhaps because they have other more promising pathways to emotional energy available to them, those who do decide to join, have, by the time of the baptism, already been thoroughly groomed toward the chaotic world of the vida loca. In short, the gang provides youth like Pancho a means of escaping the shame spiral, at least for awhile, by showing them how to transform shame into anger and vengeance. The result is an exhilarating—and dangerous—sense of personal potency. “Now” said Pancho, “I felt stronger.”
CHAPTER 3:
DODGING THE MORGUE RULE

Leaving the gang is like losing your identity. It is worse than being assassinated. It is a social death.

Ricardo Falla, S.J., Guatemalan sociologist

The gang commits, obliges, formats, and marks for life—like a tattoo.

Mauricio Rubio, Colombian gang scholar

Getting in is easy. The hard part is getting out.

Camilo, Honduran former M-18 leader

On September 18, 2007, twenty-three-year-old Antonio was walking with his wife[^20] on a sidewalk near the Market Terminal in Zone 9 of Guatemala City. Antonio, who had left the M-18 three years earlier, was shopping for supplies for his shoe shine and repair business, when two armed youth grabbed him from behind and shoved his wife to the ground. Just before the young men opened fire, Antonio shouted to his wife to

[^20]: Although Antonio and his partner were not legally married, they had been co-habiting for three years at the time and he referred to her as his wife.
run away. Moments later, Antonio, who had spent his teenage years in the gang and was one of the most articulate subjects interviewed for this study, was dead from gunshots to the head. His wife, also a former member of the gang and still grieving a second miscarriage that would have been their first child, was left to pick up the pieces of a second chance cut short. As is typically the case with murders of youth suspected of having ties (past or present) to the gang, the police did not open a formal investigation and no criminal charges were ever filed.

Antonio’s life in the gang, which he described to me in an interview two months before his murder, bore many similarities with the experience of other gang members in the region. He had joined the gang at age thirteen, frustrated by his family’s poverty, ashamed of an alcoholic mother, and angered by a stepfather who showed favoritism toward Antonio’s stepsiblings. As a fifteen-year-old he learned accidentally of the source of his mother’s lifelong struggle with alcoholism—she had been raped by her own father. Incest had resulted in the birth of Antonio’s older brother. Antonio, ashamed and angry, decided to channel his shame-filled rage into a budding career as a gang member. Describing the process of learning about the incest of his mother, Antonio’s voice trembled and grew barely audible: “I said to myself, ‘Now I see the problem.’ I started to understand my Mom and her alcoholism, and all that she had done for us in spite of this. [pause, voice returning to normal] So I went deeper into the gang. . . . I started spreading havoc.”

In place of a dysfunctional family that brought shame, dead-end poverty, and favoritism, Antonio found in the gang a family that, at least in the beginning, offered mutuality, opportunity, and a road to “respect.”
I fought for my barrio. When I entered, I found there what I’d never experienced in my house—acceptance and support. Maybe not support of the kind like, [in a grandmother-like a tone of mockery] “Oh come here, you!” No. Support in the sense of understanding. “Want a cigarette? Here, have one of mine. Want a drink? Here have one of ours.” That was what made me feel good. Meanwhile in my house my Mom drank all the time but wouldn’t let me near the stuff.

Antonio began smoking marijuana and crack, and at sixteen, soon after he learned of his family’s traumatic secret, he began selling drugs as well. About the same time, the gang cell to which Antonio belonged began to, in his words, “evolve.” Violence became more commonplace. Drive-by shootings, called a dрайver in the anglicized lingo of the gang, had earlier been prohibited in the M-18 clique to which Antonio belonged. Now drive-by’s were being ordered with great frequency. Violence and murder were increasingly directed not simply at members of the opposing gangs, but at non-gang members including neighbors and business owners. In addition to selling drugs, Antonio began collecting extortion fees called la renta (rent). His tattoos, including the digits “1-8” on opposite temples of his face, were attracting increasing attention from the police.

At the age of nineteen he was arrested and incarcerated for the twelfth time, this time as an adult. In prison, he witnessed the killing of two friends from his own clique, killed by the gang itself for “misconduct.” Although leaving the gang itself had become increasingly difficult, Antonio wanted out. “At that point I thought to myself, ‘I’m nineteen years old. ¡Puchica!’ I’ve been in jail twelve times. I’ve been shot [in the back]

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21 Antonio used a minced oath here—a softened, far more palatable version of the term puta (bitch). Elsewhere, he was less guarded with his language.
once. Brought right to the point of death. And I’ve been shot at many times. . . .' I said to myself, ‘Is this really what I want for my life?’”

One major component of the “evolution” of the gang involved the tightening of restrictions prohibiting desertion. Earlier in the life of the gang, leaders granted permission to leave for gang members who had “done their part” for the gang. But increasingly, gang members were being denied a safe exit. By 2004, when Antonio decided he had had enough, he knew better than to ask for his “squares.” “I knew that if I asked permission, they weren’t going to give it to me anyway. Five, six years ago maybe they would have. Not anymore.” So Antonio did what many other senior gang members have done. He fled to another region of the city. Distance, he hoped, and the “file” that the gang keeps of it’s members’ record of participation during gang life would offer him at least a modicum of safety since gang leaders could look back and remember his contribution to the barrio. But safety from his former fellows, it turned out, was only one of many obstacles he had yet to overcome.

At the advice of a friend, Antonio had the tattooed numbers “1” and “8” “erased” from his temples using a painful infrared method involving multiple treatments, and he began wearing band-aids over the smaller tattoos on his neck. Like many former gang members, he worried that the marks left by the “erased” tattoos on his face could earn him more problems from his erstwhile gang mates than if he had simply left the numbers. But the growing demonization of the gang meant that police were now arresting tattooed youth with little regard for their actual behavior or current membership status. In prison, former gang members are especially vulnerable.
Only a year after seeking anonymity with his grandmother at the other end of a city of three million, he was shot once again, while visiting his mother in his former neighborhood. This time the assailants were two adolescent recruits “probably in chequeo” he guessed, and thus hoping to gain a quick entrance into the gang by demonstrating their willingness to kill a deserter. Antonio managed to escape this incident with “merely” a few bullet wounds—one in his hand and one in each leg. But by this time, Antonio realized that he was a marked man, living, perhaps, on borrowed time. He managed to land a job washing cars for US$20 a week and moved to yet another area of Guatemala City, this time with his girlfriend who was also escaping the gang. After learning the skill of bread-baking at a government-sponsored project for reforming gang members, he began teaching bakery workshops at the rehab center, earning him his post-gang moniker el Panadero, “the Bread-baker.” Later, he would participate in a special reality show aired nationally called “Challenge 10.” The show, a creative take on “The Apprentice,” brought ten ex-gang members to live together in a house and work toward making a new start as entrepreneurs. A well-known Guatemalan entrepreneur offered “life lessons” to the youth, divided into two business teams. Most of the gang members wore masks during taping to avoid being identified but by the end of the two-weeks of filming, several of the youth, including Antonio, had concluded that it was safe enough to stop wearing them. Five youth worked at a car wash while the other five worked at a shoe shine and repair shop. The “challenge” was to see which group could produce the more effective business model.

When I met Antonio, some six months after the airing of the show, he was the only former participant in the reality show who continued to be employed at the shoe
shine and repair shop, essentially taking it over as his own when the others left to find better-paying work.\textsuperscript{22} The shop, located in a sleek high-rise complex called “Europlaza,” could not support multiple employees although Antonio paid a younger brother to help him on occasion. He still wore the band-aids on either side of his neck, removing them only when we arrived at a secluded outdoor park where we conducted the first interview. At the time, Antonio was still grieving the death of his elder brother, also a former M-18 member, killed just two months earlier by the rival MS-13. And although Antonio himself had been shot twice, once during his gang tenure and once afterward, he spoke with a remarkable mix of realism and optimism:

Right now I need to move [again] because there are a lot of guys in the area I live that are getting out of prison and they know me so I’ll have to leave because to tell the truth, I still have problems with the gang. I have a green light [death warrant] for years now and if they haven’t killed me yet it’s because God is great and who knows what purpose he has for my life. I’m not a Christian and I don’t go to church—why should I lie and say otherwise—but I know that when I stop to really think about it, it’s God that has helped me and if it weren’t for him who else would have stuck up for me?

That was in early July. In September, Antonio, the Bread-maker and shoe shiner, at twenty-three years of age, was dead.

\textsuperscript{22} The car wash, I was told, was also employing only one person six months after the television series. Since then, the USAID-funded project has wisely turned toward placing ex-gang members as employees in already-functioning businesses.
Learning to Leave

This chapter moves closer to the central topic of this dissertation by addressing two essential questions: what prompts gang members to want to leave the gang and what are the challenges to doing so? I have begun with the story of Antonio both to reveal some of the reasons gang youth grow weary of the gang lifestyle and to illustrate the difficulty of abandoning the gang, made especially clear by the most intimidating barrier of all—the morgue rule. When a Central American youth joins a local cell of a transnational gang, he takes on what is supposed to be, and quite often *is in fact*, a lifelong commitment. Abandoning the gang at any age, he is told, is not in the cards. As we will see, the morgue rule is not absolute. Gang leaders make exceptions under certain circumstances and gang cells are not always capable or motivated to find and eliminate deserters. But in the minds of thousands of current gang members, exceptions do not outweigh the utter finality of the cases in which the rule was applied to former friends and homies. Whatever the reasons for Antonio’s death, one purpose it serves is to cause current gang members to think twice about leaving.

In the last chapter I tried to show how attractive the gang life could appear to impoverished adolescents from fractured or abusive families. Joining the gang provides access to pride, *respeto*, and an exhilarating escape from the shame spiral by way of experiences of violence, sex, and solidarity. But this emphasis on the attractiveness of the gang life raises the question of why anyone would wish to leave. If the experience is so exhilarating, so “liberating” from shame, why should any youth reconsider? Why not remain in the gang indefinitely? The testimonies of the ex-gang members themselves provide answers to this question. A wide variety of factors, including the desire to start a
family, disillusionment upon learning the “reality” of gang life, and the fear of death are a few of the most common reasons cited by the former gang members. Interviews with gang experts and rehab workers echoed these claims. In the section below I classify the many specific reasons cited for leaving under four categories. Similarly to the last chapter, these four categories can be further classified as either “push” or “pull” factors. That is, two categories could be conceptualized as endogenous factors—characteristics of gang life that “push” gang members to consider leaving the gang—and two other categories could be considered exogenous or features of life outside the gang making leaving more attractive.

One potential methodological weakness of this chapter I must point out here. I do not have the testimonies of current gang members in their later young adult years in order to compare reasons cited for staying in the gang with those cited by deserters for leaving or the barriers overcome in that process. Nor can I report first-hand reports of why some aging gang members choose to remain in the gang indefinitely. While such testimonies may well have contributed detail and an element of methodological rigor, I chose, principally for reasons of safety, not to make serious efforts to track down current gang members (see Appendix A for more about this methodological choice). Furthermore, as some gang experts in the U.S. have pointed out, testimonies of committed gang members are often aimed at impressing a listener or improving a negative image of that gang in society. Gang members have been known to “feed outsiders and themselves a set of standardized answers” to inquiries about gang life and gang values (Spergel 1992). My tools for measuring reliability then, involved comparing ex-gang members’ accounts of their own reasons for leaving with factors cited by other former members and by
interviewing and spending time with many gang experts possessing years of experience in facilitating gang exit.

Perhaps the most common endogenous “push” factor cited by the ex-gang members was that of a gang lifestyle that became difficult or impossible to sustain. Many ex-gang members summed up their decision to leave the gang, whether made in a moment or over time, with the phrase, “Me aburrì,” (I got bored) or “Me cansè” (I got tired). Although a literal translation of the phrase “Me aburrì” would be “I got bored,” the phrase does not imply a simple ennui such as that of an American teenager “bored” of playing a video game. A more accurate translation of me aburrì would be “I got fed up with” or “sick and tired of” gang life. Ivan, a former member of the MS-13 who joined the gang while living with his mother in New York City, put it simply, Me aburrì de esa vida (I got fed up with that life). What exactly made him sick? “Stealing cars, taking people’s things, shouting at people that their stuff belonged to me.” A Salvadoran, and former member of the M-18 said, “I was fed up (aburrido) with killing. Tired of bothering people.” What begins as a thrilling game of daring, of showing off one’s ability to take risks and intimidate others, can become, over time, a kind of duty or drudgery. Winning “respect” through violence and intimidation becomes more and more difficult to sustain as the stakes get higher. Ivan described the growing feeling of weariness brought on by the constant need to intimidate others and project strength.

Every gang member pretends to be somebody but really when we do all of those things we have these moments when we get tired of being that person. I would lock myself in a room and cry to myself. I didn’t want to be like that anymore and I would regret all the things I’d done. And after those moments when I would say, “That’s it. No more. No more!” that’s when I would get even worse and go out
and do even worse things. But there comes a moment when you get tired (cansado) of hearing everyone say, “These guys are good for nothing.”

In short, the gang’s proposed “escape” from the shame spiral—violence and confrontation—offers only a fleeting respite and can even become the source itself of further shame. As noted in the last chapter, this practice of suppressing or hiding shame, what Scheff calls “bypassing shame,” has been theorized as a common source of violence among males (Gilligan 1996; Scheff 2004) since it leads to a vicious shame-rage spiral in which males, “ashamed of being ashamed” commit further violence in an unsuccessful attempt to deal with their shame (Retzinger and Scheff 1991). Similarly, Antonio “went deeper” into the gang after learning of his mother’s incest. Feeling himself unable to do anything to address his family’s secret shame, he became even more violent in the gang. But violence only postpones the experience of shame and, as Ivan’s comment shows, committing violence provides new grounds for shame. After the emotional thrill of the violent act wears off, and after the congratulations and celebrations with gang friends is over, the gang member remains a resident of a community and connected, even if only marginally, to a family that views such acts as “shameful.” Committing violence and intimidating others with weapons “feels good” as long as one is surrounded and, to an extent, isolated by the gang. But the gang member cannot live completely isolated forever. Few youth sever family ties completely and most continue to live in the neighborhood of their childhood after joining the gang. Thus, they are not immune to the negative comments and the criticisms aimed at gang members from family and neighbors such as when Ivan recalled being dubbed a “good for nothing.” Asked why he made the decision to try to leave the gang, Nelson, a former Bato Loco said, “I did it for my family,
and because people look down on you. Lots of people look down on you. They know that you’re involved in making a ruckus and they call you a thief or worse. That’s why I felt the need to leave.” Nelson’s comment illustrates that as the gangs became involved in more serious and more violent forms of delinquent activity, belonging to a gang became itself a source of shame for many gang youth.

Many female gang members also “get sick of” gang life. Olivia, who participated in the M-18 with her two older brothers, remembered feeling ashamed not of being looked down upon by family members—indeed, her own father was a professional thief who taught her how to steal. She complained instead of the feeling of being feared by her own family.

While you’re in the gang, it’s true, you start to earn respect little by little but also . . . you get sick of it (se aburre). Sometimes I just wanted to be like the other girls that lived in tranquility and had their parents and their brothers and sisters, but my brothers and I, we learned so much while in the gang—because of course they don’t teach you anything good—that my mother came to fear us. She was afraid of all three of us. And what a terrible feeling when your own mother is afraid of you! My little sister wouldn’t even speak to me. She would see me on the street and ignore me. One day she broke down crying and begged me to leave the gang because she said they were going to kill me.

If Olivia’s account is any indication, it may be the case that female gang members tend to feel ashamed of their violent behavior but for slightly different reasons. In traditionalist societies such as Central America that socialize young women to be nurturers and caregivers, especially toward relatives and immediate family, the prospect of being the daughter, sister or friend who must be “feared” no doubt wears out rather quickly. By contrast, JJ did not report feeling ashamed or being brought up short by his
mother’s fear of him. Instead, by his own testimony it seemed that he had been pleased that, “She would just give me whatever I asked for and then some.”

Another reason that participating in violence and intimidation “wears out” as a means of bypassing shame is the “boomerang effect” and the fear of death. The longer a youth stays within the gang and the more authority he comes to hold, the more enemies he makes, and the higher the price on his life from rival gang members. Asked how he came to leave the gang, Ernesto described his motivation this way:

The problem was when my name started to circulate. My tattoo (mi placa), my nickname started growing. Now more gang members from the other gangs were starting to realize who I was and that I was a member of the M-18. That’s when they started looking for me to kill me. So I decided to move away from the gang. I was tired of running.

Ernesto’s account echoes JJ’s recollection of sleeping with multiple weapons at his side as a result of his growing fama (fame) as a White Fence cell leader with an increasingly long list of enemies. Camilo recounted similar pressures. “After two years [as a gang member] they promoted me to gang leader and there I was apparently better off. But it was worse because then people were looking for me—members of opposing gangs and relatives of dead victims, the police and others.”

But gang veterans have more to fear than those outside the gang. Death can also come at the hands of your own homies. Intra-gang violence escalated especially as drugs and weapons became increasingly available, raising the economic stakes both between and within gangs in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As the gang “evolved,” the “band of brothers” often became a “band of rivals” since leadership came with economic, not just social privileges. Antonio described the experience of watching the gang kill two friends
from his own clique for “misconduct,” and witnessing this was enough to start him rethinking his future and asking himself if the gang life was really worth it.

   Of course, leaving the gang is by no means a sure escape route from danger. Indeed, as Antonio’s case and others illustrate, ex-gang members are often killed after leaving. Still, many gang members come to see their profile in the gang as the greatest threat to their own immediate security. Meme, a former member of the MS-13 in Honduras also recalled making the decision to leave the gang while still in prison:

   I spent six years in prison. At one point there were three hundred forty of us gang members in one module. Things happen there that if you don’t have your mind clear, your own homies can betray you. They’ll hang you because that’s the way things work in prison. Things happened there while I was still active, that, well, that affected me directly. So one night a voice said to me, “Get out of this module. Leave because your own homies are going to kill you.” So I listened to the voice. And that voice was God and he’s the reason I’m here right now.

   Meme’s was not a generalized fear of risking death but a more concrete one, based, no doubt, on a no-nonsense assessment of his prospects if he continued in the presence of so many gang members. And although Meme himself admitted that leaving the module where the gang members were incarcerated was only the beginning of his journey out of the gang, it was clearly his fear of death—made plainer by what he experienced as the voice of God—that brought his situation into focus and compelled him to leave. Enrique, an early member of the Salvadoran MS-13 in San Salvador decided to leave after he began to receive death threats. Raymundo came to fear the Guatemalan death squads that had begun eliminating members of the gang in his own neighborhood. Sometimes the death of a sibling made the possibility of death seem more real and more immanent. Three interviewees recalled the death of a brother who was active in the gang
as instrumental in their decision to leave. Rina fled to Mexico after her partner, also a
gang member, was shot and killed by rival gang members. Several others, like Antonio,
were wounded in gang shootings and the experience at least began their reevaluation
process. Being the victim of a non-fatal shooting also prompts a re-evaluation of the gang
life. Two Honduran interviewees, Ramón and Rolando, saw their gang careers come to an
abrupt end after being permanently disabled in separate gang shootings in the same
neighborhood. Nevertheless, the fear of an early and even immanent death while in the
gang is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause for leaving the gang. Several gang
members, like Antonio, who was hospitalized for months after receiving the first of
multiple bullet injuries, actually responded to these brushes with death by deepening their
involvement in the gang. But the experience stuck with them and many cited the memory
of it as a motivator in their decision to leave months or even years later.

Other factors cited by ex-gang members as contributing to their growing unease
with the gang, their “wearing out,” were growing concerns about their own drug
addiction and the fear of prison and the police. Sometimes substance abuse went hand-in-
hand with the fear of death as in the case of JJ whose lungs began to fail because of the
combined maladies of a collapsed and dysfunctional lung from a shooting and the
overuse of marijuana. While in the hospital a doctor warned him that his life was nearing
its end if he did not stop smoking weed. Although JJ initially resolved to take the doctor’s
advice and leave the gang, he changed his mind after regaining his health and returning to
his neighborhood. Still, the hospital visit was the first of a variety of experiences causing
him to question the rationality of continuing in the gang, where drugs and bullets were
plentiful.
Another “endogenous” feature of gang life leading some gang members to question their commitment involves the failure of the gang to live up to its own ideals. Oscar, a Honduran who joined the M-18 after watching his deported uncle fall prey to opposition MS-13 members, found in the M-18 both a close-knit family and a means of earning respect. After “demonstrating” his ability to work for the gang both by eliminating enemies and by organizing drug sales, his crimes landed him in prison—an event he likened to “winning a Nobel prize” for the amount of respect it earned him within the gang. In prison he was given the task of monitoring discipline for all M-18 members in the unit. He oversaw early morning exercises, convinced sympathetic (some would say naïve) evangelical groups to donate weights and benches, and made sure all M-18 homies dressed and acted in a way that projected discipline and respect. But his authority soon became a burden as he learned of the reality of decision-making at the top:

I was tough. But I believed in solidarity with our own. But these leaders were so tough that they started to forget about the gang itself and lost their sense of solidarity. I started to see how the leaders themselves would give orders to liquidate others on the outside, people that I knew, just for some little mistake. Sometimes I would even say, “No. No, don’t do that.” And they would say, “What are you saying? The majority rules.” There were eight of us [leaders] and I knew that if you go against six or seven, they’re going to ask you what you have against the barrio anyway. I did this once or twice but then the third time I didn’t want to anymore. So they sent out to execute a member that I knew and had walked with and who, I knew, had done a lot for the barrio. He had killed who knows how many enemies of the MS and had lots of power on the outside and these guys by simply raising their hands were going to liquidate him. So I said, “This doesn’t make any sense. If that’s the way things work when I commit a little mistake, it means they’re going to raise their hands and I’ll be liquidated too. This is no family at all.”

There are echoes in Oscar’s account of “wearing out” given the imminence of death but Oscar insisted that what most caused him to tire of the gang was his increasing
sense that the gang had lost its way. He believed that the gang had once stood for mutuality and respect, at least among its own. Part of Oscar’s idealism had been inspired by El Charo, a deported M-18 member whom Oscar met while in prison. El Charo claimed that the “original” vision of the M-18 gang in the U.S. had been one of solidarity and mutual aid in the face of a hostile society. “If one of our members didn’t have shoes and we have three pairs, we would give him one. That was the ideology of El Charo, and mine and the one my uncle had believed in,” said Oscar. In the prison meetings El Charo began to argue against selling drugs to children, saying that doing so violated the laws of the “original” M-18 code. Shortly thereafter a vote was taken and El Charo was found dead of poisoning. That experience helped make up Oscar’s mind. “I said to myself, ‘I’m an M-18 for now, but when I get out of prison I’m getting out of the gang too.’”

It is impossible to establish as fact a generalized loss of “principles” within the transnational gangs of Central America. Still, Antonio’s account of the “evolution” of the M-18 in Guatemala around 2000 coincides with Oscar’s report of increasing violence and chaos in the Honduran M-18 about the same time, and members of other gang members told similar accounts with similar timelines. Oscar attributed the change to increasing greed among the leaders of the gang as the drug trade opened up new opportunities for income. Other accounts echoed that claim. But some ex-gang members and experts attributed increasing violence to the breaking of the Pacto Sur or “Southern Pact” which held that all Latino gangs were in fact part of the same “Southern race” and ought to, at
the very least, keep their wars from spilling into public places.\textsuperscript{23} The breaking of the Southern Pact, whether brought on by a specific altercation at a party in Los Angeles, as one gang expert reported, or simply because of the increasing availability of drugs and weapons, ultimately meant the escalation of a state of war between rival cliques. The ensuing chaos in the early 2000s changed the nature of gang affiliation, increasing criminality and causing more than one gang member involved in this study to conclude that if the barrio had ever stood for anything in particular it now promoted only greed and violence.

Not all factors contributing to a desire to leave the gang are endogenous or emerge from the gang itself. One topic that surfaced again and again in narrations of gang exit was the influence of family. Edgar began to look for a way out when his mother became ill, soon after the death of his brother in a gang shooting. Wilmer also began to rethink his future in the gang at the urging of his mother after the death of his brother. He recalled his mother’s words when she would visit him in prison: “‘Son, get out of the gang. Get out!’ She would say. ‘Look at your brother.’ So I began to think hard about this.” Indeed, mothers often played a key role in stimulating “reflection” on the part of the gang member regarding the possibilities for exit. Many ex-gang members recalled particular encounters with their mother that spurred in them both a regard for the future and a sense of shame for their gang lifestyle at the time. Leonardo remembered returning

\textsuperscript{23} One former leader contended that the letters S.U.R. stand for \textit{Razas Unidas Sureñas} or “United Southern Races,” forming a backward acronym of the word \textit{sur}. Obviously, the notion that “we’re all Latinos after all” makes more sense in the U.S. context where other reference groups such as blacks and non-Hispanic whites compete or interact with Latinos.

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to his home late one night after a shooting to find his mother in a feverish trance, literally “worried sick” about the safety of her son in the gang. Nor were mothers always the principal instigators of shaming. Although he did not leave the gang immediately afterward, he felt ashamed for causing his mother such anguish and he related the story as a key moment in his reconsideration of the gang life. After years of complete isolation from family, Pancho first began to consider the prospect of leaving when his grandmother, who had helped raise him as a child, visited him in prison. He recalled how she could not even recognize his tattoo-covered face, entreatng the guard, “Please won’t you bring me my grandson. This isn’t him.” Although he did not leave the gang then, the experience made Pancho feel deeply ashamed. He missed and felt sorry for “this dear little old lady” who could not believe that the tattooed youth in front of her was her own grandson. Similarly, Leti never knew her father, and her mother lived in far-away Los Angeles, but her siblings played a key role in motivating her to leave.

Once when I stopped in to the house my brother and two sisters were there and they were crying because they hadn’t seen me in a long time. When I arrived Nathan just stared at me with this look of happiness and he said, ‘Sis!’ And I, well, I turned around and put my head down. I was ashamed. And he got up, gave me a hug, and then started to cry. He said, ‘You’re going to change, aren’t you?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I will.’ But then, I just waited for them to go back to what they were doing and I went right back to the streets.

As Leti’s story makes clear, family ties merely provide an incentive for leaving. These ties usually were not enough by themselves to motivate much less facilitate a successful gang exit. Still, among the several factors consistently raised in interviews with ex-gang members, one’s ties to family and the stress placed on them by gang membership were common elements in the motivation for rethinking the gang life.
Even in the absence of real or strong family ties, the dream of starting one’s own family motivated some youth to consider leaving. The family, as noted in the last chapter, is an enormously important ideal in the Central American cultural tradition. While few disenfranchised youth experience anything remotely akin to the tranquil scenes of the Holy Family pictured in the cathedrals and at Christmas, they are not immune to such ideals. As the adolescents who join the gang grow older, many begin to think about their own prospects for starting or having a family. And although the gang itself initially plays the role of surrogate family for such youth, as they approach adulthood and learn of the more brutal realities of the gang’s “family values” the prospect of beginning a more traditional family can become more attractive. Armando, a Honduran and former cell leader had joined the gang after living the life of a street orphan for several years. Even before he met the woman he eventually married, he remembered beginning to wish for a more “normal life” even though he had never experienced such a thing himself.

In other cases, the birth of a child caused a gang member to reflect on his or her future and motivated them to desire to leave the gang in order to “formalize” and begin a family. The onset of parenthood is in fact a common theme in the literature on gangs in the U.S. going back as far as Thrasher’s study of Chicago youth gangs in the early part of the twentieth century (Thrasher 1927). Evidence at the time indicated that as gang youth approached adult life, getting a job and starting a family became more attractive than gang life or street delinquency and youths tended to leave the gang in the past and most if not all gang members “aged out” of the gang. This pathway appears to hold true for gang youth in the U.S. (Klein 1995) where the prospects for earning an income in the formal economy, though far from certain, are more realistic than in the Central American barrio.
Nevertheless, I was surprised to find many Central American youth had continued within the gang for years even after the birth of one or more children. Rina was in fact brought into the gang by her partner and continued her activity there after the birth of their child. Osvaldo recalled that it was the presence of his four-year-old daughter that prompted him to make the decision to leave. Obviously, the mere arrival of fatherhood was not enough to tip the scales toward leaving. Pablo began to seriously reflect on the desire to settle down after being imprisoned and then only when his two daughters began to grow older and he thought of the life he would miss if when he left prison he were to continue in the gang. Thus, it was not so much the arrival to fatherhood (or, for that matter, to motherhood) that prompted in gang members a desire to “settle down” but rather the culmination of a variety of factors among which the desire to live a more “normal” or domestic life played an important but not exclusive role.

Finally, in a number of cases, several of which we will examine more carefully in the next chapter, evangelical religious experiences seem to have played a key role in creating or enhancing a desire to leave the gang. Although churches, pastors, and religious gang ministries often did more to facilitate exit than to prompt a desire to leave, in several cases the church, a pastor, or a religious neighbor or relative provided an additional force of attraction toward life outside the gang.

So far I have tried to separate the endogenous factors that make life in the gang lose its luster for gang youth from the exogenous factors attracting them outward. The former can be compared with the characteristics of the gang elaborated in the last chapter which “pull” youth into the gang while the latter could be compared with the negative social context which “pushes” them toward it—except that in this case, the direction of
the forces are reversed since the individuals now belong to the gang. But few interviewees actually separated the motives for leaving or singled them out in any organized fashion. Many spoke of the desire to “have a future” and followed up the expression with recollections about fearing an early death and wanting to have a family. Thus, the “push” and “pull” forces can sometimes represent two sides of the same coin. Nor was the decision to leave a simple matter of rationally calculating changes in the costs and benefits of belonging to the gang. Rather, as life in the gang became increasingly oppressive, gang youth began considering the prospects of life beyond the gang for the first time and often this led them to begin seeking out contexts that would allow them to cultivate an identity not related to the gang. Religion, family, work, or school, more-or-less in that order, provided promising opportunities to cultivate such an identity. But my point in this section is simply to draw attention to some of the most common reasons causing gang members to question their future in the gang and propelling them to begin searching for possible pathways out of the gang.

Barriers to Leaving the Gang

Pancho, the 26-year-old former member of the MS-13 in Honduras, believed that the gang kept close tabs on his everyday activities. “The gang keeps its eye on you at all times,” he said. The gang knows what I do, where I live, and what I think. And sometimes I think they even know what I eat.” Pancho knows well that leaving the gang is no simple matter. Although countless gang members do in fact come to question their original decision to join, a great many of these youth, probably the majority, never
manage to completely extricate themselves from the gang. In the U.S., gang affiliation was traditionally seen as merely a “stage” of adolescence—albeit one often associated with street crime and delinquency. Even today most gang members in the U.S. are expected to eventually “mature out” of the gang (Boueke 2007b; Vigil 1988). A few highly-involved leaders may stay on and remain active but most will find a job or begin a family. In the Central American transnational gangs, however, it appears that a much smaller percentage of youth actually leave. Why is this the case? In the following section I describe three key barriers to leaving the gang mentioned by multiple ex-gang members in each country. These factors could be summed up in the parlance of the gang as la morgue (the possibility of being killed for leaving), la vida loca (a taste for risky, debilitating addictions), and el chance (the possibility of finding a job). Admittedly, the first two barriers to leaving the gang sound a lot like the factors named as causing many to wish to leave in the first place. I will discuss this seeming contradiction later in the chapter.

There is a very simple reason why a great many gang members in Central America never leave the gang—they simply do not live long enough to get out. Their involvement with drug-dealing and gun-wielding eventually catches up with them in the form of the “boomerang effect” of homicides that ricochet around the barrio, ending the lives of teenage gang members long before they might even consider “aging out” of the gang. In other cases, “social cleansing” at the hands of police or local vigilantes ends gang members’ lives before they can leave. I asked former gang members from each country and a variety of cliques to recall as best they could, the number of gang members formerly belonging to their own clique that were still alive. In nearly every case, the ex-
gang members claimed that a minority of the original clique were still alive and living in the area. Some had migrated to another region or country but most, the participants reported, were no longer living. Below is an excerpt of a conversation I had with Emerson, an evangelical convert who left the M-18 following a dramatic conversion in 2006:

What about your former gang-mates? Where are they now? The one's that didn't leave the gang?
Hmm. Of the thirty-five of us in the clique, give or take a few, three or four are in prison, one serving a sentence of 106 years. Four others are Christians, of these only two are you might say, doing well, and the other two have their ups and downs. The rest, maybe twenty, are no more. “They’ve gone into mining” as we used to say in the gang.

I expressed dismay at the high mortality rate—over half of his clique of thirty-five. Were these vengeance killings I wanted to know? Emerson did not think so. Rather, he believed that the majority of these youth were killed by non-gang members, usually the police. “What they do is they’ll pick someone up, take them away and kill them and dump the body in another place.” As an example, Emerson cited the story of one member of his own clique who was overweight—so much so that the gang nicknamed him “Fat” (using the English word instead of the very common and generally inoffensive “Gordo”).

Fat always used to have problems with the police and they always gave him a hard time. One day the police arrived in a box truck. They grabbed him, threw him inside and took him somewhere else, tortured him and threw his body in a

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A major exception to this rule was the group of ex-gang members who had simultaneously exited two neighboring cliques in a satellite community of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Between those two cliques, while about a dozen youth had been killed and several others lived in the U.S., the majority of former members, about twenty-five in all, still lived in the neighborhood.
ravine. His face and arms were all scraped like they had dragged him from the back of a pick up or something.

Emerson who had himself been beaten by police behind closed doors, expressed anger at the police for killing his former gang mate in such fashion. “There’s no need for that kind of torture. If you’re going to kill someone, just put a couple of bullets in his head. Instead they just, from all appearances, killed Fat by mutilation. The police hate gang members.” Police killings of gang members and other forms of “social cleansing” have indeed been documented. Even high level officers of the Guatemalan National Police have admitted that some members of the police take part in such extrajudicial killings although the officers argue that institutional and governmental authorities do not approve of their actions (Ranum 2007). But there is no way to be certain just how many of the bodies of gang members turning up daily on the streets of Guatemala City, Honduras, and San Pedro are victims of rival wars, of police, or armed vigilante groups.

Roberto, who spent years in the M-18, reported that of twenty-two former members, only four were alive at the time of his interview in 2007. “Only four of us are still alive and of these, one is completely overwhelmed by alcoholism, one is an entrepreneur who owns two bakeries and takes care of his family, one more is a pastor and myself. Only four. The rest, all, all, all, all were assassinated. The last one died this year. He was the youngest. Only nineteen.” Roberto went on to describe the circumstances of several of the deaths, most of them having to do with the boomerang effect of gang paybacks or drug wars. Antonio reported that of the twenty-five members belonging to the clique he founded, three were still alive when he left the gang at
nineteen. At the time of the interview, he knew of only one other member who was still living.

Although I know no means of establishing with certainty the actual proportion of gang youth who are killed while still in the gang, evidence exists to support the very high mortality rate reported by the ex-gang members interviewed for this study. For example, from 1998-2002, before the government crack-down on gangs, the non-partisan Casa Alianza documented the violent deaths of 1,250 Honduran minors and youth 22-years-old and younger (Bardales 2007). During a similar four-year span from 2001-2005, the number of “extra-judicial killings” of minors jumped to 2,825 (Sibaja et al. 2006b). We have no way of knowing how many of these youth had ever belonged to a gang but many, probably the majority, did. Only in prison are formal records of gang deaths kept since gang members there are kept in separate cell blocks or units. Not included in the figures cited above were 235 gang members killed while serving time in a Honduran prison during the early 2000s. Nearly two hundred of these died in two separate incidents involving prison fires of suspicious origin. Meanwhile the Ombudsman of Human Rights in Guatemala documented 358 incidences of youth homicide during a thirteen-month period from 2002-2003 in that country and found evidence of “social cleansing” in 16.5 percent of all cases (Ranum 2007). More than one-half of all of the deaths were classified as gang-related.25

25 A gang-related death does not imply that a gang member has been killed. It simply means that authorities suspect gang involvement in the killing.
Thus, even allowing for considerable error in the reports of ex-gang members, it is clearly the case that many gang youth live a very short life, often not long enough to make a formal break with the gang. Furthermore, the above statements and statistics lend evidence to one of the most widely publicized features of the Central American gangs—the morgue rule. When youth join the Central American gang, many if not most are told over and over again that a commitment to the gang is a commitment “all the way to the morgue.” This rule is expressed in a variety of forms. In murals and tattoos, some variation of the phrase “¡Vivo por mi madre, muero por mi barrio!” or “I live for my mother, I die for my barrio!” is intended to drive home the point. Symbols such as skulls and graves represent the immanence of death while the spider’s web, pictured in Figure 3.1, is said to symbolize the lifelong hold of the gang on its members.
Figure 3.1 shows a spider web tattoo belonging to a former member of the MS-13. The young man, who asked not to be identified, wears long sleeves whenever he leaves his home.

In this sense, the statement *hasta la morgue* is an affirmation, a slogan meant to underscore gang members’ lifelong identification with the gang. Isaac remembered being warned by a neighbor not to leave his neighborhood since several members of the opposing gang were armed and waiting near the bus stop. Having survived a gunshot wound to the head from the rival gang only one year earlier, the seventeen-year-old told his neighbor, “I don’t care. I’m not afraid of them. I’m in this *hasta la morgue*. I’m going
to die for my barrio.” A short while later, after a chase on foot, Isaac suffered two more gunshots, one in his leg and another in his chest, puncturing a lung.

But in other contexts, hasta la morgue clearly carried the connotation of a warning. In multiple interviews, ex-gang members told of being reminded by their leaders and gang mates that once in the gang, reconsidering the commitment was not an option. Neftali, a former Guatemalan member of the White Fence remembered it this way: “As our leader, a ranflero named Angel, used to say, ‘Here there is only one way to get out and that’s by way of your pine-box suit.’ ‘Your pine-box suit?’ I said. ‘What’s that?’ ‘Your coffin,’ he said. ‘Ahh,’ I said.” Enrique, who spent seven years in the Salvadoran MS-13, reported an “evolution” similar to the one of which Antonio spoke as having ushered in a new era in which gang exit was no longer possible. “Nowadays the gang has undergone an evolution and has lost its concept of living the gang life. It’s not the same anymore. You used to be able to leave the gang. Now, once you’re in, the only way out is via the cemetery.”

On the surface, the morgue rule seems counterproductive. What could possibly be accomplished through the application of such a brutal and inhumane code? After all, as some youth remembered wondering, “Wasn’t this supposed to be my new family?”

Several interviewees described the logic of the morgue rule in their testimonies. Olivia put it this way:

If you want to go straight (cuadrar) you have to do something big like make a hit (hacer algún jale). You have to kill someone. But nowadays they’re not giving out squares anymore. Nowadays because so many people left, because they left and they kept on robbing and smoking up, the homies had to put a stop to giving out squares. Now the homies that want to leave, they just kill them right off the
bat. Imagine how many guys would love to leave if they could because they get tired of it, especially now the way things are.

Although Olivia mentions at first the possibility of “earning” one’s squares (right to leave safely) she goes on to say that this is no longer the case. In Olivia’s view, the morgue rule was the gang’s response to an earlier wave of attrition. It was a pragmatic attempt at discouraging gang members from disaffiliating. But there are other “rational” motives behind the rule. Oscar, the former M-18 ranflero described the logic of the morgue rule as an attempt to stop information leakage:

Remember that you’re taking information with you, their contacts. So in that sense they liquidate you not because the gang would be weaker if you’re not there because the same day you leave, three or four more will enter. No, it’s the information, and it’s the means of repressing the rest, to make sure they don’t leave. It’s a control mechanism. . . If there weren’t any rules, there would be no more gangs.

Oscar reminds us here of the symbolic nature of the morgue rule, which serves to bring home the seriousness of the enterprise for all members. By punishing deserters with the most severe form of punishment possible, the death penalty, gang leaders demonstrate to the rest that joining a gang is not to be confused with an everyday commitment like joining a club or enrolling in school. In this sense the morgue rule demonstrates the classical sociologist Emile Durkheim’s observation that punishment builds group solidarity because it provides a ritual means of sacralizing group values (Durkheim 1895/1982). Gang members who withdraw, especially those who do so without the permission of the gang leader (who rarely grants it), violate the solidarity of the group. In Honduras, gang deserters are given a special name, pesetas. To pesetear is to back out of the gang and is usually considered a capital offense. Beto, the Honduran former M-18 ranflero mentioned earlier, tells us that pesetas are not given lightly: When someone is given pesetas it’s because they’re a bad member of the gang. It’s a way of saying that you’ll be treated as if you were dead and no one would miss you.
leader, recounted in chilling detail the event of an application of the morgue rule on a
former M-18 gang-mate who had tattoo-ed an “x” over his gang tattoos in attempt to
“prove” his disassociation from the gang:

One of them (pesetas) left the gang after awhile and was going around with his
tattoos crossed out. And we would roast anyone who crossed off his tattoos. So
somebody told us that he was around. We caught him and took off his shirt and all
of us gave him a good kicking. Then we took him to the river and the other
ranking member, decided that a gun would make too much noise. “We’d better
kill him with a machete,” he said. “But I want to test you (probarlos).” “Let’s see
what you’re made of.” And of the four of us that were there that day, I’m the only
one still alive—and anyway he told me, “Okay man, (orale buey) you first.” So I
grabbed the machete. . .

Beto’s description of the killing illustrates with chilling clarity the extent to which
the application of the morgue rule can take on a ritual character with obvious symbolic
meaning for the group. All four members present were obliged to play a role in the act
thereby solidifying their own commitment to the gang, its principles, and its symbols.
The sacredness of the tattoo, violated by this unfortunate youth, was to be protected with
jealous and brutal zeal.

Nevertheless, despite constant warnings and affirmations, the morgue rule is not
absolute. It is clearly not the case that every gang member who joins remains active in the
gang until death. In fact, most of the data for this book come from sixty-two interviews
with youth who joined the gang, left, and lived to tell the story. To my knowledge, only
Antonio has been killed in the nearly two years since I first began interviewing ex-gang
members. So, how have these former gang members, some of whom still bear tattoos in prominent places, managed to dodge the wrath of their former homies? A number of alternatives exist in order to escape or assuage the wrath of the barrio. First, the gang is not always capable of enforcing the morgue rule. In some cases the death of a leader can lead to a chaotic and violent power struggle that eliminates or forces into seclusion the most active members of the clique and provides a kind of “window of opportunity” for lower-level members to disaffiliate. If a neighboring gang is also struggling and fails to immediately “take over” the territory of its rival, especially younger members of the gang may seize the opportunity to abandon the gang completely, erasing tattoos, changing their manner of dress, and going back to school or looking for work. Although several of the ex-gang members interviewed reported this pathway of escaping a wounded or destroyed local clique, such moments appear to be somewhat rare.

A second, more common strategy for gang members who become aburridos (fed up with) of gang life involves becoming a pandillero calmado, or “settled-down gang member.” Gang members who have reached adulthood, generally around the mid-to-late twenties, and desire to “calm down” may sometimes be allowed the option of retaining their affiliation but lowering their activity and participation in the gang. Among

26 I have no way of knowing for sure the motive behind Antonio’s death. However, given the totality of Antonio’s interview and a follow-up interview with his widow, who witnessed the crime, a good deal of evidence exists to suggest that the killing was meant to complete “unfinished business” related to earlier attempts on his life.

27 Interestingly, I have never heard anyone use the term “marero calmado” to refer to the same phenomenon. The fact that “marero,” the newer term for gang member, is never paired with “settling down” seems to indicate that “settling down” is associated with the older street-corner gangs (pandillas) but is less common among the transnational gangs (maras).
the typical reasons given for wanting to *calmarse* are the birth of a child or cohabiting with the intent to start a family. A settled-down member does not typically remove tattoos, and although he or she may modify his or her mode of dress, the *calmado* must continue to respect the gang mystique and hate the rival gang. Some authors suggest that what sets *calmados* apart from currently-active, full-fledged members is that the former do not participate in violence or consume illegal drugs (Cruz and Portillo 1998).

However, several participants in this study suggested that *calmados* can be expected to “help out” on occasion in the event of a major gang war or a significant criminal venture. Others reported that *calmados* are expected to continue paying gang dues in order to keep the gang supplied with weapons. In fact, one former *calmado* reported that he himself “wore out” after living as a *calmado* for a time due to the constant expectation to contribute and continue attending meetings. Similarly, Neftali achieved a kind *calmado* status after announcing to the gang that he would be moving in with his girlfriend. Nevertheless, he was told by the *ranflero* (gang lord), “It’s true, things will be different now, but we’ll still expect to see you at three meetings (*mitins*) a week. None of this, ‘Congratulations-be-sure-and-send-us-a-postcard!’ business.” Asked if he had been hoping to be allowed complete freedom from the gang after announcing his intention to begin a family, Neftali responded, “I was hoping, in my heart, that this would be my second chance.” In fact, Neftali continued attending meetings and “going after enemies” until, at a later date, a very different experience would lead him to make his break with the gang formal and permanent.

One way to think of the option to *calmarse* is to compare it with the status of a reservist in the armed forces. *Pandilleros calmados* vary considerably in their level of on-
going commitment to the gang, and it is likely that those who continue long enough will, because of their diminishing network ties with new leaders and younger members, retire from the gang for all intents and purposes. On the other hand, some calmados find their status changed from reservist back to active duty precipitously and against their will when a gang war is initiated, be it by the local or the rival ranflero. Thus, in a sense, the calmado option is often viewed as less than ideal at best and at worst, scarcely an improvement over regular membership. Still, in light of the spike in gang violence and the fear of the morgue rule, the option to calmarse is one of the most common means of dealing with a limited array of options.

One more note worth pointing out: some ex-gang members reported that the calmado option was for some youth in fact a smoke-screen for moving from working for the gang to criminal “free-lancing” in the drugs and organized crime sector or for becoming a professional hit man. After all, once a youth has learned to navigate life on the street—accessing and using firearms and learning the “tricks” of the drug trade—why should he have to use his skills in the exclusive service of the gang? If by diminishing his formal ties with the gang, he is able to find a modicum of safety as a reservist calmado the lucrative nature of criminal street work is no less attractive than before. If this is true, it may help to explain the reports of Olivia, Enrique and others who testified to the gang’s increasing reticence to give calmados a “pass.” To the extent that some calmados continued in trades the gang wished to monopolize, some gang leaders appear to have viewed them as unwanted competitors for business.

Another means of leaving the gang while avoiding the morgue rule, perhaps nearly as common as the option to calmarse is to migrate. Leaving one’s community or
city to pursue a life either permanently or semi-permanently elsewhere is one of the most common escape routes for youth “sick and tired” of the gang lifestyle. Not surprisingly, the United States is one of the most popular destinations for migrating gang members. In fact, some gang members who migrate to the United States are in fact “returning” to their gang home after having been deported by U.S. authorities (Quirk 2008). But many others are seeking refuge from the violence of their gang home. Sometimes, fleeing to the U.S. leads to a truly “settled-down” lifestyle in el Norte, as in the case of Lorenzo, a Honduran ex-member of the Batos Locos who is well-known to several interviewees. Lorenzo has even helped other ex-gang members from his former clique by occasionally sending money when they are unable to find work. In other cases, the trip to el Norte does not go as planned or ends in deportation. Beto spent two months trying to cross Mexico but lost the use of his foot in an accident while trying to board a moving train in Saltillo near Monterrey. Sergio, a Honduran former member Bato Loco had been deported from Miami just a few days prior to our interview. Since leaving the gang several years earlier he had spent over two years in the U.S. Of course, the motives for migrating to the United States usually involve a mixture of a search for opportunities as well as an escape from the gang and the morgue rule.

Instead of heading northward for the U.S., many gang members move “horizontally” across Central American borders or between major cities in order to escape their ties to the gang. Miguel, a Guatemalan who had belonged to the MS-13, reported having left Guatemala City and moved to San Marcos, a mostly rural province bordering Mexico. He made his decision to migrate when he learned of his girlfriend’s pregnancy and decided it was time to settle down, but it was facilitated by the death of
the local leader providing him with a “window of opportunity” since the gang was too weak to track down deserters. Other gang leavers used family networks to move back and forth across Central American borders in order to acquire anonymity. Oliver returned to Honduras from Guatemala after several relatives died in a drug-related killing. Andres left San Salvador to move to Guatemala with his partner where his grandmother lived. After two years of struggling to find work, he returned to his home in San Salvador.

Among female gang members, the pathways to leaving appear to be more numerous and accessible. Recent survey and interview research affirms the view among male and female gang members interviewed for this study that women are more commonly allowed to disaffiliate than men (Medina and Mateu-Gelabert 2009). Olivia reported that, although most cells have stopped granting permission to leave, a female gang member has “done her part” for the gang has at least a chance of receiving her “squares” if she reports that she is pregnant. Male gang members are not necessarily granted permission to leave when they become fathers.

Finally, in addition to migrating or becoming a calmado, gang members seeking a viable means of escaping the morgue rule can consider one other alternative. They can become an evangelical Christian. In dozens of interviews with both religious and non-religious ex-gang members, and with Catholic, evangelical, and non-religious rehab coordinators, participants told me of a religious exception allowed by almost all gang

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28 I do not mean to suggest that female gang members are treated with special gloves. In fact, Olivia herself recalled her horror when witnessing the brutal “execution” of a pregnant gang mate by gang leaders, ostensibly for the crime of “treason.” Clearly, at least some of the exponential growth in femicide in Guatemala can be attributed to the murder of female gang members and sympathizers.
leaders in the application of the morgue rule. In fact, so many informants spoke of this exception that I eventually came to call it “the evangelical escape.” Many ranfleros, it turns out, possess a kind of latent religiosity of their own and are fearful of applying the morgue rule to a deserter who has reported having undergone a religious transformation. “Converted” gang members are typically given time and space to “prove” the authenticity of their transformation by adopting and maintaining the strict, pietistic morality of their new evangelical fraternity. No more smoking weed, crack, or cigarettes, no more hanging out at the bar, and no more selling drugs or carrying weapons. Oscar, one of a handful of ex-gang members interviewed who managed to leave without converting or leaving his country, nevertheless confirmed the existence of the evangelical escape.

If you become a Christian the gang leaves you alone and doesn’t bother you. But they’re still watching you, following you to see if it’s for real or if it’s just an excuse you’re using. They find you drinking some place and, oops, you’ve been lying to them. Maybe they’ll let you have a good time for the night but pretty soon they find you and liquidate you. That’s the way it works.

Clearly, both the escape and the need for “proof” sought by gang leaders have motives and consequences that cry out for a deeper sociological analysis. In the next chapter we will examine the issues related to the clause including how and when it works as well as what actually happens if and when a conversion should fizzle. For the moment, my point is merely that the pathway exists and that, like migrating or becoming a calmado, leaving via conversion carries requirements and risks of its own. In short, despite the various alternatives and exceptions to the morgue rule, the fear of falling victim to it nevertheless remains as an enormous disincentive to leaving the gang even among older gang members who no longer wish to continue. Gang members must weigh
the dangers of continuing in the gang and falling victim to the “boomerang effect” on the one hand, with the likelihood on the other that the gang can and will punish them with the morgue rule if they try to desert. In either case, there are no guarantees.

The morgue rule is not the only disincentive to leaving. Finding a job with a steady income to replace the revenue provided by gang work is a second major barrier. In the popular vernacular of northern Central America, work and a steady job are often referred to as chance, and individuals, especially men who have put in a long day may say that they have been chanceando. Foremost on the minds of gang members seeking to “settle down” is the matter of finding un chance. The term is a curious Anglicism, the English roots of which highlight the precarious nature of employment in Central America. Finding a steady job for young men in the barrio is in no small measure a game of chance requiring among other things a mixture of perseverance, trusting friends and family, and a good deal of luck. For young men who are known by family, friends, and local authorities for having belonged to a gang, the possibility of finding un chance is especially remote. Very few gang members hold a high school diploma. In fact, the decision to join the gang usually coincides with abandoning formal education in junior high school or earlier. Thus, most gang members lack the formal requirements for any jobs except the lowest-paying blue-collar or maquila jobs, salaries of which pale in comparison to a single afternoon’s work selling drugs.

29 Sometimes, especially in El Salvador, work or a job is known popularly as chamba. Working hard is called chambeando.
Furthermore the vast majority of gang members who have been active in the gang for any considerable amount of time have acquired during those years a criminal record. When employers require that job applicants present antecedentes penales (an official record showing any prior penal record)—and many if not most employers seeking to hire for the formal economy make this requirement—gang members find that their chances become even slimmer. Many if not most of the ex-gang members I interviewed had spent time in prison. In the especially tight job market of Central America, few employers are willing to take a chance on hiring someone with a criminal record. Like the African-American men in Devah Pager’s study of job-seekers with a felony record (Pager 2009), Central American gang youth are “marked” by their criminal record and few have skin light enough to “override” their criminal past.30

The presence of tattoos is a further hindrance to acquiring formal employment. Wilmer, a former member of the Batos Locos, has spent two years looking for work following his release from prison for participating in a homicide but his tattoos and, compounded no doubt by his reputation and his criminal record, have so far kept him from even the lowest-paying maquila jobs.

The truth is, with these tattoos it’s really hard to find a job. You can go out looking for work. I’m a painter and an artist. I’ll do any design or mural for you, and I’ve done several projects for Bro. Nathan [the local gang ministry promoter] with lettering and everything. I’m very good at this stuff so I do little odd jobs (chambitas) that come up but right now that’s what I live on, little odd jobs.

30 Although the racial pyramid has more variety in Mesoamerica than in the typically two-tiered North American heritage, brown skin and indigenous-mestizo facial features put most barrio youth at an enormous disadvantage when seeking employment whether or not they have ties to the gang.
Sadly, Wilmer’s income from chambitas are stretched even thinner by his responsibility not only for his own daughter but for the three children of his brother, killed several years earlier in a gang war. One of those children, a seven-year-old with a hearing disability, sat listlessly on his lap during part of the interview. In order to remove the visible stigma carried by tattoos, tattoo removal has become an increasingly common clinical procedure for job-seeking youth and adults, many of whom may never have belonged to a gang at all. At Adios Tatuajes, a Catholic-sponsored tattoo-removal clinic on the outskirts of Guatemala City, the staff estimated that about one-half of the youth seeking the inexpensive but painful infrared treatment, have current or former ties to the gang. Many private security firms and maquilas (clothing assembly factories), typically the most likely job opportunities for Central American males without a diploma, now require a strip search of all job applicants prior to serious consideration for employment. In fact, so great is the generalized fear of the gang and the possibility of employees with connections to the gang, that some current employees are now being required to remove tattoos, even after years of problem-free work in a position, in order to “prove” their gang-free status. Obviously, given the gang’s jealousy of its status and symbols, gang members seeking to remove a tattoo in the process of leaving the gang must also consider the possibility of repercussions from former homies. For this reason, some ex-gang members who are able to find work via family or social networks choose not to remove some or all of their tattoos. Antonio removed only those on his face, leaving others on his neck and body, but he still found himself the target of members of his former gang. In the second unsuccessful attempt on his life, the two youth who shot at him at close range referred to his erased tattoos shortly before they opened fire. Another reason for delaying
removal is that the infrared method, the only safe technique economically within reach for most Central Americans, does not always produce a desirable result. Scarring or “staining” is common, and provides erstwhile homies with an easy means of identifying an ex-gang member.

Even youth who do not have prominent or visible tattoos or who take the risky step of removing them nevertheless find themselves at a disadvantage when seeking a job. Social ties, perhaps even more than in the U.S., represent a key currency when looking for work and joining the gang always involves some degree of burning bridges with family, friends, and especially neighbors. Gang members seeking to leave the gang and settle down to a “work-a-day” lifestyle find that outside the gang, few hold them in any regard other than that of fear or loathing. Nor are such fears completely without basis. Many mom-and-pop corner stores or other small businesses have hired youth to work the counter or the back room only to find themselves robbed or extorted by these youth or their gang friends after a few months. Thus even the former gang member who has promised to leave behind all former ties to the gang faces an audience of skeptics among would-be employers including, and even especially, those who know him and watched him grow up.

Asked what was the hardest part about learning to live outside the gang, JJ, the Guatemalan former White Fence leader responded, “Respect, homies, and cocaine—in that order.” A third barrier to leaving the gang involves the third aspect in JJ’s list—the addictions associated with what gang members refer to as “la vida loca.” This “crazy lifestyle” goes far beyond Ricky Martin’s innocuous song about a girl who makes men crazy to the point of “dancing naked in the rain.” For the gang member, la vida loca
represents all manner of macho risk-taking including violence, drugs, sex, and weapons. Leonardo found that having to give up carrying a gun was one of the most difficult aspects of leaving the gang. Both for the protection it offered “just in case” and for the feeling of security it provided, gun-toting became for him, a hard habit to kick. Tomàs, one of two gang members interviewed in prison, felt that giving up womanizing and drugs was the hardest. “Here in prison it’s harder to be an ex-gang member. Doesn’t matter which side you’re on. For an ex-gang member, what’s hardest to give up are women and drugs. I never had a problem with the drugs. For me the hardest thing to give up is the women.”

Other gang members struggled with domestic abuse (from the side of the abuser). Many interviewees spoke openly about the drug and alcohol addictions that dogged their attempts to be free of the gang. Substance abuse, especially the consumption of illegal substances, requires considerable investments of time and money and both of these resources are in short supply for the gang member who has recently given up his access to income from illegal activity—the kind that pays handsomely for short, risky gigs of drug-running and extortion. Clearly, a few of the former gang members I interviewed in Honduras still had problems with substance abuse—as many as five years after their gang had disbanded. Ovidio, a former Bato Loco, complained of his miserable maquila salary of US$45 per week and dreamed of going to the U.S. where he could make real money.

Tomàs resides in a medium security prison that allows inmates a remarkable amount of independence—like visiting day when family, including wives and partners are allowed private visitation on throughout the large prison farm, including within cells.
But the same youth also confessed that he liked to smoke weed and that his girlfriend kept “nagging” him for money for taking care of their baby daughter.\textsuperscript{32} Abusing alcohol and drugs produces more than chemical dependency. The ritual of getting wasted \textit{together} is a ritual that produces both solidarity and builds the gang member’s macho, devil-may-care image. Thus swearing off drugs and alcohol can undermine his status and erode his “respect.” Since the gang provides plentiful access to recreational drugs, leaving means giving up easy access to drugs and the recreational rituals associated with them. When Beto spoke of obstacles he faced when contemplating a decision to leave the gang, I asked him to explain them. “First, drugs. Drugs and respect. In the gang you have to act furious. No one can tell you anything and anyone that talks back to you, you give them a fist or worse. I said to myself, ‘If I leave, then people are going to go around humiliating me.” Beto’s statement underscores the extent to which gang members become attached not merely to drugs and violence but to the practice of using the gang lifestyle of using chemicals, anger, and violence as a means to escape chronic shame. To leave the gang is to risk returning to the humiliation of pathological shame. And indeed, many gang members did speak of entering a deep depression when they migrated or went into hiding to escape the gang. Antonio found himself in depression when he couldn’t find a job after moving to a different area of the city. Smoking pot provided a temporary means of escape but further drained his resources and kept him from continuing his job search. “Shut in, running from the gang, without work or money. I thank God that my

\textsuperscript{32} In three cases (not this one) I had to cut an interview short when it became clear that a subject was not sober.
Mom helped me out. If not, I would have starved, you know? Or I would have had to go back to robbing people.”

The Haven That Became a Hell: The Evolution of Gang Experience

Many of the “barriers” to leaving the gang cited by the ex-gang members were the same phenomena that prompted them to consider leaving in the first place. The young men and women who reported wanting to leave the gang “before it’s too late” also worried that by leaving, they would forfeit protection from their enemies as well as earn a “green light” or death warrant from those who remained in the gang and sought to uphold the morgue rule. Similarly, the same drug habits that caused the youth to wish to be free of the gang lifestyle, also proved very difficult habits to break, even though many gang leaders expected calmados or deserters to rid themselves of their former habits. And finally, while many gang youth dreamed at first of “settling down” to a work-a-day lifestyle with a steady job and a family, actually finding a job invariably proved extremely difficult not least because affiliation with the gang, past or present, had come to hold a loathsome status in many local neighborhoods as well as the national media.

Nor does the apparent conceptual confusion stop there. In fact, many of the aspects of gang life that prompted youth to try to leave the gang were in fact the very same features that brought them into the gang in the first place. This feature came to my attention as I listened to ex-gang members describe life in the gang as both exciting and comforting—a haven where disenfranchised youth could express themselves, find belonging and experience pride. But alongside that description of gang life as family—
the “haven in a heartless world”—was a very different description of the gang. Often the very same participants who described gang life as exhilarating, also described it as frustrating, fear-inducing hardship—a hell-on-earth that prompted them to go to take great risks and undergo real hardship in an attempt to be “free.” Which is the real nature of the gang? Is it heaven or hell? A refuge of solidarity or an island of nightmarish torment? The truth, of course, is that it is both. Most ex-gang members, like Pancho in the last chapter, remembered their earliest experiences with the gang with a mixture of nostalgia and excitement. Taking part in violence and crime was exciting at first. Drugs, alcohol, and la vida loca provided a shortcut to adulthood and a sense of power and personal efficacy in taking an active role in how to spend their time and determine their future. The gang cell was a haven of fraternity and solidarity. Taken together, these experiences led to a new sense of pride and an escape from the debilitating shame spiral. But in most cases it did not take long for the haven to become a hell. Participating in violence soon brought consequences in the form of escalating barrio wars and the acquisition of ever more enemies from rival gang members. “Success” in carrying out strikes on enemy territory brought increased privileges for the perpetrators but it also brought increased notoriety among enemy cells. Police began to arrest and torture gang members, often simply giving them a “working over” rather than going through the paperwork and court hearings necessary to prosecute a minor. Furthermore, friends and families of gang members’ victims, frustrated by the inability or unwillingness of the police to properly punish suspects, often took it upon themselves to identify and “punish” those they believe to be responsible for their loved-one’s death. All of these factors led to the boomerang effect that brought an element of realism to a violence that seemed like
entertainment at first. Similarly, what began as an affirmative rallying cry, the slogan *hasta la morgue* eventually morphed into an ominous warning. Gang members who were thought to be considering abandoning the gang were reminded of their commitment and the motto soon became a curse.

Just as important, even as the subjective experience of individual gang members changed from one of euphoria to one of fear given their own changing position within the gang structure, the nature and structure of gangs in the region as a whole “evolved” as well. What several ex-gang members described as an “evolution” of the gang has been described as the larger shift from the *pandilla* street gangs of the 1970s and 1980s to the violent, organized *mara* of the late 1990s and 2000s (Rubio 2007). The testimonies of the ex-gang members in this study is further evidence of a transformation in gang structure and tactics due in large part to the increasing availability of illegal drugs and weapons. Although the *pandillas* of the past no doubt always engaged in a certain level of drug consumption, violence and crime, an emerging “small arms race” in the hemisphere (Moser 2002) and around the globe (Fleshman 2001) near the turn of the millennium meant that the gangs suddenly found themselves equipped to “protect the barrio” and its enterprises in a far more brutal fashion than ever before. What had begun as a game of identity-enhancing skirmishes over disputed territory and symbols soon appeared more like a larger-scale war. And as in other wars, the foot soldiers are likely to become mutinous as their chances of survival become increasingly doubtful.
Conclusion

For many gang members who have spent years in the gang, the thought of leaving the gang is at once enticing and intimidating. A variety of social factors push and pull youth toward leaving. The fear of being killed by the “boomerang effect” of pay-back violence or by jealous gang mates while still in the gang, a weariness from having constantly to project intimidation, the pull of non-gang friends and family, and a desire to start one’s own family all affect aging gang members at some point, causing them to at least consider the possibility of leaving the gang. But a number of related forces also cause many gang members to think twice about leaving. The morgue rule and the constant fear of being killed as a deserter or peseta, the pull of addictions related to la vida loca, and skepticism about the possibility of ever being able to find un chance (a steady job) all provide disincentives to leaving the gang, and taken together these obstacles keep many gang members from ever severing ties with the gang. Even those gang members that do decide to make a definitive break with the gang find themselves hemmed in by a variety of personal and social barriers that make learning to live “on the outside” a tall order at best. After four years of rebuilding his life after the gang, JJ, the former Guatemalan White Fence cell leader explained the challenges of learning to live without the gang in this way: “When you leave the gang, it’s like you’ve just been born.” His metaphor captures the sense in which ex-gang members are in an especially precarious position of vulnerability and innocence when they abandon the gang. “Marked” in both a literal and a figurative sense, many find starting over without the gang a difficult if not impossible task to accomplish by themselves. No wonder Dr. Kepfer, a clinical psychiatrist who treats gang minors in detention concluded when asked
how gang members might be helped to leave the gang shook his head and concluded, “Take them to another planet.” His comment was meant to underscore the sheer difficulty of succeeding in life after the gang but it also highlights the need for a wholesale change of social context when starting over. Of course, no such literal extra-terrestrial migrations are possible. And yet there is a cultural voyage that, in some respects, comes close to planetary migration. The gang member seeking to completely sever his ties to the gang and publicly renounce his former affiliation can “emigrate” to a social planet with a very different cultural landscape—he can join an evangelical congregation. The following chapter examines how and why a surprising number of “fed up” gang members have taken hold of the “evangelical escape” from the morgue rule, joining an evangelical-Pentecostal church in an attempt to make a radical break with the past and access resources for “settling down” to a decidedly distinct future.
Every gang member knows perfectly well that the only known escape from the
gangs is by death. But the evangelical Christian, those of us that do the work of
God, we know that Jesus Christ is the other escape.

Danilo, Honduran ex-member of MS-13

Look if you’ve belonged to a gang and you don’t want to keep active, there are
three things the gang respects. The first is if you’ve become a Christian, but it has
to be for real. That they will respect, as long as you’re not messing with matters of
God.

Guatemalan M-18 member, quoted in (Medina and Mateu-Gelabert 2009)

On the day Ricardo, alias “El Zuipi” (Mosquito), found himself weeping at the
foot of the altar at the Prince of Peace Pentecostal church across the street from his home,
the news spread so rapidly through the neighborhood that the half-empty church quickly
filled with curious onlookers. “When they heard that El Zuipi of the Batos Locos was
accepting Christ crying, people gathered around the church building,” Ricardo
remembered.

They were jumping above the wall just to get a look and see if it was true that I
was really accepting Christ. I mean, it was really a special moment, not just a
regular old service but a service where the people realized that I was really accepting Christ. Afterward I went straight to my stash and grabbed my three cartons of marihuana and dumped it in the toilet. A few days later I took my chimbas [homemade firearms] and gave them to Brother Ricardo [the local Mennonite peace promoter]. That’s when I started preaching and declaring, as the Bible text says, “Therefore if anyone be in Christ, [they] are a new creature.”

Ricardo, former leader and founding member of the local Honduran cell of the Batos Locos, tells his story of a sinner-to-saint transformation of the kind heralded in many a religious magazine or evangelistic sermon. From a moment of despair to one of release, excitement and even elation at having found a new pathway forward, through a difficult, even lethal situation. When I met Ricardo in 2007 it was hard to imagine him as a homie, much less a gang leader. The twenty-five year old had a paunch, no visible tattoos, parted his hair on the side, and kept a perennially upbeat demeanor. He used the evangelical insider greeting of hermano or hermana (brother or sister in the Lord) when addressing other evangelicals on the street and he spoke often and with excitement about evangelization opportunities in this neighborhood and others. Ricardo pastors a new church in another community, and soon after we met he told me excitedly that his congregation had been upgraded from campo blanco or “white field,” evangelical-speak for a church plant in the early stages, to a full-fledged congregation by the denomination. In addition to pastoring, Ricardo works part time as a peace promoter for the Honduran Mennonite Peace and Justice Commission and has taken several classes toward a certificate in conflict transformation. He is also in charge of planning and coordinating

33 This is a direct translation to English of Ricardo’s recollection of this oft-repeated verse, not a reproduction of the text, 2 Cor. 5:17, in an actual Bible translation.
occasional tattoo-removal campaigns, a trade he learned from the Catholic-sponsored
tattoo-removal clinic across town. If that were not enough, Ricardo is studying to finish
his high school diploma and looks forward to beginning studies at the university. He is a
busy man.

Ricardo’s charisma spills over into his everyday interaction. When interviewing
Ricardo I had trouble getting a word in edgewise. Glad to have the opportunity to tell his
story, Ricardo spoke quickly and at length, describing his entrance into the gang and the
part he played in its transformation from a mildly delinquent local street gang to a well-
organized criminal organization involved in the drug trade and violent crime. He used the
sing-song cadence of an evangelical preacher who’s found his rhythm, emphasizing
words at the end of a line or in a thematic climax. Despite his troubled past, perhaps even
in part because of it, Ricardo is proud of his status as an evangelical hermano.

This chapter addresses the three basic questions animating my research on gang
exit and religion from the beginning. First, why do gang members convert to evangelical
Christianity and how does conversion help them? What is it about evangelical conversion
that might allow the hermano to succeed in what is one of the difficult and dangerous of
task of un-becoming a homie? Second, does the pathway of evangelical conversion
“work” for the gang members who attempt it? That is, are converts able to “start over”
and become reintegrated as capable, contributing members of society? Lastly, just how
common is conversion among gang members? Is it a rare phenomenon that receives
special attention or are conversions actually frequent among those seeking to leave the
gang?
Leaving the Gang

In the last chapter I described the obstacles to a successful gang exit under three broad categories: staying alive in spite of the threat facing the penalty for desertion (\textit{la morgue}), overcoming dangerous and debilitating addictions associated with \textit{la vida loca}, and finding an income via a steady job (\textit{un chance}). The first of these three has to do with escaping the gang safely, the other two involve what Central American gang experts call “reinsertion,” or successfully reincorporating into a local community. But in reality, both un-becoming a homie and joining the non-gang society represent two sides of the same coin. They are part of the same struggle to reinvent one’s identity as a non-gang member who holds a job, and can be relied-upon as a father, partner, neighbor or friend. I separate them here for reasons of conceptual clarity.

By far the most immediate concern for many gang members “fed up” with the gang lifestyle and seeking to settle down to something more stable, is the ominous threat of the morgue rule. The rallying cry of solidarity, “All the way to the morgue!” can easily be used by the \textit{ranflero} (gang boss) as a threat to members of his cell who appear to be rethinking their commitment. But the morgue rule is not absolute. The most commonly-cited exception to the morgue rule is the rule that I have come to call the “evangelical escape clause.” Although “deserting” the gang is in many cases, a capital offense, many if not most gang cells allow a special pass for gang members who report having experienced an evangelical conversion. Here it is cited in a journalistic account of the MS-13 in Mexico:

\begin{quote}
Nobody gets out of the Mara Salvatrucha alive, they say. The only door that opens to them is that of the evangelical religious groups. . . . Many ex-gang members
\end{quote}
have found a place in churches and evangelical movements. In the mythology of the mareros (gang members) you don’t touch those that have found God and his pardon (Fernández and Ronquillo 2006).

Similarly, the former gang members interviewed in this study cited the conversion escape more than any other exit pathway as the safest, surest way to escape the gang without being targeted as a deserter. Some youth mentioned other means of exit such as migrating to another country or another city or simply waiting for one or more gang leaders to be killed leading to the opening of a “window of opportunity” for the rest of the members. A few ex-gang members mentioned paying a hefty fine that could put the gang leader at ease but this action appears to be less common now than in the past. But none of these exit strategies were mentioned as often, usually without any prompting, nor explained as explicitly as that of the conversion pathway. Vera, an ex-gang member interviewed at the Catholic tattoo-removal clinic responded to my question about how an ex-gang member might get out of the gang today by saying, “Really, the only way to get out is to get involved in the church one hundred percent. But the gang keeps watch over you day and night to see if you’re actually completing it.” Vera herself was not religious. She had managed to escape the gang several years earlier when her father sent her to a special home for recovering gang youth. During her second stay—she escaped and returned to the gang on the first visit—the leader of her cell was killed and many of the other members fled. Thus, she herself had decided to leave during a “window of opportunity” that allowed her to abandon the gang without leaving the community or joining the church. But she was convinced that leaving the gang now was a different story from when she left several years earlier. “Right now, leaving the gangs is hard,” she said.
Ester’s comment brings up another common claim related to the evangelical escape clause. Gang members who leave the gang in order to join a church or who claim a religious conversion are “monitored,” it is said, in order to make sure that their conversion is genuine. Uriel, a Guatemalan former member of the M-18 explained it this way:

You know there are many that have been given permission to leave the gang but what they tell you is . . . “Well, we’re going to give you your squares—squares means that they’re going to take you out of the gang without problems . . . [but] you have to attend a church. You can’t smoke anymore, you can’t drink anymore. If we see that you’re not attending church, that you’re drinking, you’re smoking, then [we] will kill you because if you left it was [supposedly] because you were going to change, to follow the paths of God.” But if you left to take it easy, to be free of the gang, that’s when they’ll kill you.

The claim that gang members “watch over” professed converts seemed difficult to believe at first. The report that a former gang member can be killed for “falsifying” a conversion was even more difficult to believe. But over and over and in each country, I was told a version of the same rule: false converts are subject to the same “green light” death warrant issued to deserters. I began asking converts if they knew personally of individuals who had converted but had not been able to keep up the strict moral demands of evangelical faith. What happened to them, I wanted to know? At least three gang members knew personally of other homies who, after reporting a religious conversion, were killed for not giving up the gang lifestyle completely. One converted ex-gang member reported that a good friend of his had actually become an itinerant evangelist after a long career in the MS-13, was later killed after having been found by the gang to be involved in extortion. The informant reported having disbelieved the rumor at first
since his friend had also been a spiritual mentor. But later evidence led him to accept as
ture the accusation of his friend’s illegal activity. Gustavo, a Guatemalan ex-gang
member I met at the tattoo-removal clinic, had converted after attending a Pentecostal
congregation in his neighborhood. During the course of his decision to convert, he
informed his gang leader, El Gato (The Cat) of his intention to leave the gang and join a
church:

When I went to El Gato, he told me, “Here, whoever enters only leaves dead.”
But I wanted to leave and I wanted a peaceful life. So he said, “Okay. You leave
and you have to go straight (cuadrar). If not, I will personally kill you.” The gang
told me that I had to change my vocabulary, way of dressing and no more tattoos,
no weapons and no keeping watch for anybody (no esquinas ni chequeo). Then
they still charged me three thousand quetzales [US$420]. . .

Do you know of anyone who was ever caught breaking the rules after joining the
church?
(Pause.) Yes. Owl (El Buho). He went to church and kept the rules, dressed right
and everything except he liked to smoke marijuana. He used to go with his
girlfriend to the Assembly of God church. One night the gang pulled him out of
church and shot him outside.

You mean they pulled him out right in the middle of the service?
Yes. They saw him. He smoked a joint right outside before going into the church.
Look, the gang takes religion very seriously and they don’t it like when people
mix the church and the gang.

The gang, it seems, sees religious conversion and the barrio as two separate, very
distinct, but equally serious endeavors. Gustavo’s account implies that while the gang
respects religion, gang members are not to be caught “mixing” church and barrio. Thus, a
gang member who professes a conversion must abandon the gang lifestyle completely,
including the abuse of drugs and alcohol and even the cholo style of dress. On the one
hand the evangelical escape clause “makes sense” from a strategic standpoint. Gang
deserters who embrace evangelical religion are not likely to join another gang or set up
shop as freelancers in the drugs, weapons, and extortion trade. For this reason, gang leaders can safely assume that converts—at least those that are serious—will not be competitors for business nor will they try to settle old scores from internal gang conflicts. But there is more to the escape clause than practical considerations. Both Vera, who was not a convert, and Gustavo, who was a very active one, asserted that behind the warning to would-be converts to “walk the talk” is the gang’s high regard for religion itself. Fernandez and Ronquillo claim that part of the gang “mystique” itself involves this high regard for strict religion (Fernández and Ronquillo 2006). In other words, in addition to the desire to make sure that leaving the gang is hard by promoting strict, moralistic religious commitment as “the only way out,” gang leaders themselves do not wish to kill ex-gang members who have genuinely made a commitment to God. Beto, a Honduran former member and cell leader who abandoned the M-18 in 2006, put it this way:

Around here there is permission to leave but always and only when you become a Christian. If you leave just to get away, Oof! Barbecue! And you have to talk to them too before you leave. And so [I went to see] a leader up the way in another neighborhood . . . who asked me, “Is it true that you’re going to church?” “Yes,” I told him. “So, what’s up? Are you going to change?” he said. “Truth is, yes,” I said. “Okay. You know that nobody messes with Curly (el Colacho). Not with Curly, not with the barrio. If you’re going to change, you’d better do it once and for all.”

Not sure to whom or what Beto was referring with the nickname, I stopped him to ask for clarification:

Don’t mess with what?
With Curly. That’s how they call God, Curly.
Oh, I get it. So you don’t mess with—
Curly.

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Yes but you said—
Not with Curly, not with the barrio.

As Beto’s responses to my somewhat flummoxed interjections make clear, “Curly” or el Colocho, represents God, and for gang bosses like Beto’s, neither Curly, nor the gang are to be “messed with.” Nor was Beto the only gang member to warn of the dangers of “messing” or “playing around” with God. One version or another of the phrase “You don’t mess with God” was mentioned on many occasions by participants from all backgrounds in this study. The same phrase is found on the lips of gang members interviewed in other studies. Here it is expressed by “Pipa,” a current gang member in Honduras, quoted in a gang study carried out by the Jesuit think tank, ERIC: “If you want to leave to seek out God’s paths, fine. We will support you. But if you’re messing with the barrio and with God, we will cut off both your hands and both feet so that you’re maimed for the rest of your life” (Castro and Carranza 2005). Similarly, Lucas, a Salvadoran ex-member of the M-18, combined the two rules of respecting the gang and respecting God into one. “If you can leave, you’d better do it by accepting God and living up to it (ser cabal). You have to live up to it. You can’t mess with Him. Because if you mess with Him, it’s like you’re messing with the Eighteen at the same time. And then, and then, well. . .” Lucas did not finish the sentence but the meaning was

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34 I am not aware of the exact origin of this nickname, although it seems likely that it may have something to do with some traditional religious images I have seen of a white-haired celestial statesman with a voluminous, curly beard. One other ex-gang member, a Guatemalan, also used the term for God and reported that the term is used commonly by the gang.

35 I have chosen to translate “no se juega” as “don’t mess with” rather than the more literal “don’t play with.” The phrase could also be rendered as “don’t mess around with God.”
clear. Gang members who convert and then renege on their commitment are subject to serious punishment, possibly even a “green light.” In fact, some ex-gang members even described the gang’s practice of policing conversions and punishing “half-hearted” conversions as a kind of just reward to those who would “mess with God” by simply using a conversion as cover for a quick and easy exit or for transferring their allegiance to another gang. Camilo, himself a convert, went so far as to say that the gang’s practice of policing conversions to verify their authenticity is in fact a good thing. “If somebody’s in the gang and he decides to serve God and to serve God clearly—there are moments when they’ll screw you, when they’ll look for ways [to trip you up]—but over time they’ll say, ‘Okay, we’re going to give you a pass. But if you fail, ¡Ah, hombre muerto!’ And in some ways it’s good, in some ways because if you fail God then that means others will lose the opportunity.”

As Lucas, Beto, and Pipa report, “messing with God” is paramount to “messing with the gang.” Both God and the gang, it is implied, represent symbols and values of a sacred nature and ought to be respected. In fact, while “messing with God” was usually voiced in reference to playing false with a religious conversion, the gang itself, some participants reported, must be careful not to “mess with God” by killing a convert who is in fact genuine. Neftali, a former White Fence member from Guatemala recalled that his ranflero warned the gang regarding a recent deserter, “We’re not going to kill him because he’s a Christian.” Asked to explain his comment further, Neftali reported, “It’s well known that if you mess with somebody who is up to God’s work (anda en las cosas de Dios) it’s going to go badly for you. That’s why they say, ‘He’s a Christian. Let’s leave him alone.’” In short, the gang “respects” or even, in Pipa’s words, “supports” gang
exit by way of a conversion because to eliminate an ex-gang member who has honestly committed himself to “Curly” is just as dangerous as faking a conversion—it is, in fact, “messing with Curly.”

It is worth noting that what I have termed the “evangelical escape clause” could also be called the “conversion escape clause” or the “religious escape clause” since in many cases the ex-gang members who made reference to it did not make explicit that they were referring to an *evangelical* conversion. But, as I will show below and in the following chapter, the vast majority of conversions in Central America, and virtually *all* of the conversions of former gang members are evangelical in nature. Both the gangs and the larger society typically assume that a “convert” has converted to some form of evangelical-Pentecostal Christianity. In addition, many of those interviewed did refer to the evangelical nature of the escape clause and others assumed it when they employed the term *cristiano*, which is often used interchangeably with *evangélico*. Catholic conversions are exceedingly rare and gang youth who decide to “seek out the paths of God” almost always do so in an evangelical context.

There is no way to know for sure how many gang leaders actually respect the evangelical escape clause. Although I met many converts who had managed to remain safe for years after having left the gang, I was also told of one or two cases in which a convert had been killed who had been generally regarded as having maintained his conversion and played by the rules. But, as evidenced in the last chapter, more than just reprisal from one’s former gang mates can end the life of an ex-gang member and it is not always clear in who is responsible in the murder of a former gang member. For example, Antonio attributed the death of his evangelical brother to a reprisal from his brother’s
former rivals in the MS-13. At the same time, there is plenty of evidence that not everyone who “messes with God” by converting but then losing their religious fervor meets with the violent fury of the gang. My interviews included no less than a dozen ex-gang members who professed having converted to religious faith but later abandoned attending church services and no longer observed the strict moralism of evangelicalism. They were not “practicing evangelicals” by any reasonable standard. But in ten of these cases, the “backslidden” convert belonged to a cell that had disintegrated entirely; thus, there was no one around to enforce the morgue rule or to “monitor” those professing a conversion to ensure their veracity. In another case, the ex-gang member and former convert had moved to another area of the country at a moment when his own gang had lost its leader and thus he was also unlikely to be monitored in any fashion. Finally, Antonio had also left the gang after professing an evangelical conversion but no longer considered himself an active Christian. This fact may have had something to do with his very real reasons for fearing of his former gang.

Other Benefits for Converting

Gang members who leave the gang, even those professing a conversion, have more to worry about than the homies who still belong to the cell. Most jumped-in Central American gang members participate in violence and intimidation during their gang tenure and such participation makes them subject to the “boomerang effect” of violence from opposing gang members, vigilantes, or victims and family members of victims of past crimes. In fact, as several ex-gang members recounted being told by their ranflero, even
gang members who leave with the permission from the ranflero forfeit the gang’s protection from enemies. Only pandilleros calmados retain the right to protection since they also carry the potential to help out as “reservists” when called upon. Ex-gang members worry about how to protect themselves from former enemies without weapons or friends-with-weapons. Converts like Oliver reported feeling protected by God. Oliver had been a ranflero in the Honduran M-18 and thus did not seek “permission” to leave the gang. His concern was rather how to keep himself safe from his former enemies:

I couldn’t sleep at night because I could feel death following close behind me. I was getting desperate and so I was carrying my guns with me everywhere. I had many enemies right here in this neighborhood. So one day I decided to go to church and I left my weapon and everything. And something happened then. I felt the need to go to church and after the service, I met three of my enemies along the way. Three enemies. I was walking with my Bible in my hands and they stopped and turned when they saw me. I said to myself, “That’s it. I’m dead.” But they—I don’t know what happened to their sight. But they turned their heads down like this [lowering his head]. And we passed each other like this. And when I got home, my family was crying because those same guys had just been at my house looking for me just before. “They were just here, looking for you to kill you. One was keeping watch on each street corner,” they said. They were looking for me to kill me because I used to go out every night at seven or eight to smoke up. But that night I went to church instead. And isn’t God something? Because I had walked right by them and they didn’t do anything to me and so that’s one way that I came to realize god’s purpose for me, when I started to recognize it and stay off the streets, away from my old friends, and to look for help.

Although Oliver remained holed up in his home for six months during the time of his conversion, he still attributed his safety to divine protection for the six years since his conversion. “I feel at peace now. Wherever I go, Guatemala, El Salvador, I go out with my family without any trouble. Nobody follows me, thanks to God.” Raymundo, another gang member who belonged to a different cell in a nearby community, told of a similar experience on his way to an evening church service. When he passed his enemy on the
way to the service, “He didn’t say anything to me. He had his pistol and I had my Bible and I walked calmly by. We didn’t say anything to each other. I’ve seen lots of changes like that.”

Youth like Raymundo and Oliver described the Bible as a kind of talisman protecting them from danger whenever they ventured out to attend church services. But divine protection is not the only way to make sense of such testimonies. In the symbolic world of the barrio, the Bible carries significant weight. Barrio evangelicals, who almost always carry a Bible when walking to religious services, communicate to onlookers that they are attending to matters of spiritual significance. When a young man, especially a gang member, carries a Bible, he can be assumed to have experienced or be seeking out a religious conversion. On the one hand, to attack him while carrying a Bible would be a particularly brazen form of “messing with Curly” himself. On the other, the converted or “converting” gang member is no longer considered a threat so long as his conversion is genuine since evangelical converts are generally considered “neutral” in matters of violence. It is worth noting that other research on evangelicals and Pentecostals in other parts of Latin America helps to make sense of the reports of converts being “left alone” by violent enemies (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1993). David Smilde, who researched troubled Venezuelan men who convert to evangelicalism, described “la culebra” (the snake) as an encultured form of vendetta violence that haunts macho Venezuelans who engage in violence by requiring them to “settle old scores” in order to preserve their masculinity. Smilde found that “conversion to Evangelicalism provides men with a way to step out of conflict-ridden situations” (Smilde 2007). Similarly, when Oliver and Raymundo carried a Bible to church, their “safe passage” may have had less to do with divine intervention
than with their own willingness to symbolically “forfeit” in the hyper-macho game of get-him-before-he-gets-you by openly advertising their new identity as a Bible-carrying evangelical.

In addition to its benefit in providing a measure of safety from the morgue rule and from violent enemies, barrio evangelicalism offers a well-publicized method for dealing with the addictions associated with la vida loca. Not that evangelicals promise instant or immediate freedom from addiction, although a few respondents described their own experience in this way. Rather, pastors and other church members in congregations with gang ministries provide support in the form of continued interaction and constant “checking-up” on new converts in order to make sure they succeed in their new commitments. Most barrio evangelicals, whatever their formal theological doctrine, are strictly Arminian on the issue of salvation. That is, they do not adhere to Calvinism’s belief in divine election or in the idea that a convert is saved only once and cannot lose his or her faith. Instead of “once saved, always saved,” most barrio evangelicals believe in the ability of the individual to exercise “free will” both in the initial conversion and in maintaining it. Therefore, pastors and ministry workers, cognizant that a new believer may in fact lose his resolve together with his faith, keep a close eye on converted ex-gang members, encouraging them to stay on the right path by avoiding drugs and alcohol.

Still, such “encouragement,” which often takes the form of social policing, is hardly enough by itself to keep new converts away from destructive addictions. A more effective means of steering converts away from la vida loca is time hording. Evangelical congregations, especially the small, largely Pentecostal congregations of the barrio, tend to gather with great frequency. Even more important, their largest, most important
gatherings take place at night and on weekends, when the gang mitins take place, the bars and discotecas are open, and drugs and alcohol are more widely available. New converts are under significant social pressure from the pastor and church members to demonstrate the depth of their commitment by attending services “whenever the doors are open and the lights are on.” Some converted ex-gang members undoubtedly also feel the added “incentive” of vigilant homies observing to make sure the convert is not “messing with God and the gang” by using a professed conversion as cover for continued partying with a different gang. The ex-gang member who attends worship regularly, Bible in hand, tells his former gang mates that he is serious about his new religious commitment. In any case, the enormous investment of time, which coincides and interferes with the peak hours of la vida loca, provide additional help in avoiding the temptations and addictions of the gang life.

But la vida loca includes more than just substance abuse. As pointed out in chapter three, abundant, casual, and sometimes violent sex is in fact one of the most attractive incentives drawing young males to join the gang in the first place. Sex in this context makes the youth feel like adults—like real men in fact. But these encounters can result in unwanted pregnancies, sexually-transmitted disease, and, more commonly, conflicts with other gang members competing over a woman. Over time the negative effects begin to become more evident and the experience of casual or competitive sex can easily sour. But reigning in sexuality is not easy. Many gang members who wish to leave the gang and “formalize” by starting a family find that their sexual “conquests” make settling down to a domestic life difficult at best. Evangelical congregations on the other hand promote, support, and, to the degree that they are able, enforce formalized
marriages as the only legitimate means of sexual expression. It is common knowledge that ex-gang members who convert will be expected to end any sexual relationships (few if any gang members are legally married) or, if they have a steady relationship, to make plans to marry their partner at some point in the not-so-distant future. I was surprised to find some pastors offering considerable leeway in terms of the time allowed before a converted ex-gang member who was cohabiting was obliged to legally marry his partner. One convert, in the presence of his pastor, told me that he was hoping to marry his partner soon but that she wanted a “formal” wedding with a white dress and new shoes and he lacked the money. Other converts told of similar experiences of planning to be married or of having married several months or several years after cohabiting with a partner. But most churches do expect converts to legally marry eventually and indeed, to arrange any relationship with that expectation in mind. In any case, the marriage “requirement” is not just a rule but also an incentive. Congregations often help put up resources for a wedding including providing the building and a meal. JJ’s marriage in 2008 is just one example.

Taken together, marriage (or stable cohabiting) and weekly or nightly involvement in an evangelical congregation can provide an important change of environment that limits opportunities for engaging in crime and substance abuse as well as risky and transient sexual encounters and the conflicts that arise from them. Such new patterns of activity and radical restructuring of time investment resemble what criminologists John Laub and Robert Sampson refer to as a “knifing off” process in which men with long-entrenched patterns of criminal activity were able to finally able to
become “desisters” (Laub and Sampson 2003) after a marriage or entrance into the military.

One way to understand the contribution of barrio evangelicalism is that, like the gang, evangelical congregations are an example of what Lewis Coser called “greedy institutions” that “seek exclusive and undivided loyalty” from their members (Coser 1974). Such groups place “omnivorous” demands on those who belong to them, seeking total commitment in return for a deep sense of belonging and an efficient hierarchy of the self and its roles. Coser cited as examples the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), the CIA, and “Protestant fundamentalist sects” since these organizations tend to ask members to subordinate all other roles to that of their membership in the group. Even the traditional American family in the 1970s exemplified a greedy institution for Coser, since it placed enormous demands on the housewife to be at the beck and call of each and every member of the family. But greedy institutions do not engage in outright coercion. In contrast to Goffman’s “total institutions” such as prisons and concentration camps, greedy institutions do not force their demands upon members by erecting physical barriers to the outside world but rather “maximize assent to their styles of life by appearing highly desirable to the participants” (Coser 1974). Time hording, then, via multiple and lengthy evening worship services, is part of barrio evangelicals’ “greedy” practice of subordinating the social lives of members to the needs and priorities of the faith community. Proscribing social activities such as drinking or going to bars or night clubs—frequent and much-anticipated pastimes among young barrio males—helps to erect barriers between the ex-gang member and his former life, “knifing off” the past to an extraordinary degree.
In many cases the most difficult obstacle facing the homie upon leaving the gang is that of landing a steady job. Good jobs are difficult to come by in the barrio and most employers are extremely hesitant to take the risk of hiring an ex-gang member, tattoos or no tattoos (Loudis, del Castillo, Rajaraman, and Castillo 2006). Perhaps even more than in the U.S., social ties are key to finding un chance. But while the exiting gang member typically has strong social networks, these are predominantly tied up with the gang, since he has spent his teenage years building strong “bonding” social capital by cultivating tight relationships with his homies while completely ignoring, even alienating non-gang neighbors, relatives, and childhood friends. Furthermore, the age-specific nature of the gang means that ex-gang members have especially few social ties to the older adults who could be of the most help in finding a job or getting an interview. Joining a church is an excellent means of accessing the “bridging” social capital most needed for finding a job for two reasons. First, frequent worship services and other church activities provide numerous activities for converted ex-gang members to inquire about job possibilities and make themselves available for permanent or temporary work. Joining an evangelical “family” wherein all adult members address each other as “brother” and “sister” means that all members are at least expected to take seriously the plight of their spiritual siblings. To the extent that the ex-gang member is able to convince his new family of the genuineness of his conversion, he gains a helping hand from adults with their own contacts and vocational ties.

Second, and more importantly, pastors themselves can be an excellent source of help in landing a job. Several converted ex-gang members reported having found a job as a direct result of a recommendation or referral from their pastor. Danilo reported that he
had been hired in a bakery only after his pastor made a recommendation on his behalf. JJ was accepted into the USAID-funded employment program for ex-gang members called “Challenge 100” only after his pastor had vouched for the quality of his character and the depth of his about-face in behavior in the two years since leaving the gang. The job, assembling computer equipment at a large computer hardware outlet, came with full legal benefits including basic medical insurance and legal bonuses—a rare find for a youth with no high school diploma and tattoos on his eyelids! In a few cases, pastors themselves provided work and invaluable apprenticing until a formal job could be found. At Youth Restoration, a small church-run ministry spearheaded by a Mennonite church in the gang-heavy Honduran neighborhood of Chamelecon, the pastor, a self-employed electrician, takes newly-converted ex-gang members with him to construction jobs whenever these are available, employing them as apprentices in electrical circuitry and block-laying. In other cases, pastors take recent converts with them on pastoral visits or evangelistic campaigns, providing them with food and lodging while “hording” their time to keep them away from the former crowd. When nothing else is available, some converted ex-gang members have taken to leveraging their own religious testimonies into a source of income. A common custom for individuals with a disability or other barriers to formal employment is that of selling knick-knacks, singing, or reciting speeches on

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36 In fact, the director of Challenge 100, himself an evangelical, confided to me that a pastoral recommendation was the key element in deciding whom to accept for the nearly fifty youth involved in the work program. Such “faith-based” practice in international aid would, no doubt, raise eyebrows were it to become publicized in the U.S.

37 A more cynical perspective would call this practice “selling” your testimony.
public buses. A few converted ex-gang members told of giving their testimony on a bus and then “passing the hat” for donations. This practice was reportedly popular in all three countries although my own experiences on public transit have yet to yield any such encounters. Even apart from these religious entrepreneurial forays, the practice of churches and especially pastors helping converted ex-gang members to find work appears to be quite common.

Finally, when jobs fail to materialize, some congregations helped converts in other ways. JJ recalled receiving material aid soon after converting, when, as a recent gang deserter, he was having great difficulty finding work:

The people of God were very aware of what was going on. They gave me staples, food; they gave me money to buy milk for the baby and I would look for work but I couldn’t find any. But that was the fruit of all those sixteen years in the gang, the result of the stains [tattoos] on my body, the criminal record . . . People would look at me and decide that I was way too dangerous. I looked for work and [employers] would reject me.

Although JJ’s local congregation was unable to provide him with a job, their ability to help him provide for his partner and their infant son allowed him to bridge the gap between the lost income from gang participation and the job that eventually materialized at the computer parts wholesaler. Even that job was provided with the help of his pastor’s recommendation.

The flip side of “greedy institutions” like the congregations of Central America’s barrio evangelicals is that they can also be quite generous. True, barrio evangelicals place great moral demands on their members, limiting their non-congregational social ties while seeking steep contributions in terms of time and energy. But such resources of
time, energy, and social ties do not “evaporate” once they are relinquished to the congregation. They can be and often are redistributed among the members according to need. In this respect, Coser’s concept of “greedy institutions” are not unlike Iannaccone’s “strict churches” which, by limiting free-riding by members with low commitment, can offer more abundant religious goods to all members (Iannaccone 1994). Thus, as many of the gang members who converted and joined an evangelical congregation found, new members who demonstrate their own willingness to surrender their time and loyalty usually receive a flood of attention, be it in the form of “checking-up” on lifestyle commitments, help with finding a job, or bridging the gap economically until a new form of income can be found. In the next chapter I will explore some of the motives, spiritual and otherwise, in providing such support to converted gang members and even those who show potential to convert. But for the moment, my aim has been simply to detail the variety of resources available to gang members who convert to evangelical Christianity and join a congregation, including a “pass” on the morgue rule, a protection from enemies, help with abandoning la vida loca, and support in the search for a steady job.

Why Not Convert? The Cost of Conversion

So far we have seen how evangelical conversion offers resources for overcoming the key barriers to reentry for gang members who have spent years in the hyper-macho, violent community of a transnational gang cell. Due to the evangelical escape clause, gang members choosing conversion are often granted a temporary “pass” from the morgue rule allowing them a measure of safety and confidence. At the same time,
evangelical congregations help converts avoid *la vida loca* and its concomitant addictions through social policing and time hoarding. And congregations offer crucial resources for finding a steady job via access to information about jobs, temporary work or economic aid to “bridge the gap” until a job can be found, and the provision of job recommendations from a pastor. Viewed from this angle, it is worth asking why not all gang members convert if and when they seek to leave the gang.

One difficult aspect of this question “Why *not* convert?” is the matter of whether or not one can “choose” to convert at all. I will address that topic at length below. But even assuming a gang member can in fact “decide” to convert, there are real costs associated with evangelical conversion. In fact it was the very institutional “greed” of evangelical congregations that made some ex-gang members wary of converting in the first place. For example, when I asked non-converted ex-gang members or “non-practicing” converts why they were not active, many responded that the expectation of regular worship attendance was too great a burden. If an ex-gang member happened to already have a job, attending frequent evening services during the week meant having to eat quickly after work, shower, and head out once again. Others worried that they would be judged as dangerous or cast out if they were to venture into a church. A few spoke of having entered a church *seeking* a conversion but had concluded from stares and indirect comments that they were not welcome. Some of these youth sought and found other congregations more welcoming to them but others were turned off by the experience and sought out other, non-religious alternatives.

In addition to tying up free time—and, in part, because of it—conversion also entails a severing of ties with male friends “on the street.” It is a given that a converted
ex-gang member will cut off friendships with erstwhile gang members. But as greedy institutions, evangelical congregations often require converts to sacrifice friendships that have the potential to compromise the commitment and identity of the new convert. While this practice may be helpful as a means of “knifing off” a former lifestyle, it may give pause to some gang members who would like to be free of the gang but not stripped of their former social ties and activities. Many of the preferred pastimes for young men in the barrio, activities such as drinking or going to night clubs on weekends are off limits to evangels and swearing off such practices means that converts must limit their non-church friendships. Raul, a non-converted former Bato Loco from Honduras, reported that he hoped to some day become a Christian but that for the moment, he thought it best not to make the commitment since he was not sure he could live up to its demands. He explained:

You’ve got your friends. Maybe if I’m hanging out with these friends, there will be vulgarities and other things like that. Then someone will come along and invite me to church and I’ll go. But later I can be punished because let’s say that later on I decide to go to a discoteca and get out on the floor and dance. Then I can be punished even worse because then I’m just playing around. I’m not taking things seriously as I should. But I have faith in God that some day I will be able to serve him. I’m confident that some day I’ll be a true Christian to serve him.

Interestingly, Raul did not specify who exactly would “punish” him for “playing around” by professing a conversion while maintaining ties to the vida loca of the gang. Whether it was God or the gang that threatened to make him pay for not living up to his religious commitment is not clear, but Raul’s comment reveals the strict moralist standards of behavior of barrio evangelicalism and how such standards can serve to limit enthusiasm for conversion. Strict expectations about how one spends free time and the
company one keeps represent some of the highest costs associated with converting to evangelicalism. For Raul, and other non-converts who liked hanging out with their friends, enjoying alcohol and an occasional night at the disco, it seemed safer to find less severe or abrupt means to “settle down” and leave the barrio than an evangelical conversion. To risk angering God or the gang with a half-hearted attempt was something he wanted to avoid, at least for the moment. In actual fact, conversion may have been less attractive to Raul and other Batos Locos in his neighborhood because of the highly unique corporate process of gang exit in his neighborhood. In Raul’s case, no one was left to enforce the morgue rule.

Raul’s comment also points to the larger matter of conversion and masculinity. Several converts spoke of their conversion as drawing ridicule from gang members or other friends because the association with evangelical religion undermined their masculine identity. Even though many gang leaders officially “respect” conversions that they deem genuine, individual gang members often offer converts plenty of ribbing for having given up the “macho” lifestyle of *la vida loca* in exchange for a teetotaling, domesticated new lifestyle. While simply leaving the gang is sometimes associated with questionable masculinity—leavers were accused of *chavaleando* or “backing out like a chick”—some gang members converting to Christianity found themselves subject to extra ridicule. Former M-18 member Ronaldo recalled being made fun of when he first considered leaving the gang. Although the Honduran youth had not yet left the gang, he had decided not to “go out on the street” for a week while thinking it over. When his gang mates came to find him, they accused him with the worst possible allegation:
I hadn’t left my house for a week and all the guys came over and started saying, “Pucha, You’ve turned gay!” they said. “You’re ruined! Oh no! Now the only thing left is to become a Christian.” “No way!” I told them. “How could you think that? A Christian is the last thing I’ll ever be. I’d rather die first.” After that I fell back into the street life again because of their criticisms.

Nor was Ronaldo the only ex-gang member to mention the homosexual connotations of becoming an evangelical Christian. Calin, a former MS-13 member recalled his own inner dialogue remembering his “moment of conversion” while speaking by phone with a famous Honduran radio evangelist:

The pastor said to me, “Do you want to be a Christian?” “No!” I said. “I’m a pandillero. I live for my barrio and kill for it too.” [The evangelist replied] “Son, would you like to accept Jesus Christ into your heart?” When he said this it made an impact and I felt my heart might jump out of my chest. And I said to myself, “If you do this, you’ll be a fag (maricón), you’ll be a homosexual. Don’t be stupid. [Think about] the money, the women. You’re going to have to quit smoking. No, no, no!”

Earlier in the interview, Calin had reported that when he joined the gang at age fourteen, he felt it was “a man’s thing.” Now, faced with the possibility of conversion and giving up smoking, money, and frequent sex, he worried that his macho reputation would be ruined. Nor were such fears unfounded. It is important to remember that the gang lifestyle, especially la vida loca, is neither a pure invention of the gang nor one completely out of step with the value system of barrio masculinity. Rather, the violence, substance abuse, and misogyny of the gang represent a kind of hyper-masculinity—a machismo taken to its most dangerous extremes. Evangelical Christianity on the other hand, prohibits many of the favorite pastimes of unmarried barrio males by eschewing personal acts of violence, proscribing alcohol, and prioritizing the home and family.
Thus, the gang member who converts goes beyond abandoning the hyper-masculinity of the barrio to jettison even the “everyday machismo” of the barrio itself. Activities such as smoking, extra-marital sex, and having a beer with the guys are all off limits for the *cristiano evangélico*. By converting, the gang member sets himself up for ridicule from his homies in the gang as well male friends, family, and neighbors who do not share his religious piety. Nor should this finding surprise readers familiar with the role of religion among men in Latin America. Other authors have noted the “domesticating” role evangelical religion among working-class Latin American men (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1993; Smilde 2007). Although evangelicals symbolically if not always literally continue the pattern of male headship in the home, even the suggestion of a man reducing his sphere of sexual influence to the home and of placing voluntary limits on his male autonomy, are enough to render his masculinity subject to serious criticism.

Another cost associated with evangelical conversion is the risk that failure could lead to the accusation of “messing with God” and earn the failed convert a “green light” death warrant from the gang. To convert then, means not only giving up certain activities associated with youthful masculinity in the barrio. Conversion means betting that one will be able to maintain the new commitment. Of course, leaving the gang without converting can also be cause for the death penalty, but most gang members who leave the gang without converting migrate or go into hiding. The homie who professes a conversion usually remains in the community opening himself up to policing by his former gang-mates who may be suspicious of the genuineness of his conversion. No one wants to meet with the fate of *El Buho* whose lingering marijuana habit allegedly cost him his life.
But gang members considering a conversion often fear more than just the gang. Many have themselves internalized the injunction not to “mess with Curly” by mixing gang and religion. Antonio recounted his own struggle not to smoke weed while carrying a Bible when he first began attending worship services. “I remember sometimes on the way to church with the Bible I would feel like I HAD to smoke drugs. I remember that I would hide my Bible under my arm or my sweater to go inside the store and buy a cigarette to smoke because I couldn’t stand the anxiety.” When I asked Antonio to explain further he put it this way:

It’s like this. When I would go to church it was like something inside me said that smoking on the way to church is bad. Like God was doing something inside me, CHANGING me, you know? And so I felt ASHAMED (sentía PENA) for people to see me carrying a Bible while smoking. And so I would hide my Bible so that I wouldn’t feel ashamed if people saw me. I wasn’t that cynical, you know?

In Antonio’s account it is not the gang’s policing of conversion that makes him wary of “mixing” religion and his former life, but rather a combination of concern for what others might think as well as his own belief that smoking on the way to church was itself a “cynical” act with the potential to undermine the “change” he felt was already taking place within. This fear of insufficient resolve plays no small role in keeping gang members like Raul from attempting to convert. After all, not just the gang but “Curly” himself is watching.

Making the Conversion Leap

Clearly, the prospect of an evangelical conversion represents both “benefits” and “costs” to the gang member who has become aburrido or “fed up” with the gang life. On
the one hand, a “genuine” conversion can bring a measure of safety for the convert. But on the other hand, the cost in terms of the erosion of one’s masculine reputation, the considerable time investment, and the possibility of facing a “green light” if a conversion should fail are just as real. So how do gang members considering a “leap of faith” make the difficult decision to convert or to find some other pathway such as migrating or waiting for a window of opportunity? Can conversion be boiled down to a rational act of weighing known costs against potential benefits? Some converts reported their conversion almost as a matter of course given their circumstances. The matter seemed quite straightforward and simple to former Eighteenth Street member Tomás, who put it this way: “I gave my life to Christ because I was fed up (aburrido) with killing, bothering people and only God can change the way we think. When I received Christ I received spiritual and moral support as well as material support from the hermanos.” Others reported thinking it over for at least some specified time. Danilo, the Honduran who now works in a bakery thanks to a recommendation from his pastor, converted after his partner became very ill. Desperate, to find a cure as well as to make a new start with his life, Danilo reported spending a couple of days wrestling with the decision before striking a “pact” with God. “I kept thinking and thinking about it. It wasn’t easy. I didn’t want to leave my friends, the gang, none of it. But I kept thinking about how much I loved her and I decided to try it. ‘If God exists and has power to heal, let him heal her,’ I said. ‘I want to see it.’” Since the health of Danilo’s partner showed rapid improvement shortly after his conversion, the young man felt obliged to follow through with his side of the “pact” by abandoning the gang and la vida loca altogether. When I interviewed him, he was very active in a small Holiness congregation in the neighborhood. Such “bargains” or
pacts were mentioned as instrumental in the conversion decision of multiple gang members although it was usually the life and safety of the gang member himself or freedom from prison or addiction that were being bargained for rather than the health of a loved one. At the same time other gang members like Raymundo, reported that the costs for conversion remained too high. Raymundo still enjoyed his freedom including the ability to hang out with friends and go to the discoteca. Since he had been out of the gang for several years and the cell he belonged to was no longer active, he felt no pressing need to convert although he expected that he might well do so at some point.

It is clear that some level of cost-benefit analysis is often in play when gang members seeking to exit choose the pathway of evangelical conversion. Not that such “analysis” necessarily takes the form of an organized or deliberate attempt to sort out the possible outcomes. More frequently, conversion itself was described as a process involving key moments of intense emotion followed by post-hoc reflection on these moments and further assessments of potential pathways including conversion. Occasionally, a momentary conversion experience packed an emotional wallop, the impact of which arrested the attention of the gang member. Such was the case for Emerson. In 2006 Emerson belonged to a subsidiary of the M-18 in Guatemala City but he had become fed up with the gang lifestyle and was increasingly worried about his prospects for staying alive. Those fears came to a head while participating in a gang battle that led to his arrest and subsequent beating at the police station. Still, he found himself paralyzed by the fear of falling victim to the morgue rule. Emerson had already begun looking for a conversion, occasionally attending church services in the neighborhood. He
had even made several “bargains” with God in the heat of gang battles, but he had so far been unable follow through with any of these commitments. Emerson recalled that some Pentecostal women from the neighborhood had begun “pestering” him, trying to convince him to leave the gang and join the church:

One day . . . [the women] came to my house, man, and they started to talk to me but that day, who knows what was going on because they started to pray for me and started placing their hands on me and I felt like, as if my body was getting hotter all over inside, man, and you should have seen in that instant I started—I hadn’t cried, man, in maybe six or seven years, I hadn’t cried but instead I would do things to get out whatever it was inside of me, I mean I would look for something like, illegal to do, something bad to get out whatever I was feeling but I didn’t cry, man. And at that time, believe me, I was left like this [covers his face with his hands] . . . and all of a sudden I started to cry, man. I started to cry—something that, never, y’know? I mean it had been so long since I’d done it, not even while in the gang, man, not ever, because in the gang they make you feel strong like, they make you feel like ‘Nobody messes with me,’ right? And if you feel like they hurt you, you do more damage than ever, right? . . . So imagine, I haven’t cried in all that time and these were chicks (chavas) that were praying for me, and me all shy and me with my hands over my face and like a little kid I was like [makes sobbing noises] because I felt like that. Look man, you should have seen it and I wanted to stop because like I said, you get shy if there are chicks watching you bawl, right? Like after they’ve seen you like with your head up high [in the gang] and then they watch you bawling. I wanted to stop and I couldn’t man. I hid my face and my Mom was there too, bawling and bawling.

Afterward, Emerson recalls that word spread about what had happened and his friends in the gang wanted to know what was up. “And then they stopped by to see me and I told them I didn’t want to continue anymore, right? That I wanted to stay in the

38 Emerson referred to the women as Pentecostal. However, it is important to remember that according to a Pew-funded survey in 2006, more than eighty percent of Guatemalan evangelicals self-identify as Pentecostal or charismatic.
church because in the church I felt really good.”

Emerson’s conversion story is important for a number of reasons. First, his account provides a close-up view of a “key moment” in conversion and how gang members who “hope” or even “desire” to convert but cannot seem to muster the will-power to do so, begin to follow through on that desire. Second, Emerson’s account makes clear references to shame, a key emotion attracting gang members to the gang in the first place, and one that motivates the “shame-rage spiral” energizing a great deal of the violence of the Central American gang. Third, as we will see below, Emerson’s emphasis on emotional experience and display, especially the role of weeping, was echoed by a number of other converted ex-gang members in my interviews. When the prospect of carrying out a conversion and/or leaving the gang seemed difficult or impossible, emotion often became a lever for bringing about such a personal change project.

In the account Emerson provides of his own conversion the “crisis moment” in his home played an enormous role. As in the other interviews, I did not ask Emerson to detail any “moment” of conversion or describe his emotions at a particular moment. I simply asked if he considered himself a Christian and allowed him to recount anything he felt important enough to relate regarding his own faith. But like several other converts, Emerson felt it necessary to describe in detail his own means of overcoming the “rational” dilemma in which he found himself. He “wanted” to convert and leave the gang but could not find the willpower to announce to his gang that he was leaving. His “decision” came not after another round of weighing the costs and benefits of leaving but, according to his
own recollection, when he found himself in the midst of an intimate, emotional ritual, surrounded by praying women. Furthermore, the role of shame in Emerson’s conversion account is unmistakable. Clearly, Emerson was caught in the shame-rage spiral in which young men experiencing shame and deeply damaged social bonds, avoid acknowledging shame by enacting violent outbursts of anger. He reports that, “I hadn’t cried, man, in maybe six or seven years, I hadn’t cried but instead I would do things to get out whatever it was inside of me, I mean I would look for something like, illegal to do, something bad to get out whatever I was feeling but I didn’t cry, man.” Crying is an open acknowledgement of weakness, an expression revealing shame and Emerson remembers using anger, or “doing something illegal” as a means of avoiding the experience. Several ex-gang members reported that weeping, certainly in public, was strictly prohibited in the gang. As such, the prohibition illustrates what Arlie Hochschild would call the strict “emotion rules” of the gang. Hochschild notes that all societies and sub-cultures regulate the experience and display of emotions and these regulations are deeply gendered (Hochschild 1983).

Weeping, especially in public, violates the gang’s hyper-macho code of pride and “respect.” For Emerson, weeping marked a “bridge-burning event” spoiling his identity as a macho homie (Goffman 1963). The “emotion logic” of evangelical religion, however, is markedly different from that of the gang and embraces and encourages weeping in public even for men. Thus, by weeping in the presence of other evangelicals, Emerson laid the initial groundwork for establishing his credentials as an evangelical hermano.

Emerson’s account also sheds light on the way emotions can work to
communicate not only to onlookers but to the individual himself. The subjective experience of emotions can be “managed” but not always tightly controlled. Thus, the experience of certain embodied states, especially those that are unfamiliar or have been repressed for some time, communicates to the individual that something “important” or monumental is taking place, a shift to which the subject cannot help but pay close attention (Hochschild 1983). Emerson reported that “I don’t know what was going on” when his body became hot all over and he started to shake perhaps as proof of the authenticity of the experience as something he could not himself have predicted or produced. Thus, his emotional experience served as a “clue” signaling an important inner change. Later, the mere remembrance of the experience provided a biographical marker, dating the conversion with a specific time and place.

Other ex-gang members reported similar experiences even though I did not specifically ask any interviewees for details about a “moment of conversion” or emotional details. Pancho, the Honduran MS-13 leader who joined the gang after being abandoned by his mother, recounted the emotional content of his own conversion event. After several unhappy months in an evangelical rehab center where he had been sent by a judge, he had made up his mind to escape the following day. A visiting pastor approached him and began to deliver a “prophetic” warning regarding his future if he escaped:

“When the pastor said this to me my whole body began to shake and shake and [I started] to cry. I started crying and crying like a baby and the truth, man, is that I hadn’t cried in approximately eleven years. I was a brother [English word used] and I’d always said to myself, ‘I’m crazy.’ I remember that the only day I’d let tears go, man, was the day they killed my best friend (carnal), but apart from that
day, during that whole time I’d never cried and I began crying man, like a baby and asking forgiveness from God, right? For everything I’d done, for all that had happened, right? And for the damage I’d caused my family and then everybody was shocked, man, from watching how I cried. And I cried for approximately four hours, crying, man . . . And the pastor, man, praying for me then. And after this I said to God then, ‘God, you know what? I’m going to stay here after all. Help me,’ I told him. . .”

Like Emerson, Pancho also recalled the emotion “display rules” of the gang, even more stringent in prison than on the street. For an incarcerated gang leader like Pancho, the repression of shame had meant avoiding weeping at all costs. But when confronted by a pastor who delivered a “personalized” prophetic warning, Pancho found himself unable to continue bypassing his own shame and began weeping “like a baby.” Importantly, Pancho’s acknowledgment of shame took on social dimensions that went beyond weeping. By “asking forgiveness” Pancho acknowledged past wrongdoings and by agreeing to stay at the center rather than escape, he took an important first step in repairing the social bonds to non-gang society that had been allowed to deteriorate for eleven years. In fact, both Pancho’s and Emerson’s conversion accounts display strong elements of a phenomenon criminologist John Braithwaite calls “reintegrative shaming” (Braithwaite 1989). For Braithwaite, a proponent of “restorative justice,” cultural ceremonies involving the public acknowledgement and subsequent discharge of unacknowledged shame provide an effective and vastly under-utilized approach to dealing with crime and criminal offenders. In the modern, urban West, shame goes unacknowledged and crime is “punished” by an impersonal state more interested in meting out an abstract version of punitive justice than in reintegrating offenders by
obliging them to publicly acknowledge their guilt and make reparations. Such “disintegrative shaming” simply extends the shame-rage spiral by labeling offenders as hopeless criminals, consigning them to further shame and extending endless recidivism. On the other hand, since shame is the “engine” motivating ongoing violence, offenders who can be brought to acknowledge their wrongdoing in a corporate setting can effectively discharge shame and be reintegrated into the social fabric rather than ostracized further. Furthermore, the social, interactive nature of reintegrative shaming allows for a two-way reparation of the social bond opening up the possibility for a renewal of trust and the reincorporation of the offender (Collins 2004). I am not arguing here that emotional conversion experiences are the same as restorative justice models that bring victims and offenders together and establish a plan allowing the offender to “restore” something of value to the victim who has been violated. Rather, I draw a parallel to reintegrative shaming because the concept reveals the impact of openly expressing shame and “remorse” in a corporate setting. Indeed, in Ricardo’s own account of his deeply emotional conversion experience recounted at the beginning of the chapter, weeping in public drew the attention of onlookers beyond the congregation itself no doubt because of the symbolic power contained in the emotional acknowledgement of shame for past wrongdoings. Nor did the “symbolic” nature of the experience communicate solely to those watching. Ricardo remembered “feeling better” afterward—so much better that, like Emerson, Pancho and others, he continued returning to the evangelical-Pentecostal worship services, developing a “taste” for new lines of action involving other means of
responding to felt shame than simply engaging in further violence. In Ricardo’s case, relinquishing his weapons and disposing of his marijuana stash felt like an obvious next step.

What do we learn from emotional conversion accounts like those of Emerson, Pancho, and Ricardo—or for that matter of Calin’s “pounding heart” or Abner’s report of “glorious” tears or Ismael’s recollection of solitary sobbing? It seems clear that such emotion experiences involve more than simply feigned sincerity or conjured sentimentality. In weeping, these individuals reported finding themselves, sometimes against their immediate will, on the other side of an emotion “threshold.” Crossing that threshold involved trespassing an important, deeply gendered feeling rule of the gang. Therefore the experience came to mark a biographical “moment zero” dating their own conversion and allowing them a sense of security in moving forward with their own project of personal reform. Emerson reported telling the gang he was finished a few days later. Ricardo turned over his weapons, and Pancho abandoned his plans to escape and return to the gang. Clearly, these intentions were not completely new. Both Ricardo and Emerson had already been contemplating leaving the gang and all three surely knew of the “evangelical escape clause” prior to their moments of emotional conversion. But neither escaping nor converting seemed fully possible prior to the emotion event. In short, their conversion was both a decision to seek out evangelical religion, “hoping” for the possibility of a conversion, as well as a subjective, emotional experience that facilitated it, setting in motion new approaches to dealing with shame, and new ways of embodying
their own masculinity.

Emotion, Shame, and the Sociology of Conversion

The accounts of the converted homies speak to the larger literature on the sociology of conversion. With a few recent exceptions (Frankenberg 2004; Winchester 2008), embodied experience is not a common topic in the sociological conversion studies. Most conversion studies debate the causal influence of social factors such as an absence of strong social networks resulting in the “structural availability” of potential converts (Rambo 1993; Snow and Machalek 1983) or emphasize the capacity of converts to freely choose conversion as individual agents (Straus 1979). Sometimes debates about the factors leading to conversion end up resembling a tug-of-war between those who see conversion as a “caving” to social pressures and those who view it as an achievement accomplished by a rational, utility-maximizing agent. In his book Reason to Believe: Culture and Agency in Venezuelan Evangelicalism cultural sociologist David Smilde moves this conversation in a helpful direction by asking the question of why some Venezuelan men in the midst of personal struggles with crime and addiction were “able” to convert while others, who seemed sincerely desirous of the organization that a religious conversion might bring to their chaotic lives, were, in the end, unable to follow through with a self-reform project. He concludes, among other things, that individuals can “choose” to believe if they have good enough “reasons” for doing so. By reasons, Smilde refers both to the practical outcomes of self-reform promised by evangelicalism’s
disciplined, teetotaling lifestyle as well as the relatively simple theological concepts of a doctrinal system involving an empowering God and a debilitating devil. For Smilde, evangelical conversion in Venezuela provides a means for reinventing the male self-identity in such a way that the convert is lent greatly enhanced personal agency during critical moments of personal struggle. Through what he calls “imaginative rationality . . . [p]eople encounter problems, create new projects to address these problems and then evaluate the success of these projects” (2007:52). The men in his study were able to gain effective control over an array of personal struggles and setbacks in part by adopting the symbolic system of evangelical Christianity and viewing their own problems in light of this new system. This is not unique to Christianity, he notes. “People create concepts by combining and attaching existing, usually well-known images to inchoate objects of experience. They thereby gain a cognitive fix on these experiences that facilitates action with respect to them” (2007:52).

Smilde’s account of the inherent semiotic power of a symbolic system for empowering individuals trying to achieve personal efficacy in a moment of crisis is certainly useful. Many of the converted ex-gang members I interviewed did indeed use evangelical concepts of an empowering God or Holy Spirit and a debilitating devil to help them account for their own respective achievements and setbacks when trying to break free of the gang and its violent, addictive lifestyle. But for that matter, so did some of the non-converts. Young men like Ovidio described themselves as caught in a struggle with the devil to overcome drug addiction and lethargy. Ovidio would like to convert but
cannot seem to manage it. So far, he admitted, the devil has the upper hand. At the same time, many other converted ex-gang members described their conversion not as a cognitive realization or a calculated decision based on an assessment of the benefits and drawbacks of conversion or gang exit. Indeed, many had long since decided that they would like to leave the gang and most already believed in what amounts to an evangelical Christian symbolic system. Their conversion came not when they “bought in” to a religious narrative but rather when they became emotionally “overwhelmed” by it, usually in the context of a religious ritual such as a sermon or a prayer service. Young men like Emerson, Pancho, and Ricardo told of converting “body-first” in a deeply emotional event, the embodied sensations and social repercussions of which caused them to both doubt their “true” identity as a gang member and to place confidence in their emerging identity as hermanos. Furthermore, the power of such experiences was intimately connected to the transgression of well-known, gendered emotion rules in the gang and in the church. Once a gang member had violated the emotion display rules prohibiting weeping and trembling in public, the experience of emotional vulnerability (and the fact that others had witnessed it) produced a ripple effect, allowing and even obliging the convert to set aside the constant obsession with maintaining el respeto and the constant projection of angry dominance. It was not by accident that Ricardo turned over his weapons soon after his emotional conversion experience. Firearms, especially in the barrio, project power and symbolize the will to dominate and humiliate. They provide access to the momentary “escape” from chronic shame through the angry side of the shame-rage spiral whereas
Ricardo had now found another, more promising and permanent means of escaping shame.

To return to the first question of this chapter, How does conversion “work” for the homie who becomes an hermano? We have seen that religious conversion offers important resources for gang members fed up with the gang life and seeking an alternative. It does this by offering a modicum of hope for safety due in part to the evangelical escape clause and the reticence of gang members to “mess with Curly” by killing a convert.

Second, evangelical congregations provide support for gang members seeking to extricate themselves from debilitating addictions associated with la vida loca, and they provide valuable resources in finding steady work or el chance. But there are also costs associated with conversion. Gang members must surrender for good their access to a variety of rituals and pastimes that figure prominently in the maintenance of a macho identity. They are likely to receive, at the very least, a ribbing from their former gang mates and others who may question the masculinity of a new convert. Worse yet, the convert risks being violently called to account should he fail in his conversion project and be accused of “messing with Curly.” Thus, the prospect of a conversion, while attractive to many, is by no means a simple “decision.” Although many youth desiring to leave the gang did report weighing both the potential costs and the benefits of conversion, the key moment in a conversion often came as a result of a subjective, deeply-embodied emotional experience in which the gang member “tried on” the experience of acknowledging shame through weeping in public and concluded that it “felt good.” Thus, his “reasons” for believing lay not merely in calculated costs and benefits for converting nor in theological categories or
concepts, but in reflections on an interactive experience saturated with bodily sensations. In short, embodied conversion experiences offer an emotional lever for effecting personal change through the forging of new lines of action motivated not by efforts to mask or bypass shame but through an acknowledgement of it, to repair the social bond and begin re-forging ties the non-gang community. In the following chapter I will discuss further the reasons why gang youth almost exclusively seek out conversion in evangelical contexts rather than Catholic congregations. My point here is simply to understand the impact of evangelical conversion, how it works, and the resources it provides to deserting gang members seeking a means of reintegrating in a society that has come to loathe them.

Conversion and “Reinsertion”: The Effectiveness of Conversion as an Exit Strategy

So far I have described the variety of ways in which evangelical conversion can work as a means of leaving the gang and rejoining the broader society but does it work? Are evangelical converts better prepared to meet the enormous challenges of staying alive, finding a job, reconnecting with family, and staying out of trouble after leaving the gang? Better prepared, that is, than those who do not convert or who experience a conversion but do not follow up with a religious commitment? One potential problem in answering this question is that of defining a successful “reentry.” Holding a steady job is indeed a good indicator of success, but unemployment, in a region where unemployment, especially among barrio youth with minimal education, can hardly be a sign of complete failure. Ridding oneself of addictions can also provide a good indicator of a successful exit but not all gang members struggled with substance abuse to the same degree if at all.
Although most, if not all gang youth experiment with and abuse illegal substances, many ex-gang members told me that they had never become addicted to drugs or alcohol during their years in the gang. These youth reported that they had only used marijuana and alcohol or that their experiences with narcotics had only been occasional and recreational. Finally, staying alive is also an indicator of success but, with one exception, ex-gang members who failed this test did not make it into the study.

All three of these indicators are subject to the limitations of my methodology—that is, of collecting single interviews in order to put together a snapshot in time of how the youth are doing compared with retrospective self-reports about earlier life experiences. I was in many instances able to corroborate self-reports with assessments from friends, a counselor, a pastor, priest or social worker. But in other cases, notably the ex-gang members interviewed at the tattoo-removal clinic, the interview itself provided the only source of data for a particular youth. Furthermore, in a few cases, ex-gang members had left the gang so recently as to make an assessment of their success in reintegrating premature. Three Salvadorians had deserted the gang just a few months prior to my interviewing them. These interviews provided important data on current aspects of the Salvadorian gang structure as well as “close-up” information on the exit process, but such cases could not be coded for success of reintegration. In spite of these limitations, there were many cases in which it was obvious that an interviewee was thriving—or that the individual was clearly struggling.

Ricardo is a good example of a youth who has found his niche. He excitedly showed me pictures of his wife whom he had recently married, of his new church, a humble structure of corrugated metal in a dusty squatter settlement a half an hour away,
and spoke enthusiastically about his role as in organizing after-school activities for underprivileged neighborhood children, some of them children of his deceased gang mates. During a return visit in 2008, I learned that in addition to pastoring, Ricardo had become involved in local politics in the community where he now lived and pastored, organizing neighbors in opposition to a local cement factory that was polluting the air and causing rampant respiratory illnesses in the neighborhood. Other ex-gang members were clearly not faring so well. Rina was still hoping to find a job in order to make ends meet and take care of her child whose father, a member of the same cell to which Rina had belonged, had been killed by another gang member several years earlier. Having recently returned from Mexico after an unsuccessful bid to find work in the U.S., Rina confessed that her penchant for partying continued to get her into trouble, though she was at least managing to keep her habits under control. A recent attempt to work in a beauty salon for female ex-gang members had also fallen through. Andrès, a Salvadoran who had left the gang six years earlier was also clearly struggling. Separated from his wife, he shares a room with his two young children in a ramshackle residence and does odd jobs when his brother calls on him. Although Andrès claimed that his wife had left him because she wanted to stay in the gang, I learned through another source that physical abuse toward her had been a major factor. Clearly, ex-gang members like Andrès and Rina were still struggling to get back on her feet and their struggles affected those around them.

In many cases, however, the current status of an ex-gang member trying to reintegrate in the larger society was not so clear-cut. Beto was busy as an active member of an evangelical gang ministry in his neighborhood but with no diploma and a maimed foot from a Mexican train accident, his prospects for getting a job appeared bleak. None
of this kept Beto from exhibiting an upbeat demeanor however, and when I revisited the community a year later he was still active in the ministry and had found an organization willing to pay for an expensive operation and a prosthetic foot. In a very different scenario though still far from thriving, was Ovidio, a former Bato Loco who had also recently returned from a failed trip to the U.S. Ovidio had a job working at a maquiladora but complained about the miserable salary of US$45 per week. He openly admitted that he struggled with marijuana and that his partner often gets angry with him about his habit of spending his meager earnings on marijuana rather than on their daughter or on renting a place for the three of them to live together as a family. Ovidio’s future, like that of Beto, appeared stable but not very promising.

The above scenarios illustrate the variety of levels of “success” experienced by ex-gang member trying to re-enter society. I used interview data and reports from other informants to categorize all but three ex-gang members into those who appeared to be thriving, those who appeared to be merely “getting by,” and those who were obviously struggling. Table 4.1 shows the breakdown by religion of post-gang outcomes using my crude categorization scheme.
The data suggest that religiosity, whether evangelical or otherwise, does not guarantee a successful re-adaptation to society after the gang. Many practicing evangelical converts were doing well at the time of the interview but in at least a dozen cases, the converts were merely getting by. Like Beto, these converted youth had high hopes for the future but lacked some fundamental resources or faced exceptional challenges to significantly improving their situation. Three of the converts I classified as “getting by” were residents at a drug rehabilitation center—two of them having landed there long after converting—and although each was reportedly showing strong progress after several months in the program, their futures were less certain. Among ex-gang
members who reported no religious affiliation, three were thriving and five were only getting by.

One problem with comparing reentry success among “practicing evangelicals” with that of others is that of the selection effect resulting from the correlation between the requirements of belonging to an evangelical church and those of succeeding after the gang. At the very least, most practicing evangelicals by definition do not practice extensive drug use or have transient, chaotic lifestyle patterns. Evangelical converts who continue to struggle with substance abuse for an extended length of time often end up abandoning the church either because of ostracism or because they feel unable to live up to evangelical lifestyle patterns. Thus, “struggling” ex-gang members tend to self-select into the “non-practicing evangelicals” category. In other words, because of the challenge of substance abuse, “failing” as a convert often coincides with a weak or unsuccessful bid to establish a stable lifestyle after the gang. In any case, part of the goal of this section is to assess whether embarking on a conversion project enhances an ex-gang members ability to succeed after the gang. Therefore, conversions that sputter or fade out ought to be included in any assessment of whether or not conversion “works” as a pathway out of the gang. Table 4.2 shows reentry success based simply on whether or not an individual reporting having experienced a conversion, “durable” or otherwise.
TABLE 4.2
REENTRY SUCCESS OF CONVERTED AND NON-CONVERTED
EX-GANG MEMBERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Converts*</th>
<th>Non-converts</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thriving</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting By</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*NOTE: Included in this figure are a Mormon and a mass-attending Catholic who abandoned evangelicalism.)

While converts in the study had a moderately higher rate of successful reentry into society, ex-gang members in both groups were struggling or just getting by. Clearly, conversion is no guarantee of a smooth reentry. None of this data would come as a surprise to those who work to help gang members leave the gang. All of the gang exit promoters I interviewed recognized the enormous challenge of starting over after the gang, regardless of whether the ex-gang member had undergone a conversion. Indeed, some of the most committed gang “evangelists” were remarkably sober about the prospects of an ex-gang member seeking reentry into a society that loathes his clan. Pastor Luis, himself a former gang member and founding director of the Guatemalan Pentecostal group “Maras para Cristo” (Gangs for Christ) guessed that out of every ten gang members who experienced an evangelical conversion, perhaps one, given the right circumstances.
guidance and accompaniment, is able to escape the morgue rule, find a job, start a family, and avoid illegal drugs. Given my own findings, Pastor Luis’s response sounds especially pessimistic and may represent his attempt to underscore the unique challenges of his line of work. But other evangelicals were also quite open about the frequency of converts “backsliding” into crime or drugs. In fact, as optimistic as Ricardo was about the ability of evangelical conversion to transform lives like his own, the homie-turned-pastor recognized that many conversions fizzle after awhile:

What do you think: of ten youth that leave the gang, how many convert to become evangelical Christians or attempt it at some point?

Of ten? Maybe four.

Of those four, how many persevere in their faith?

Three or two. Yeah, because of the forty or fifty of us [Batos Locos] that left the gang, maybe twenty are still in the church.

Ricardo used his own experience of gang exit to estimate the frequency of conversion among gang members in general and even his estimate that “maybe twenty” of those from his cell were active in the church seemed rather high. Of thirteen Batos Locos I was able to interview, only five appeared to maintain a commitment to any church although a dozen reported having had a conversion at some point.

Given the data as well as the stories from those who work to reintegrate gang members, what conclusions can we draw regarding the relationship between conversion and the chances for a successful reentry? Does religious conversion “work” as a resource for starting over? The answer is a “definite sometimes.” Clearly, many ex-gang members are indeed thriving after experiencing a conversion on their way out of the gang or soon
after leaving. But others are struggling to find a job, trying to settle a lingering domestic conflict, or have given up on their personal reform project, conversion and all. Although more than half of all those who reported a conversion were thriving, nearly half—five out of eleven—of those few ex-gang members who did not report a conversion were also thriving. Nevertheless, both the frequency and depth of the stories told by the converted ex-gang members are compelling enough to examine further.

The Frequency of Conversion

If one thing is clear from my research on gang exit, it is that evangelical conversion is a very common pathway out of the gang. Three reasons support this conclusion. First, a high proportion of the ex-gang members I interviewed reported a conversion. Of sixty-three ex-gang members, thirty-nine were practicing evangelicals at the time of the interview. Another twelve (including one Catholic) professed having converted to evangelical Christianity but were no longer active as evangelicals at the time of the interview. One youth was a practicing Mormon who had joined an LDS congregation after leaving the gang. Nine ex-gang members professed no religion at all. Quite remarkably, given Central America’s long history as a bastion of Catholicism, only three individuals among the entire sample of sixty-three youth professed any affiliation whatsoever with Roman Catholicism. Only one of these youth reported going to mass for

39 For a description of how I coded “converts,” see the Methods chapter in the appendix.
worship and this youth reported having spent time in an evangelical church during the time he was trying to get out of the gang.

It is worth reiterating that my sample cannot be considered representative in a scientific sense. But it is hard to imagine that such a high proportion could be simply explained as purely an artifact of the selection process. More than three in five of the ex-gang members I located were evangelical converts currently active either by maintaining a commitment to an evangelical lifestyle or by active participation in a congregation or both, and another seventeen percent professed an evangelical conversion but were no longer active in any significant way. In all, more than four fifths of the ex-gang members had at least attempted an evangelical conversion since leaving the gang.

Just as compelling as the evidence from the overall totals of religious affiliation was the preponderance of converts among males of each country and every major gang. Table 4.3 shows the breakdown of religious practice among gang members by country.

TABLE 4.3

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE OF EX-GANG MEMBERS BY COUNTRY OF INTERVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Honduras</th>
<th>Guatemala</th>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Evangelicals</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-practicing Evangelicals</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Catholics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-practicing Catholic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although only one of the four female ex-gang members professed any current religious affiliation, a matter I will discuss further below, a majority of male ex-gang members from each country reported that they currently practice evangelical faith either by being active in an evangelical congregation, as was typically the case, or by emphasizing their on-going commitment to evangelical lifestyle norms. Similarly, a majority of ex-gang members from each of several gang backgrounds professed having experienced a conversion. TABLE 4.4 shows the religious affiliation of ex-gang members from the major gangs represented in the sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M-18</th>
<th>MS-13</th>
<th>Batos Locos</th>
<th>Other Gangs</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Evangelicals</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-practicing Evangelicals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Catholics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-practicing Catholic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only among one group—the Batos Locos—were active evangelicals not in the majority. Among this group, six ex-gang members professed having converted but no longer attributed any importance to their conversion while another six reported currently...
practicing evangelical faith in any meaningful way. One former Bato Loco professed never having possessed ties to religion. The reason for relatively lower numbers among the former Batos Locos probably has to do with the unique circumstances of their exit. The particular clique to which most of the Batos Locos interviewed had formerly belonged was the only gang cell that disbanded more-or-less corporately over a period of two or three years. Individual members did make individual choices to renounce their commitment to the gang but these happened in relatively brief succession during a time in which the local chapter of the Honduran Mennonite Peace and Justice Commission had ramped up programmatic efforts and resources to persuade the youth to leave. In essence a special “window of opportunity” opened in the early 2000s and during this time homies could disaffiliate without having to face the wrath of local gang leaders, one of whom was Ricardo himself.

Although the difference in conversion totals in each group are far too small to attribute to differences between gangs’ approach religious exit, it is interesting to note the preponderance of practicing evangelicals among former members of the M-18, the gang that professes to have the “strictest” standards for membership. One former M-18 member actually suggested that the M-18 is more amenable than other gangs to the idea of leaving the gang via evangelical conversion since the M-18, he reported, is especially deferent toward evangelicalism. Whatever the case, the fact that a majority of ex-gang members in each country, and from each gang reported experiencing an evangelical conversion supports the idea that conversion is indeed a common pathway out of the gang.
In addition to the widespread nature of evangelical conversion among ex-gang members, the fact that evangelicals were among interviewees recommended by gatekeepers from a variety of backgrounds, including Catholic and non-religious rehabilitation professionals, provides support for the conclusion that conversion is not merely an isolated phenomenon among those leaving the gang. Pancho, president of the non-religious ex-gang member organization “Generation X,” was one of two youth recommended for an interview by a Honduran sociologist who considered himself a nominal Catholic. The sociologist, who set up the interview with Pancho before knowing about my interest in religion, was himself critical of evangelical gang ministries, not because they were ineffective—he admitted that these groups tend to have a high success rate—but rather because they bring religion into a setting where he believes it does not belong. Nevertheless, Ricardo reported that his own decision to leave the gang was prompted by a highly emotional evangelical conversion experience while participating in a faith-based rehab center. Similarly, the well-known “gang priest” Padre Pepe was highly critical of evangelical conversion as a pathway out of the gang, dismissing conversion as simply a means of hoodwinking naïve pastors and priests. Yet when he arranged for me to interview his two most important “success stories” of gang deserters, one of these turned out to be a devout evangelical convert. Finally, at the Catholic-sponsored tattoo-removal clinic ¡Adios Tatuajes!, where I came the closest to accessing a “random” sample of ex-gang members, four out of seven ex-gang members professed having undergone a religious conversion around the time they left the gang. One of these youth had become active in the Church of Latter Day Saints (even though none of his family members were Mormon), another no longer considered himself religious and two
were active members of evangelical congregations, peppered their vocabulary with evangelical language and references to the Bible, and professed a deep commitment to faith. Among the three ex-gang members at the clinic who did not report a conversion, all three professed not having any religion. Of these, one was a female ex-gang member and the other two had been active in cliques while living in the U.S. and thus could enjoy relative anonymity from the gang while in Central America.

It is impossible to know precisely what proportion of jumped-in gang members who leave the gang exit by the “evangelical stairway.” We know from individual reports cited in the last chapter that despite the “morgue rule” and the “evangelical escape clause” allowing a “pass” for converts, other means of leaving the gang do in fact exist and many gang cells possess neither the ability nor the incentive to track down and kill every gang member who stops showing up to local mitins (meetings). But the evidence here suggests that conversion is indeed a very common means of extricating oneself from the gang, perhaps even the most common means.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have addressed three basic questions: Is evangelical conversion a common pathway out of the gang? We have seen that it is indeed quite common. Also, does evangelical conversion “work” as a means of leaving the gang by addressing the three main challenges to reentry in staying safe, avoiding addiction and violence, and finding work? Quite often, probably in a majority of cases, it is. But the initial question of how evangelical conversion works as a pathway out of the gang has taken much more time to
answer. Evangelical conversion provides many practicing converts with some measure of safety due to the evangelical escape clause. Evangelical congregations help converts overcome debilitating addictions associated with la vida loca through social policing, time hoarding, and by strongly encouraging if not requiring legal marriage. Finally, many gang members find help from the church when looking for work, especially from pastors who can connect them with temporary work or provide a crucial recommendation for a wary employer. Congregations are able to do this in part because of their nature as "greedy institutions" that are nevertheless generous when it comes to sharing their abundance of social networks, time, and material resources with newly-committed believers who show a willingness to convert and commit. Some of these findings are not new. We know that evangelical faith offers troubled Latin American men a resource for reordering chaotic lives (Chesnut 2003; Brusco 1995; Smilde 2007). What is new and rather surprising is the extent to which evangelical conversion and the participation in an evangelical congregation helps violent, heavily stigmatized “outsiders” (Becker 1963) like the Central American gang homies find acceptance and reintegration in communities that have feared and loathed them. Furthermore, the interviews of many of the men emphasized crisis moments during which they felt overcome by an experience of emotional vulnerability that violated their habit of projecting intimidation to win or maintain “respect.” When emotional crisis experience was public, as was usually the case, the impact on the convert’s former identity as a homie was all the more devastating.

The discussion of public shame leads us back to the altar at the Prince of Peace
Pentecostal church where in 2005 Ricardo found himself weeping, while outside the church walls, neighbors jumped up and down to get a peek at the well-known homie leader as he exhibited very un-gang-like behavior. On the one hand, Ricardo’s conversion was no accident. Worn out by the gang life, fearing that he would be killed by an enemy gang member, and sick of being hounded by the police, the 23-year-old had been considering leaving the gang for quite some time. Furthermore, Ricardo was well aware of the potential resources that evangelical practice had to offer both in terms of providing a supportive community and in offering theological concepts for gaining a “cognitive fix” on his troubles. But for Ricardo, as for at least eight of the other converts (all of them still practicing religion at the time of the interview) who told emotional stories of conversion unprompted by my questions, leaving the gang seemed somehow impossible before the emotional conversion experience. The benefits for being free of the gang were high but so were the potential costs for converting. Thus, when Ricardo left the gang to convert, it was not, in Ricardo’s estimate, merely the result of a cost-benefit analysis but rather the result of a routine-shattering, bridge-burning, deeply-embodied, and highly social event during which he publicly acknowledged his shame while displaying the ultimate social indicator of “feminine” vulnerability—weeping. That the event caused a stir in the neighborhood is hardly a surprise since Ricardo’s reputation as a violent gang leader was well-known in the community.

Of course, the emotional experience for Ricardo marked only the beginning of his transformation. There were tattoos to remove, classes to take, and relationships to mend.
But as a means of discharging shame in the presence of witnesses, the conversion fit the bill par excellence. Evangelical hermanos, excited by the thrill of witnessing a spiritually “powerful” event, gathered around him to pray, undoubtedly energizing Ricardo’s commitment to change by providing emotional energy from a powerful ritual in a sacred space and all of this added to his resolve. In short, Ricardo’s conversion experience illustrates the power of emotion as a lever for human transformation. If, as theorists such as Scheff point out, shame is indeed the “master emotion” shaping interaction by establishing patterns of emotional energy, then it makes sense that such embodied experiences as these, which acknowledge shame while trespassing the emotion rules of macho invulnerability, form a powerful, and largely overlooked factor in religious conversion studies. Sociologists of conversion have identified changes to the convert’s “universe of discourse” (Snow and Machalek 1983), “root reality” (Heirich 1977; Smilde 2007) or “usable narrative” (Smilde 2007) as the key ingredients in engendering changes in practice. But all of these perspectives place undue emphasis on changes to the convert’s “way of seeing.” The ex-gang members’ emotion-laden conversion accounts illustrate the importance of paying attention to deeply-embodied, gendered experiences of emotion that result in changes to the former homies’ “way of feeling” and of expressing emotion thereby laying the groundwork for fundamental transformations in practice or “lines of action.”

In the next chapter I address the implications of homie conversions for religion in Central America and what, if anything, the phenomenon can tell us anything about the
region’s rapidly-changing religious terrain.
CHAPTER 5:
RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO GANG VIOLENCE

I don’t wait for the government to help me. I hope that the church solves [the gang problem]. Because I think the church is the one with the solution to this problem—the church as a church—because this is a spiritual problem.

Pastor Luis Arreola, founder of “Gangs for Christ” (Guatemala City)

“The church cannot respond as a church! The problem is with society and only by responding as a society can we begin to address this issue!”

Fr. Jose Maria Moratalla (San Salvador)

After dark, the collective taxis from Honduras’s industrial city, San Pedro Sula stop at the edge of Chamelecòn. When my contact and I arrived at the entrance to this urban satellite community of 50,000 inhabitants, the taxi driver informed us that this was as far as he would take us. “You’re lucky I brought you this far,” he said. Chamelecòn is one of several satellite neighborhoods creating a vast belt of impoverished and crime-ridden barrios encircling Honduras’s northern industrial city of one million. On December 23rd of 2004, Chamelecòn gained international notoriety literally overnight when armed men, ostensibly gang members, stopped a public bus and riddled it with gunfire from automatic weapons, killing twenty-eight passengers, most of them women and children. The perpetrators left a note indicating that the crime was in response to the president’s all-out war on crime. By the time I visited the neighborhood in 2007, the
barrio had become synonymous with gang violence in the minds of most Hondurans. After two blocks of walking the wide dirt streets—dark and eerily quiet already at 7:30 in the evening—I was glad to meet one of the planners of the event I had been invited to attend. Five young men, two of them ex-gang members, had organized a special two-night evangelistic campaign aimed specifically at gang members. Together with the pastor of the local Mennonite congregation\textsuperscript{40}, the young men had founded a gang exit program called “Youth Restoration.” The program, which had recently celebrated its first anniversary, sought to convince gang members to leave the gang and to persuade young sympathizers to join the church instead of being jumped in. Our guide, a former gang sympathizer, was visibly excited about the event and led us on his BMX bicycle to the place where the event would take place, an outdoor park with a reputation for violence. Setup of a large sound system was well underway and lights had been hung from palm trees surrounding the “stage”—a former public pool filled with dirt. People streamed in for the event, eventually numbering two or three hundred. Some sat on chairs while others stood or milled around on the sides. Behind the seated audience was a row of young men and boys, the “special guests” made up of gang members and sympathizers who had received specially-printed invitations, hand-delivered by the organizers in the days leading up to the event. The title of the event, posted on the invitations and on specially-designed t-shirts, was “Escape with Your Life.”

\textsuperscript{40} The Honduran Mennonite Church, one of the largest “historic” Protestant denominations in the country, is made up of Honduran nationals belonging to congregations founded by North American missionaries arriving in the 1950s. It does not include conservative “ethnic” Mennonites such as those living in “colonies” in Belize or Mexico.
Heading the bill on the first evening was a Christian Reggaeton group called *Soldados de Cristo* (Christ’s Soldiers). After a short introduction and a pair of charismatic songs led by the pastor, the group took the stage. The three young men wore ghetto-style clothing—baggy jeans, huge t-shirts, oversized baseball caps and gold crucifix necklaces. The leader announced that his group did not sing in churches but rather chose to perform at secular venues and clubs. After cringing through one or two songs I began to feel sorry for the club patrons, but here at the campaign the specially-invited gang members and sympathizers seemed thrilled. Apparently, being tone deaf is not a serious impediment to singing reggaeton. No one in the band gave the slightest indication of being able to carry a pitch. In any case, the message was thoroughly Christian. The group sang about being transformed by Jesus and “Papa Dios.” After awhile the pastor retook the stage. Pastor Jose, an energetic 28-year-old and father of four preached an impromptu sermon—the invited speaker, we learned later, had been unable to find the venue. The pastor’s text was Proverbs 16:6: “By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil.” He then launched into a blistering critique of the government’s approach to dealing with gang members. “Why is [the gang] such a problem? Because the government has decided to spill blood and in doing so has made the problem even worse than before.” He wondered out loud what kind of result the government might have achieved if they had instead sat down with a “man of God” to put together a different kind of approach. This point served to segue

41 I use the King James Version here because it mimics the archaic and gender-exclusive language of the Spanish *Reina Valera* version from which Pastor José read.
into the contrasting approach that this church and these men were using. “God has a different way of correcting (corregir) sin.” He said that this evangelistic campaign was planned, “Because you’re important to me, because this community is important to me and because God has a plan for you. . . When everyone else turns their back on you, God is listening in the heavens.”

Later that evening, Pastor Josè told guests, including the musical group, how the event had originated. An evangelical woman in the neighborhood had grown increasingly desperate for a way to convince her son to leave the gang. Eventually, she hit on the idea of planning a special evangelistic campaign targeting neighborhood gang members but when her own pastor spurned the idea, she turned to Pastor Josè and the young men from Youth Restoration. Together, they began planning and raising money for a special event called “Escape with Your Life.” Soon after the planning had begun the woman’s son was shot to death two blocks from his home by members of the opposing MS-13 gang. His mother had hoped that the event would provide the additional incentive that her son needed to leave the gang for good. He had already begun participating in some events at the Youth Restoration program. The woman was devastated and plans went into hold. Nevertheless, after a couple of months the young men approached her to ask if she was still interested in moving ahead. She agreed and even helped put up money for printing special t-shirts. Now the event was finally taking place.

My decision to attend the evangelistic campaign was motivated in part by sheer curiosity. I had interviewed most of the members of Youth Restoration in the days leading up to the event and they had shared with me their excitement about the campaign, which had been in the planning stages for months. They had shown me the full-color
invitations they had printed and had hand-delivered to their former gang mates. They had

told me of participating in special work projects in order to raise money for the event.

Given evangelicalism’s prohibitions of macho behavior, would any of the local gang

youth actually show up to an evangelistic event I wondered? And if so, what would bring

them to it? And, assuming some did show up, what would be the impact of attending such

a campaign? Surely there would be an old-fashioned “invitation.” Would the gang youth

stream forward by the dozens, making commitments to leave the gang and becoming

evangelical teetotalers like the members of Youth Restoration.

In fact, the immediate outcome of the event failed to meet the expectations of the

organizers. There were no public “decisions” much less a massive exit of gang members

or sympathizers. About two dozen youth attended one or both outdoor services and nearly

as many participated in the daytime workshops on self-esteem and violence, but there

were no new “decisions” to celebrate. The youth, many of whom were only just

beginning their gang affiliation, seemed curious and interested in the campaign events—

especially the reggaeton concerts—but not yet ready to give up life in the gang.

Nevertheless, when I visited the program a year later the five youth who had organized

the event reported that two of the gang youth who had participated in the event had joined

the program since then. “The seeds were sown,” they insisted. The campaign, they

believed, had been worth the effort.

In fact evangelical “campaigns” aimed especially at gang members and other

young, wayward males are not uncommon in Central America. And religious ministries

aiming to help gang members leave the gang are, if not plentiful, at least not an anomaly

in the region. But what are congregations really aiming for with such ministries, the costs
of which, in both time and energy, can be especially high? In this chapter I examine religious gang ministries, including Catholic and evangelical programs as well as those aimed at prevention and those aimed at facilitating gang exit. I aim to explore what it is that motivates the individuals who found and promote such initiatives as well as how they define the problem of gang violence in general. The larger goal is to gain a better understanding of how and to what extent religious groups in northern Central America attack social problems related to violence and whether such programs hold out any hope for reducing gang violence. Finally, I draw some tentative conclusions regarding the connection between two contrasting approaches to gang violence and the broader shift in the religious landscape of the region. My findings in this chapter draw especially on over thirty interviews with individuals from more than two dozen organizations working with gangs in the region. My list of contacts was developed by word of mouth and with the help of lists developed in an earlier study by researchers associated with El Salvador’s Jesuit university (Cruz 2006). I also draw occasionally from the interviews with former gang members.

Evangelicals and the Gang: Defining and Attacking a “Spiritual Problem”

Evangelicals have been involved in gang ministry since at least the late 1990s but most ministries that address gangs and gang violence directly emerged in the early 2000s. My research took me to visit nearly a dozen such ministries, most of which were connected with a congregation or a denomination but some of which were stand-alone “para-church” organizations and thus did not relate exclusively to a church or
denomination. Table 5.1 shows a list of the evangelical gang ministries I visited or with whom I conducted at least one interview. Staff size are based on my own estimate. The “approach” of the institution indicates whether a group aims to “restore” current gang members—a term I explain further below—or to thwart the growth of gangs or gang violence through “prevention” aimed at keeping youth from joining the gang in the first place.

### TABLE 5.1

**A SAMPLING OF EVANGELICAL GANG MINISTRIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Staff Size</th>
<th>Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proyecto Jeremias</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundacion San</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maras para Cristo</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Evangelical-ELIM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Restoration/prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casa de Alcance</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Restoration/prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministerios Jefte</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casa de</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restauraciòn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidos en Cristo</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casa Victoria</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iglesia de Santidad</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Evangelical-Holiness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restauracion</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Evangelical-Mennonite</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPyJ</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Evangelical-Mennonite</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>Restoration/prevention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many ways, the evangelical ministries varied considerably. A few were well-structured and highly institutionalized but these ministries usually had a variety of institutional priorities, having added gang ministry only in recent years. More commonly,
evangelical gang ministries were “mom-and-pop” organizations run mostly by a pastor and a handful of volunteers or by laypersons with minimal professional training. Indeed, one of the distinguishing features of evangelical congregations is their tendency to multiply with great frequency. Theologically speaking, there is nothing to stand in the way of an evangelical who feels a “calling” to begin a ministry from doing just that, regardless of the extent of that person’s theological training or lack thereof. The same is true with evangelical gang ministries. There are no diocesan authorities from which to request permission to begin a social or evangelical ministry and thus individuals or pastors who desire to begin such ministry can do so provided that they are able to inspire others to contribute time or resources to support them in their efforts. Of course, this “free market” approach to religious ministry, while encouraging the founding of new congregations and ministries, also means that a great many evangelical organizations function for only a time and later, after the energy or inspiration of the founding leader runs out, disappear or disintegrate. At least two of the smaller evangelical ministries I interviewed, *Unidos en Cristo* (United in Christ) in Honduras and *Ministerios Jefte* (Jephthah Ministries) in Guatemala City, were in a process of re-evaluating their prospects for future ministry after having seen their activity decrease significantly in the past year or two. Another, the Jeremiah Project, located in San Salvador, was shifting its attention away from gang-related ministry and toward broader themes of education and capacity building among youth.

While evangelical gang ministries have sprung up in all three countries—and I was by no means able to locate or contact the universe of evangelical ministries in the region—it is not the case that most evangelical congregations or pastors support such
ministry financially or otherwise. However numerous the evangelical gang ministries have become, even in neighborhoods where gangs are plentiful, most pastors desire to keep a safe distance from the gangs. They do so both out of a concern for their own physical safety as well as a concern that neighbors and outsiders might get the wrong idea. When I asked one of the members of Youth Restoration if evangelicals commonly do this kind of work he reminded me of the mother of the youth who had been killed during the planning of the evangelistic campaign. “She visited various churches, looking for people to work with and they rejected her. ‘Oh, it’s not in [our] plans,’ [they would say]. That’s just an excuse not to support the program out of fear. They’re afraid they might get killed. Or they’re only interested in saving their souls. They’re not looking out for their neighbor.” Similarly, Pastor Jose Fernandez, who directs the project, reported hearing of some mild disapproval from members of his community for the work of the program.

The reality is that not everyone accepts this work that the churches do. So it’s happened before that people have told me that some people believe that I’m a pastor that identifies with [gang members]. That because of this work, we have some sort of a nexus. That’s basically the biggest risk we run. That it might hurt my testimony as a “good evangelical” [laughs].

Nor were the negative repercussions entirely imagined. In another conversation Pastor Jose reported feeling some resistance from local police after he and the members of the project had scraped together funds to hire a lawyer to represent a former gang youth who had been imprisoned, they were certain, under false accusations.

Although one could hardly expect even a sizeable percentage of evangelical congregations to possess the interest or personnel to engage in gang ministry, the
reticence to get involved in some cases stems from fear or suspicion. A number of ex-gang members themselves reported receiving a less-than-welcoming reception from evangelical congregations they had visited when first considering leaving the gang. Camilo remembered visiting a Pentecostal congregation as a young gang member living on the streets of San Pedro Sula. “I was looking for help and when I arrived the hermanos said, ‘Get out of the way! (¡Quitense!) Here comes that thief. Here comes that gang member!’ They closed their doors to me completely and I left.” A decade later, Camilo again sought out the church, this time while in prison, and although he again felt rejected by some, he found others willing who responded very differently. But others, like Ignacio, never tried a second time. “Once I attended a church called The Philadelphia. I was discriminated against and I still have that concept with me.” Ignacio, an M-18 member at the time, wore the “cholo” style with baggy cloths and short hair. “A lady told me that I couldn’t enter and I don’t know why she said that, maybe she thought I was there for something else but Ha! She told me to get out of there and I never went back.”

And yet, the experiences of a few ex-gang members aside, a surprising number of evangelical congregations have attempted gang ministries through formal and informal means. Although many of these consist of mom-and-pop ministries in which a pastor or lay person in effect “hangs out a shingle” advertising by word of mouth or via simple flyers their intent to work with gang members, such local micro-organizations are numerous enough to be found in every major city and under a variety of denominational headings. Most of the organizations do not have professional staff—that is, directors with a university degree. And lacking a formal institutional structure, most receive little if any international funding. Their strength seems to be their local connections. Indeed, many
evangelical gang ministries were founded or directed by former gang members themselves.

Pastor Luis Arreola is the founder and director of Maras para Cristo (Gangs for Christ), a ministry affiliated with Central America’s oldest megachurch, Ministerios Elim. I first met Pastor Luis while visiting Guatemala’s infamous El Pavón prison where I had joined another pastor, shadowing him during a day-long visit with gang members and other inmates. Pastor Luis had arrived in a white Fiat delivery-style truck with the name of the ministry painted in bold letters on the sides and a three-way loudspeaker mounted on top. Pastor Luis was accompanied by at least a dozen youthful volunteers wearing bright yellow ministry t-shirts bearing the phrase, “Rescue 911: Gangs for Christ.” Pastor Luis seemed like the quintessential evangelical ministry coordinator. The unequivocal name of his ministry, the bright t-shirts, and the loudspeaker all spoke of old-fashioned, anything-but-subtle evangelical ministry aimed at one thing—saving souls. When I interviewed the middle-aged pastor the next week in his basement office of the giant factory-turned-church-building that is Elim’s headquarters, I expected to find a slightly-fanatical, highly charismatic evangelical obsessed with saving gang members from eternal damnation. Pastor Luis does have a charisma about him and, true to my expectations, he spends a lot of his time preaching and holding evangelistic services. He has on many occasions given his testimony of having been involved in street gangs, crime and drugs as a youth in the late 1970s. Furthermore, Pastor Luis defined the gang issue as first and foremost a spiritual problem. But as I listened to Pastor Luis speak of his ministry I began to realize that the term “spiritual” for Pastor Luis, held broader
connotations than merely soul-saving. On the one hand, Pastor Luis insisted that due to the risks involved in gang ministry, he tried to stick to a “spiritual agenda.”

I don’t get involved in the internal problems that [gang members] have, nor with the police. My work is a spiritual work, of help, that’s all. Because sometimes gang members come to me saying, “I’m fleeing because they want to kill me. Come help me get out of here and find a place to hide.” “No,” I tell them. I can’t have anything to do with that.

And yet, “spiritual” work, for Pastor Luis, clearly involves paying attention to more than the soul. Taking clothing and food to prisoners, helping to finance burials and direct funerals for gang members killed in gang warfare, and connecting converted gang members with work opportunities or drug rehabilitation were among the non-salvation-directed tasks in which Pastor Luis engages. In fact, he seemed frustrated that so few evangelical congregations have become involved in “social work,” like gang ministry.

I think that the church has really neglected social work (obra social). I’m talking about the evangelical church. The evangelical church has really neglected social work because the evangelical church has room in its budget for painting the church, buying new chairs, buying speakers, and renovating the building and so much more you know. The praise and worship team here the praise and worship team there. But the church forgot to include its social aid (ayuda social). Because I think that the church is the one with the solution to this problem, at the level of the church because this is a spiritual problem, right? One that we have to solve ourselves. And God gave authority to the church from the spiritual and an economic perspective to solve it. But social aid doesn’t exist in many churches. I have gone to churches and told them, “What plans do you have for working with the streets?” And there’s nothing. “What investment have you made in the streets?” Nothing there either. And so I don’t look for help to the government. I look for help from the people [associated with this ministry] and they have understood and offered their cars, gasoline, their time.

On the one hand, Pastor Luis’s monologue seems confusing, even contradictory. If the gang problem is in fact a “spiritual problem” why should churches bother with
“social work” at all? Why not solve a spiritual problem with a “spiritual solution”? And yet for Pastor Luis, it is precisely this lack of social ministry that keeps churches from being able to “solve” the problem of the gangs. Nor was Pastor Luis alone in his lament. Abner, also a former gang member who converted and later began a ministry to gang members called The Jepthah Project, echoed Pastor Luis’s language of the “spiritual problem” of gangs. “I think that the church is the first one with a solution in its hands. Why the church? Because the church has Christ and Christ is the best medicine for any gang member or delinquent. And so the church should be the first one on the scene, changing the situation.” Like Pastor Luis, Abner saw the gang as a problem that should be a top priority of congregations, precisely because he viewed the problem as an interior, spiritual problem within individual gang members. And yet Abner himself recognized the social rejection faced by gang members and the difficulty of reintegrating into a society that loathes and fears them. In fact, he went on to criticize evangelical pastors that evangelize gang members using a narrow, condemning tone and suggested that such ministers had been ignored or harassed by gang members precisely because they did not understand the “problematic social climate” (problemàtica social) faced by the gang youth. Thus, although he felt that the church should be the first “on the scene,” he also seemed to intimate that more hands are needed. “What we need is an integral work. Integral. Where all organizations and institutions work together to solve this problem. Everyone. None should be left out.”

One reason evangelical gang ministry leaders identify the “problem” of gangs and gang violence in ways that are at best conceptually muddled and at worst, contradictory, is that most have little if any formal training in social scientific conceptualizations of
social problems like gang violence. In fifteen interviews with evangelical gang ministry staff, only three respondents possessed a university degree and none had a background in sociology or criminology. Most had only modest educational background such as a high school degree or informal theological study. Leaders of mom-and-pop gang ministries like The Jepthah Project or pastors of small congregations tended to define the problem of gangs in terms that were familiar to them. They knew from experience that gang members tend to come from impoverished backgrounds and precarious homes but they did not possess a working knowledge of social-structural forces that make gang membership persist and gang violence attractive. But more than just lack of university training or exposure to the tools of social science is involved in evangelicals’ appropriation of spiritual language when referring to the gang problem. Central American evangelicals, including those who work with gangs, tend to view social problems such as gang violence through the lens of sin, grace, and personal transformation. Like their counterparts among white evangelicals in the U.S., Central American evangelicals have an individualist, free-will approach theological orientation that orients their understanding of- and action with regard to social problems (Emerson and Smith 2001). Unlike the whites in Emerson and Smith’s survey who ignored or minimized the problem of race in America, most barrio evangelicals in Central America do not play down the social problems related to the transnational gangs. Indeed, the violence has affected their homes and their neighborhoods. But even those evangelicals who are attempting to do something about the problem have attacked it using an individualist framework that promotes the “rescue” of youth already in the gang. Most, like Pastor Luis, recognize that “social work” or “social aid” is a necessary element—gang members have real social and
material needs that must be addressed if they are to successfully “escape” the gang and start over. But the problem, from the perspective of evangelicals involved in gang ministry remains one of how to extricate individuals from the gang and help them to avoid any future involvement with drugs, alcohol, or crime.

Of course, most Central American evangelicals see conversion as a vital component of such rescue and reintegration and thus, they describe the problem in spiritual terms. Furthermore, defining the gang issue as spiritual in nature brings it within the realm of action for spiritual people. Far from an attempt to wash their hands of the problem by relegating it to another realm, for pastors and barrio evangelicals like Pastor Luis, defining the gang issue as a spiritual problem is another way of holding evangelicals responsible for doing something about it. In effect, for evangelicals who undertake and promote gang ministry, understanding gang ministry within a spiritual framework is another way of making it an evangelical problem. As we will see below, this perspective contrasts starkly with the approach voiced by those involved in Catholic gang ministries.

The individualist, free-will orientation of evangelical gang ministries as well as the fact that most evangelicals involved in such ministries have minimal formal training, mean that evangelical gang ministry is almost always aimed at “rescuing” gang members from the gang and putting them on a path to successful reintegration in their communities. Among such ministries, the most common term for this work is “restoration” (restauración). The term restaurar (to restore) has a spiritual connotation, making reference to the conversion experience and being “restored” to harmony with God. I did not hear the term used by any Catholic or non-religious gang ministry workers.
One sociologist, a self-described cultural Catholic, reacted negatively to the term precisely because of its religious underpinnings. Outside the evangelical sphere, there is little agreement on what to call projects which work with current and former gang members. Some call it “rehabilitation” in order to emphasize the enormous psychological challenges to gang members who leave, while others object to that term because it seems to lay too much responsibility for reform at the feet of the individual. Others prefer the term “social reintegration” in order to underscore the fact that gang members have learned to exist largely outside traditional society and need more than individual attention. They must be reintegrated with the help of a society that has grown to distrust them. Other terms such as “integration” and “re-insertion” also take into account the social nature of the dilemma facing exiting gang members. The director of Onward Youth referred to the work of his own non-religious organization as that of _desarrollo de la construcción humana_ which translates into the even more unwieldy English phrase “development of human construction.”

Aside from the evangelistic component of “restoration,” which _all_ evangelical gang ministries shared, most restoration ministries include one form or another of overt _obra social_ (social aid). Four of the organizations I visited incorporate a half-way house (formal or informal) for youth who wish to be physically removed from the gang territory either because of their fear of reprisals or in an attempt to escape the temptation to abuse drugs and alcohol. At “Casa Victoria” in Honduras, ex-gang members join other men struggling with alcohol abuse in daily workshops and training. But most gang ministries do not have the resources or personnel to orchestrate a half-way home. They rely on heavy contributions of time and energy from pastors and volunteers in order to
evangelize gang members, keep tabs on new converts leaving the gang, assist them in the job hunt and provide occasional subsistence aid for the new convert and his or her family. In short, the notion of restoration “mixes” spiritual and social aspects of gang ministry in a way not unlike Pastor Luis described the gang as a “spiritual problem.” When I asked Pastor Jose of Youth Restoration to describe what he meant by the term, he explained it this way.

For us restoration means precisely that: restoring [one’s] worth. When we speak of youth restoration (restauración juvenil) our idea is that the name should produce in us as much as [the reforming gang members] the concept that you can be someone of worth again. You can once again be someone—how could we say it? It’s [about] your self-concept, and others’ concept toward you. We believe that the work that this title communicates has to do with returning to the person their quality of life. The quality of life in all senses beginning with the spiritual but then continuing to include giving back their emotional quality [of life] and their material quality. So in this sense we use the word restoration because we believe it’s the most complete, right? It’s the one that best sums up what we’re trying to do for them.

Thus Pastor Jose’s actual approach to gang ministry included a variety of social aspects. In addition to its evangelistic campaign, Youth Restoration conducts workshops on self-esteem and anger management, helps gang members in need of legal defense, provides job training in construction and electrical work, and at one point tried unsuccessfully to provide employment for recovering gang members through the establishment of an internet café.\(^{42}\) Pastor Jose’s broad application of the term “restoration” was probably at least partially a result of his informal ties to the Mennonite

\(^{42}\) Not surprisingly given its location in Chamelecón, the café never had enough paying customers to keep it afloat.
Peace and Justice Program which had developed by far the most holistic approach to gang ministry of any evangelical programs. But his use of the term was also meant to imply a strong spiritual component. He insisted that the program remained “one hundred percent evangelistic.”

In fact, as was clear in the preceding chapter, even purely “spiritual” components of gang ministry carry social implications. Evangelical congregations that take in ex-gang members contribute to a “knifing off” of the social environment both through time hording and by promoting and policing strict prohibitions to alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and dancing. In place of such pastimes, which figure heavily into the macho youth culture in the barrio, evangelical congregations offer an “alternative masculinity” based on the idea of overcoming weakness and “conquering sin.” For example, in his sermon delivered at the second evening of the “Escape with Your Life” campaign, Rev. Carlos Tercero, a prisoner-turned-evangelist, attempted to deconstruct the hyper-macho gang disposition by calling it a “spirit of inferiority” and “a sickness inside the soul. . . . When someone comes up to me and tells me that those gang members are bad and we should kill them, I tell them to shut up – they’re children of God like us.” Indeed, Rev. Carlos had a knack for reframing compassionate behaviors as courageous and masculine. “The Bible says you have to bless those that curse you,” he said. “When I see a man walking around with an AK-47, I’m not afraid. Instead, I pray to God on his behalf because a child of God

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43 Whether or not evangelicalism promotes a true “alternative” to the traditional masculinity ideals of the barrio is a matter worthy of further analysis and debate. Clearly, male domination of women is alive and well in the evangelical contexts I visited. But the ideals of abandoning la vida loca and loving one’s enemies certainly do run counter to the masculine norm among barrio youth.
doesn’t need that weapon. He’s just carrying it to be macho. For many years, I was macho. For many years, I carried a gun but it wasn’t any good to me. It just did me harm.” Rev. Carlos also drew on the language of “spiritual warfare” to emphasize the “battlefield” nature of the challenges facing youth. Indeed, the martial metaphors seem to be especially attractive to youth who risk being called a “fag” due to their teetotaling evangelical lifestyle. Thus, the reggaeton group playing the first night of the campaign was called “Christ’s Soldiers.” Similarly, Gustavo, a Guatemalan ex-gang convert remembered being encouraged by an MS-13-member-turned-evangelist with a warfare analogy. “He told me to be firm like a soldier. Love your neighbor and your enemies. Pray that they come to Christ.” Calin, who reported that he had learned in the gang to repress his sentiments since in the gang “only fags cry” reported that now things were different: “When I feel the touch of Jesus in my heart, I cry tears because I tell people that only the courageous join forces with the kingdom of heaven.” Calin’s statement seems like an obvious attempt to rescue a note of masculinity by attaching a risky, battlefield metaphor to the evangelical lifestyle.

In addition to promoting alternative notions of how to express one’s masculinity in the barrio, the evangelical restoration ministries advertise, openly or not, the possibility of a “religious career” that is especially attractive to youth whose future may hold little promise. Ricardo was ordained as a minister only two years after his conversion experience and by the time of our interview, he had traveled to five countries to participate in workshops and preach in evangelistic campaigns. Camilo had traveled to Guatemala and had preached weekly during month-long evangelism services in his native Honduras. In all, six of the thirty-eight converted ex-gang members I interviewed had
worked or were currently working as pastors or evangelists even though most had not finished high school when they began preaching. Other converts coordinate or direct evangelical gang ministries, modeling the possibilities available to converted ex-gang members who “keep the faith.” Nelson directs a neighborhood Bible study for men struggling with alcoholism and feels happy that he can “give back” to his neighborhood by “working hard in the Lord’s work.”

Other ex-gang members told of aspiring to be pastors or evangelists. Clearly, these young men had been impressed by the men who had helped them to convert and leave the gang. But they must have also been attracted to the prospect of holding a position of leadership or authority. Evangelicals advertise the availability of such religious careers—at least for men. Intentionally or not, the invitation to Rev. Carlos to speak at “Escape with Your Life” told the specially-invited gang youth that, should they decide to convert, there were potential opportunities for leadership even for those unable to produce a diploma or a clean record. When he pointed toward one of the gang youth at the back of the audience and told him, “You are going to be a pastor some day,” Rev. Carlos confronted at least one of the youth—probably more since it was not clear to whom he was pointing—with the possibility for leadership and a religious career. The action also emphasized to everyone present that even barrio youth with a troubled past can aspire to evangelical leadership. Similarly, the meteoric religious careers of men like Ricardo, a grade-school drop-out who now traveled internationally and pastored his own congregation, provides attainable models to young gang members desperate for the prospect of an alternative career. Such modeling of a religious career is one more means of attracting youth to leave the gang and reintegrating them into their communities.
Finally, a few evangelical gang ministries have recently begun to expand their work to “prevention”—that is, to helping youth to avoid joining the gang in the first place. Pastor Luis reported that Gangs for Christ was taking a turn in this direction largely due to the fact that the gang members he had been evangelizing for years were now mostly dead or in prison. In addition to his continuing prison ministry he had begun a church among children of imprisoned or deceased gang members. Pastor Luis is convinced that such efforts are preventive since children who grow up in the church and are “well-rooted in the word” will not, he believed, join the gang when they get older.

The Mennonite Peace and Justice gang project in La Lopez has also taken a less overtly religious approach to prevention by teaching conflict resolution in local schools and organizing a youth group and soccer team involving children of gang members.

Gang ministry, whether religious or not, is risky. Many gang members and ex-gang members struggle with substance abuse, fear the “morgue rule,” and are under the constant threat of the “boomerang effect” of barrio violence. Bringing gang members or recent deserters into one’s church or ministry brings both challenges and hazards, and nowhere were such threats more boldly—some would say naively—confronted than in the home of María de la Luz Hernandez. María de la Luz, whose name means “Mary of Light” lives with her husband and their six children in a one-story cinder-block home on the dusty outskirts of La Ceiba, Honduras. In 2002, accompanied by a handful of members from her own Pentecostal congregation and a few other local churches, Luz began a ministry to gang members in the northern coastal city of La Ceiba, Honduras. The program, loosely known as “United in Christ” began simply as a visitation ministry aimed at evangelizing gang members on the streets and in the local prison and at helping
them to leave the gang and overcome the challenges to living a crime- and drug-free life.

But when the crackdown of the Maduro administration went into effect, many local gang members found themselves on the run and forced into hiding in the nearby mountains. When a fifteen-year-old gang member approached her asking for a place to stay, Luz invited him to come and stay in her home with her family. Shortly thereafter, Luz invited Camilo, the former M-18 leader to join her household as well. Camilo had just finished a prison term and was running for his life. The ex-gang member recalled when Luz approached him after a worship service in the prison chapel shortly before he was to be released and told him, “God has made me a mother to you.” Since he himself had learned of his orphan status as a young teen, Camilo felt deeply moved by her pronouncement.

After his release, Camilo spent several months in the Hernandez home, and soon word began to spread among those most desperate to find a way out of the gang, that safety and a modicum of stability was available at the home of “Hermana Luz” (Sister Luz).

Eventually, Luz and her husband came to provide a kind of halfway house for gang members trying to escape the gang. A total of fourteen recovering gang members have found refuge in the Hernandez home. At one point eight young men lived and ate in the Hernandez home at a time sharing two bedrooms and a guest bathroom while Luz, her husband and their six children (including four young daughters) shared a bathroom and two bedrooms.

When I asked Luz to explain how and why she had allowed her home to become a half-way home for recovering gang members, she answered matter-of-factly, “Well, it wasn’t something that I had been planning for. All at once when I was about twenty-four, a relative of mine fell into a gang and that’s when we started to live the pain of the youth
and the families.” Thus, on the one hand, the decision of Luz and her husband to place their household at risk by taking in gang members during the “hunt-down” was motivated by a simple, humanistic empathy. “No one was doing anything for them and we realized that they were dying . . . We never made an open decision like, ‘Let’s bring home a youth!’ because we didn’t know how. It’s just that along the way a case came up . . . where we couldn’t really see another option than to bring them into our home.” Indeed, one could think of plenty of “options” other than bringing into one’s home not one but several gang members at a time, especially in a home with four young daughters! But Luz seemed uniquely prone to viewing gang youth as though they were members of her own family—as if they were her children.

And yet Luz’s motivation goes beyond maternal compassion to include religious conviction. She spoke of feeling motivated by the spiritual rewards of helping converted ex-gang members find eternal salvation whatever the outcome of their immediate future.

Early on when so many youth were getting killed, there was a moment when every week one or two of our [ex-gang member converts] would be killed after getting out of prison. I got to the point where I said, “I don’t want to do this anymore because I don’t want to see them get killed.” But when I said that I remembered that God is interested in what happens with our soul and where our soul goes. And so I realized that they had Jesus inside of their hearts so it didn’t matter if they died because that soul was not lost—although I still cried every time they died—but I realized that that youth was going up there to rest with Jesus. That was the most important thing.

Nevertheless, such “purely” spiritual rewards as the confidence that saving souls would lead to the eternal rest of slain gang members clearly took a back seat to the motivation of seeing individual gang members “transformed” through after staying in her home. She spoke proudly and by name of former gang members who had found a stable
life with a job and a marriage following their time in her home. Most stop by to visit or
call her from as far away as California. Although Luz and her husband made the decision
in 2006 to temporarily discontinue their hosting of gang members in their home for a
time, they remain active in gang and prison ministry and had hosted another youth in
early 2007. She stated, “I get passionate, passionate when I am with these youth—those
that have left the gang or those that are still active or in prison. That’s where I feel really
capable.” From her own account then, Luz appears motivated by a “mixture” of religious,
social, and personal motivations. This “mixing” of motives was quite common among the
evangelical gang ministry leaders I interviewed.

In fact, “separating” religious and social motives is difficult if not impossible
when listening to leaders of evangelical gang ministries. As Smith and others have
pointed out, religion provides a narrative about how things “ought to be” that can
motivate risky or “disruptive” action in a world that does not align with such values
(Smith 1996). Evangelical gang ministry leaders tended to borrow frequently from
biblical narratives and injunctions when explaining the motivational framework for their
ministry. Luis and Nahum, two university students who work in the Salvadoran
administration’s pro-youth program, conduct “proyectos ambulatorios” (walking
projects) walking through “red zone” neighborhoods to seek out gang members and
attempt to persuade them to leave the gang. They also visit prisons, organizing games and
non-violent recreation for El Salvador’s thousands of imprisoned gang members. On
evenings and weekends the two “check-up” on gang members they know who have
recently left the gang, hoping that through such visits and by inviting them to church
youth rallies, such recent gang leavers will remain motivated to retain their commitments.
While traveling to a prison outside San Salvador, Luis and Nahum described to me their motivation using a variety of biblical themes including the story of “the good Samaritan.” “The story shows that Christians must come to the aid of those in need,” he said. He went on to point out that while others walked past the man who had been robbed and left for dead, the good Samaritan came to his aid, took him to a hotel and paid for his stay with his own money. Drawing a parallel between the victim in the story and gang members in general, he added that, “We don’t know what that man had been involved in before the robbery.”

Such biblical themes surfaced in interviews with other evangelicals as well. Pastor Luis, in his critique of the larger evangelical world which, he feels, has ignored the plight of the gang members, argued,

Really the mission of the church is that—to support those most in need. They used to say to the Lord, “You spend your time with publicans and sinners,” right? The Lord said, “I have come to seek the sick of this earth, those with the greatest needs, not the healthy, because the healthy don’t need anything.” So we have identified with the people. There have been criticisms as well because the same [evangelicals] sometimes say, “They ought to take all of the gang members and kill them!”

In fact the language of taking gang members into account as “the least of these,” that is, as impoverished youth with great needs rather than as hardened criminals deserving punishment, was more common among evangelicals than I had expected. Evangelicals such as Luis and Nahum, Luz, and Pastor Luis viewed their mission largely in light of a biblical command to protect the weak, not merely to convert the damned. Although spiritual salvation was clearly a key component of all evangelical gang
ministries, such spiritual concerns were often viewed in the context of a larger humanitarian concern for the well-being and future prospects of gang members.

Not all of the motivations for engaging in evangelical gang ministry were selfless. Whether or not they were willing to admit it, evangelical congregations and pastors could in fact realize certain benefits from gang ministry successes. After all, in the evangelical worldview a congregation in which former gang members are active and have made an obvious and public change in their lifestyle is one that demonstrates the evangelical principle that “God can change anyone.” Thus, when a high profile gang member or leader converts, he is likely to be “showcased” in the congregation in which he has converted and, should he continue to maintain the evangelical lifestyle for a sufficient period of time, he will be given visible responsibilities in the church such as playing in the band or preaching on occasion. Converted gang members often travel with evangelists to give their testimonies at evangelistic campaigns or at mega-churches. A congregation with one or more converted ex-gang members participating actively is one in which “the spirit” is made visible to those in the local community.

In short, it is difficult to extricate social from religious concerns motivating evangelical gang ministry. Within the evangelical worldview, Christians are to act responsibly toward their “neighbor,” especially those neighbors in need. But they are also to seek the salvation of everyone, including and especially youth involved in substance abuse, drug-dealing, and violence. Thus for evangelicals, gang ministry provides an ideal context for bringing together social concern and spiritual fervor since converted ex-gang members provide “proof” of the evangelical message that salvation is powerful and within the reach of everyone. That such a message of transformation is always framed
within an individualist framework merely grows out of the evangelical theological perspective.

The conversionist approach and religious motivation of evangelical gang ministry can be a weakness, especially when ministry leaders possess a very limited awareness of the social contextual problems underlying the problem of gang violence. Overzealous gang ministry leaders, eager to facilitate conversions can fall into the trap of assuming that a “change of heart” is all that is needed for a gang member to start over and desist from participating in crime, violence, and drugs. Fortunately, some evangelical gang ministries seemed to be “learning” from their past mistakes. For example, Pastor José reported that although Youth Restoration had begun as a purely evangelistic endeavor, he had learned along with the coordinators that more than spiritual conversion was needed:

When Youth Restoration was born, the idea was to inculcate in the spirit and heart of youth the need for God, the need for a change of life starting from within. Our focus, our vision is first and foremost evangelistic. Nevertheless, as the project advanced, a more formalized, more complete proposal [was developed] where we realized that the gospel, when it is preached in certain sectors of our community, people have different demands, right? So in the case of the [gang members] it wasn’t just about making them feel the love of God and changing from within but also how to produce a return to their natural environment so that they could readapt, regain trust and have resources for earning a living.

Alvaro Borges (not his real name), pastor of a large congregation in a large town in southern Guatemala, learned an even more difficult lesson, this one regarding the connection between gang violence and law enforcement. Pastor Alvaro is a young, energetic pastor of a large congregation linked to the enormously-popular mega-church Casa de Dios (House of God) located in Guatemala City. I interviewed Pastor Alvaro in the presence of two former gang members involved in the congregation’s ministry for
gang members and sympathizers. The ministry, called Casa de Alcance (Outreach Center) began when several members of the local M-18 and MS-13 gang cells converted to evangelical Christianity and started attending his congregation. During a special “reconciliation service” it emerged that certain members of the local police had been arresting gang members, taking away their weapons and selling them to the opposing gang for a profit. Gang members realized that they were being used by local authorities interested in making a profit. Furthermore, Pastor Alvaro told of encountering political resistance after seeking to protect new gang converts from reprisals. At one point Pastor Alvaro asked me to turn off the voice recorder while he shared in more detail about his difficult experiences with the legal and judicial system. Later, he admitted openly that he and his congregation had been naïve and didn’t understand anything about gangs when they began the ministry. “We soon learned that there were limits to what we could do.” Although the Outreach Center continues to work with some gang members, most of its work is in the area of prevention through after-school activities and computer-literacy workshops.

Unfortunately, wisdom gained from past mistakes is rarely shared among evangelical gang ministries, which rarely interact and frequently dismiss each other’s work if they are aware of it at all. Pastor Willy (not his real name) who founded and pastors a non-denominational Pentecostal-evangelical church, is a short, barrel-chested man with a commanding presence and a strong voice. He wears a gold watch and a half-buttoned Western shirt reveals a thick gold necklace. I interviewed Pastor Willy in the squat cement structure that houses his congregation and which, he proudly told me, used to be home to a bar where he had spent considerable time as a young man. The church is
located on a busy street near the center of the city. Pastor Willy used his cell phone to show me video clips of emotional moments from a healing service for a resident of the center for alcoholic men that he had recently established. Although he had never formerly belonged to a gang, Pastor Willy tells of a past life of crime and alcohol abuse prior to his own conversion and of founding a church and ministry for gang members and street children. When I met Pastor Willy, he was constantly shadowed by three male youth, all of whom were recovering from addictions. One of the youth had been a member of the gang. Pastor Willy began the “dry-out” ministry in his home and now rents a house several kilometers outside the city, where the young men sleep and have their evening meal. Several days after interviewing Pastor Willy in his church, I accompanied him as well as three of his young “protégés” on a pastoral visit to the Pavòn prison where two converted ex-gang members he visits weekly were serving out lengthy prison terms. In addition to the two ex-gang members, Pastor Willy was excited about two other men whom he had been visiting and who had been expressing interest in religion of late.

Over the course of the day I became concerned about the nature of the pastoral relationship Pastor Willy had developed with one of the inmates, El Buso (a fictional nickname). El Buso lived in a special private wing of the prison called “the pole” (as in the North Pole) where three inmates lived in private cells and enjoyed special access to water and other amenities. Pastor Willy seemed impressed with El Buso and the respect he commanded among the other inmates. Indeed, I found myself marveling at El Buso’s seemingly unlimited resources, his gold chains, name-brand clothing, and easy-going manner. Pastor Willy had informed me that El Buso was the most powerful prisoner in the complex and El Buso made no effort to hide his influence. He treated our party of five
to ice cream, an elaborate meal of traditional pepián prepared by two female visitors, and sent us on our way at the day’s end with multiple bags of sweet bread from the prison bakery. During the lunch, El Buso conducted business by mobile phone, giving orders regarding a construction project in his home town. He also sent other inmates to fetch tortillas, Coca-cola, and “bread for the gringo.” During a conversation about a prison-wide New Years Eve party financed by El Buso himself, another resident of the three-person private wing disappeared behind a makeshift curtain and re-emerged holding a bottle of Buchanan’s Whiskey, the pride of the men’s liquor collection. I had heard of special privileges for Guatemala’s most powerful inmates. Now it was clear that such stories were anything but fictitious.

But especially troubling was a short conversation between Pastor Willy and El Buso near the end of the meal during which El Buso offered, and Pastor Willy accepted, the use of a Ford Ranger pick-up truck “for the ministry.” In fact, El Buso had also offered the use of a suburban home “sitting empty right now” in a gated community near the south coast although Pastor Willy turned down that offer in spite of the urging of one of the young accompanying him. Pastor Willy said it was too far from the city for use as a half-way home. Before we left, El Buso made arrangements for Pastor Willy to pick up the truck at the home of his fiancé the next day.

Perhaps there is an explanation for Pastor Willy’s interaction with El Buso that does not raise as many red flags as my own interpretation of the events. And yet, from my perspective, there were plenty reasons for Pastor Willy to be far more cautious and self-critical in his interaction with powerful inmates. Prior to our visit to el Pavón Pastor Willy had shared with me that he sometimes did small favors for El Buso such as
“purchasing” special tennis shoes from a particular vendor downtown who charged him nothing once he knew their destination. Furthermore, Pastor Willy admitted to not being certain of the extent to which El Buso really desired to convert. True, he attended chapel occasionally and liked to talk about faith matters with Pastor Willy, but he was clearly not yet ready to take on the status of an evangelical convert not least because it would entail giving up alcohol. Nor had Pastor Willy inquired about the nature of El Buso’s offenses or whether or not he intended to change the course of his life. El Buso continued managing his business from prison and it seemed highly probably that such dealings included an illegal element. At one point El Buso made reference to an altercation he and his friend had had with “the Colombians” a day earlier. Another reason for concern was the fact that El Buso counted one of Pastor Willy’s prized ex-gang member converts among his closest friends, even inviting him to live in “the pole.” Given reports of connections between organized crime and the gangs, it was difficult not to be troubled by this friendship. The same ex-gang member, a Salvadorian, had been a relatively high-profile member of the M-18 prior to his very recent conversion. Finally, my concerns were deepened by the fact that Pastor Willy and his protégés clearly hail from a lower socio-economic class than the one to which El Buso belongs and all were obviously impressed by El Buso, whose light skin, expensive clothes, and social ease put him head and shoulders above the rest of the inmates. Accepting the offer of the use of El Buso’s late-model pick-up indebted him to El Buso, the more so because Pastor Willy drove a dilapidated hatchback from the early 1980s. Was El Buso using his relationship to Pastor Willy as cover for his on-going activities or was he genuinely interested in the evangelical message and truly desirous of helping Pastor Willy’s ministry to alcoholics
and gang members? In either case, Pastor Willy seemed terribly naïve about the conflict of interest created when a pastor accepts gifts and runs errands for a powerful felon.

My review of characteristics, tendencies, and motivations of evangelical gang ministries has complicated the picture considerably. A significant variety exists among and between evangelical organizations and congregations working at gang ministry. A few have multiple, paid staff members and a formal institutional structure while many others consist of merely a pastor or highly-motivated former gang member and a cadre of volunteers. Furthermore, some evangelical gang ministry coordinators seem at least aware of the complexity surrounding gang ministry while others appear not to have recognized yet the dangers and pitfalls associated with it, confident instead that religious conversion can change a gang member “from the inside out.” Nevertheless, a number of broad tendencies characterize nearly all of the evangelical gang ministries I visited. Evangelicals involved in gang ministry tend to speak of the gang issue in both spiritual and social terms. Pastor Luis defined the gang as first and foremost “a spiritual problem” but implied that congregations were not engaging enough in “social work.” Abner felt that congregations must understand the struggles faced by gang members before engaging in gang ministry but believed firmly that only Christ could truly transform gang members since religious conversion effects change in “the heart” of the individual.

Second, evangelical gang ministry takes a highly individualist approach, focusing almost entirely on extricating gang members from the gang rather than mobilizing to attack the social problems which make gang membership attractive in the first place. Evangelicals call this ministry “restoration” and those involved use a variety of tools to help gang members leave the gang and reintegrate into society including religious
conversion, the knifing off of the old social environment through time hording, the promotion and supervision of an alternative masculinity projects, and the offer of a religious career to take the place of a delinquent career.

Third, evangelicals are highly motivated by a combination of social and spiritual commands and incentives and they tend to articulate such motives with the help of biblical injunctions to take care of the disadvantaged and the down-and-out. These three broad tendencies—framing the gangs as a “spiritual problem” as well as a social one, addressing the gang issue through evangelistic-social outreach to individual gang members, and drawing inspiration from biblical stories—all contrast with the most common perspectives I encountered among those involved in Catholic gang ministries.

The Nature of Catholic Gang Ministries

Catholic parishes and non-profit charities have also developed ministries for addressing gangs and gang violence in Central America. While these programs and institutions vary considerably in size, budget, and mission, they do share some similarities. Table 5.2 shows a listing of eight Catholic institutions devoting at least a portion of budget and program toward the reduction of gangs and gang violence at the time of my visits in 2007 and 2008. Since there was no agreement among Catholics on what to call gang ministries aimed at helping current gang members to leave the gang and reintegrate into society, I distinguish between ministries aimed at promoting gang exit from those seeking to prevent entrance by calling the approach of the former
“reinsertion” and the approach of the latter “prevention.” However, the term “reinsertion” loosely corresponds to the evangelical term “restoration.”

### TABLE 5.2

**A SAMPLING OF CATHOLIC GANG MINISTRIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Staff Size</th>
<th>Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Poligono de Don Bosco</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Catholic-Salesian</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crispaz</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Reinsertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adios Tatuajes</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Catholic-Maryknoll</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reinsertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rincôn Juvenil</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adios Tatuajes</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Catholic-Maryknoll</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reinsertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidos por la Paz</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reinsertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grupo Ceiba</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Catholic/ecumenical</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEPAZ</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Catholic/ecumenical</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fe y Alegria</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Catholic-Jesuit</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I did not encounter any “mom-and-pop” gang-related ministries with Catholic affiliation. Although some Catholic gang ministries, like ¡Adios Tatuajes! (Goodbye Tattoos!) and Rincòn Juvenil (Youth Corner) had only a small staff, these programs were almost always integrated within a larger administrative structure such as the local diocese or a larger Catholic non-profit. In five cases, a priest was involved in the administration of the institution while in the other three institutions—FEPAZ, Unidos por la Paz, and Crispaz—the director held a college degree at the very least. Consequently, Catholic gang ministries tended to be more institutionalized, better organized and had better access
to funding both at the local and the international levels. At least four of the organizations
drew a considerable amount of their resources from international donor agencies.

Before I began my on-site research, I had been told that Catholic gang ministries
were dedicated to gang prevention rather than intervention or “reinsertion.” While there
does seem to be evidence for a Catholic preference for promoting alternatives to children
who might otherwise be involved in the gangs, I found a few Catholic-affiliated
ministries promoting gang exit through reinsertion as well as two that formerly promoted
reinsertion but have shifted their focus to prevention. For example, Father Jose Maria
Moratalla is a Spanish Salesian who runs a technical high school called “El Polígono de
Don Bosco” located in las Iberias, one of San Salvador’s most dangerous neighborhoods.
Although the Catholic-owned and operated institution enrolls many students from the
neighborhood and the surrounding communities, it also operates as a kind of “reform
school” especially for young men needing vocational skills for entering the job market.
Hundreds of youth study trades there while obtaining a high school diploma and, through
an agreement with the Salvadorian juvenile justice program, some offenders can choose
to serve out a part of their term at the school. Over the years but especially in the late
1990s and the early 2000s a number of gang youth have entered and graduated from the
school learning trades such as bread-baking, welding, and machinery for gaining a fresh
start afterward, and in the process the school has attracted national attention and
international funding for the entrepreneurial cooperative approach developed by Fr.
Moratalla. “Padre Pepe” as he is affectionately called by students and the media, has a
reputation for “specializing” in reforming gang youth and maintains communication ties
with active gang leaders both in prison and on the outside. It is easy to see why they trust
him. Padre Pepe has a lively personality and a “tell-it-like-it-is” conversational style that is both engaging and disarming. When I interviewed him in 2007, he seemed eager to correct what he believed were widely-held and inaccurate stereotypes regarding the gangs in El Salvador. He argued that the gangs are a foreign import (from Los Angeles) and that gang members no longer can escape the gang. When I asked him about religious responses to gang violence, he became emphatic: “The church cannot respond as a church! The problem is with society and only by responding as a society can we begin to address this issue!” In sharp contrast to Pastor Luis, Abner, and other evangelical gang ministry leaders who believed gang ministry ought to begin by promoting a change of heart among current gang members, Padre Pepe insisted that the real sources of growth and violence of the gangs lie in unemployment and migration. Thus, only the government, pressured by civil society can truly address the problem. In any case, Padre Pepe believed that the gangs no longer allow exit, and the school had not accepted gang members for some time now. Although he did not rule out the possibility of helping to reform gang members in the future, he would only do so if they came honestly seeking to leave and, by his own admission, such cases were now quite rare if they exist at all.

Turning the question around, I asked Padre Pepe how the gangs view religion. This time his response was even more intense. “That’s just the problem—they’re using us! The churches are being used by the gangs. They’re playing with us!” Padre Pepe insisted that the gangs are constantly evolving and learning to take advantage of those naïve enough to trust them. He told me of meeting a gang member in prison recently who showed him his certificate of baptism. “See how they use the churches?” he said. “He was just playing the
pastor for the good image of being a Christian now. [Getting baptized] might help him to get out earlier.”

Clearly, Padre Pepe saw religious conversion as a ruse, a way of gaming gullible religious people, especially evangelicals, by playing to their religious sensibilities. Furthermore, Fr. Moratalla hinted that religious gang ministry that seeks conversion is merely a distraction from the hard work that must be done to provide youth with what they really need—a job. As evidence, he recounted a meeting in which religious gang ministry leaders had met to try to coordinate their efforts in speaking with one voice to the government by promoting pro-employment reforms. To his disappointment a Baptist minister stood up and gave an impromptu sermon on what “the Bible says,” insisting that what these men really need is Jesus. The sermon was greeted with numerous “Amens.” “I just hung my head,” he recalled.

Friar Miguel, a Peruvian Franciscan who pastors a satellite neighborhood of Guatemala City, holds a similar perspective. In 2006 his parish was awarded a sizeable grant from USAID to found a youth center for children and youth of the neighborhood of Bucaro and the surrounding area called Mezquital. The Rincón Juvenil (Youth Corner) is an after-school youth center with workshops for children and adolescents and was just getting off the ground when I visited in 2007. The center had been constructed on fallow land belonging to the parish and held a beauty academy, a gymnasium, and a computer lab and was managed by a small paid staff as well as a larger core of adult and young adult volunteers from the community. Although a handful of gang sympathizers and former members had participated in workshops at the center, the lay organizer stated that the center’s main approach to gang violence was that of prevention. Fr. Miguel does not
share Padre Pepe’s perspective of gang members as powerful, wily criminals. He described them rather as youth from precarious and impoverished families and lacking options for a viable future. But he does share Padre Pepe’s conviction that only by teaching gang youth a marketable trade can they be helped to leave the gang and establish a crime-free life. Furthermore, Fr. Miguel is equally pessimistic about the evangelical churches’ approach to the gang phenomenon. In the surrounding Mezquital area, he noted, the “separatist” (evangelical) churches have grown at the same time as the gangs have multiplied. Furthermore, some ex-gang members who had been taken in by local evangelical churches had recently been killed. “So when you look around and see this you realize that getting gang members out isn’t enough. We have Protestant youth that come here for career preparation.”

The indictment of evangelical gang ministries as overzealous “spiritualists” was a common theme among those working in Catholic gang ministries, voiced especially by the priests I interviewed. Father Julio Coyoy, who directs a pro-youth vocational school in Guatemala’s crime-ridden “El Limón” neighborhood, accused the evangelicals churches of offering little more than “song therapy.” Furthermore, he expanded his critique to include what he called the “fundamentalism” of charismatic Catholic youth groups. “What’s missing is to make the gospel real and practical,” he said. His organization, called “Grupo CEIBA” has also been a beneficiary of USAID funds aimed at reducing gang violence and like many of the Catholic-related gang ministries, CEIBA aims at prevention of gang affiliation by helping local children and youth learn trades and skills useful for finding employment. Fr. Coyoy emphasized that CEIBA, though founded in the late 1980s by the Catholic parish next door, was now a lay organization and did not
promote a religious stance of any kind despite its ongoing connections to a progressive Catholic parish in Quebec. He seemed eager to distance himself from mainstream Catholicism and noted that his group no longer maintained friendly ties with the current diocesan priest.

Ironically, even Catholic ministries with an overtly religious name were reticent to promote spirituality in any formal or theologically-specific manner. Such was the case at Fe y Alegria (Faith and Happiness), a Jesuit-founded youth center promoting popular education and technical trades among children in a rough barrio of San Salvador. The center had worked with local gang members during the late 1990s and administered a special program encouraging gang exit from 2001-2004 but by the time of my visit, the center had changed its approach to one of working at promoting alternatives to gang life among children not yet affiliated. When I asked the Santos, the youth director, about the “spiritual component” of the group’s ministry, spoken of in the literature describing the program, he explained:

We call it values formation. It’s not catechistic or anything. It’s more general than that. When we pray we want everyone to be able to participate, no matter what their religion. We also try to help them to develop a personal project. You mean like a life plan? Yes. We try to help them think about what they want to do in life and how to get there. We also try to help them cultivate the values that are necessary in the workplace. We teach all of the values.

Like Fr. Miguel and Fr. Julio, Santos was highly skeptical of the evangelical efforts at gang ministry due to their highly religious, conversionist approach. He criticized evangelical churches for offering little more than spirituality in the form of terapia del culto (worship service therapy). “They lack any real process. All they can
offer is a religious experience—you accept, you’re forgiven and that’s it. They don’t use scientific tools such as psychological counseling, job training or therapy.” Santos did not argue that evangelical conversion never “works” as a pathway out of the gang, but instead that it provides little help for the really tough cases involving those most deeply involved.

For many gang members, becoming a Christian has worked but it’s mostly just the ones who hadn’t advanced very high in the system. They could get out more easily.

So you’re saying there’s a point of no return?
I’m one who believes there are those who just can’t go back. Once you get so deep into it you can’t change. They’re crazy. A guy, after killing so many people, he is a psychopath – he’s gone crazy. If you talk to this guy he narrates his sadistic crimes with ease (tranquilo).

In this respect, Santos’s perspective on gang exit mirrored that of Padre Pepe. Since leaving the gang becomes increasingly difficult after years of activity or leadership, it seems advisable not to try to persuade long-time gang members to leave the gang since doing so may lead to naively believing a transformation has taken place when it has not.

“Many of [the graduates] have made us look bad. One guy we helped place in a carpentry shop busted up his boss’s face one day. Others have robbed from their boss or just don’t like the job. They’ll come back and complain that the job is no good.”

One way to avoid the challenge of “knowing” whether or not a former gang member is adequately prepared to succeed as a drug- and crime-free member of the community is to reduce the scope to a single aspect of reentry. The Maryknoll community, a progressive Catholic order founded in New York state in the early 20th century, has helped to develop tattoo-removal clinics called ¡Adios Tatuajes! (Goodbye
Tattoos!) in all three countries of northern Central America. The clinics incorporate infrared technology capable of burning off a tattoo in three visits over the course of one month. The treatments are attractive because of their very low price but the method is time consuming and can sometimes lead to painful, ugly scarring. Figure 5.1 shows a tattoo in its second of three treatments required to fully “erase” the tattoo.
Figure 5.1 shows a nurse technician administering a second-stage treatment of tattoo removal at *Adios Tatuajes* in Ciudad Quetzal, Guatemala City.

Although the clinic in Honduras was closed after providing more than thirty thousand treatments, tattoo-removal at other Catholic-funded clinics in Guatemala and El Salvador continues to be an important service offered to gang youth and anyone else whose tattoo has become a barrier to landing and keeping a job (Sibaja et al. 2006b). Lately the practice has come under scrutiny, though, since a number of studies have suggested that gang leaders now remove their tattoos in order to more freely be able to go
about their work. In other cases, tattoo-removal attracts the ire of gang leaders and places ex-gang members at a greater risk for a “green light.” Still, for ex-gang members who have been given their “squares,” tattoo-removal greatly enhances the prospects for getting a job and makes traveling in rival gang territory far less dangerous. The clinics ask no questions, simply providing a low-cost service to anyone wishing to be free of their tattoos.

A few Catholic bishops and priests in Guatemala and Honduras have approached the issue of gangs as a matter of social justice decrying the “scapegoating” of gang members by politicians for political advantage. In Honduras both the Archbishop of Tegucigalpa and, especially Auxiliary Bishop Rômulo Emiliani Sánchez, were outspoken opponents of the heavy-handed militarized approach of the Ricardo Maduro administration and its “zero tolerance” legislation. After the Maduro administration and its hard-line party lost the elections to a left-leaning candidate from the opposition, Mons. Sánchez offered to act as a mediator between the gangs and the government. The bishop’s proposal met with strong disapproval from hardliners who viewed the overture as akin to “negotiating with terrorists” (Replogle 2006). The bishop has also played an instrumental role in helping a local rehabilitation center called “Unidos por la Vida” (United for Life) seek funding for the building of a rehabilitation and job training center, but after some early successes, additional funds have been slow to materialize and the project has been in limbo for over a year. In Guatemala, the Catholic bishop’s conference has also released statements promoting a more humane approach to dealing with gang violence.
Finally, Catholic educational institutions have contributed to advocacy efforts indirectly by providing objective, social scientific research regarding the rise of gangs (Cruz 1999; Cruz and Portillo 1998) and investigating possible social causes contributing to the presence of gangs in particular communities (Cruz 2004). The Jesuit Universidad de Centroamerica de Simeón Cañas, popularly known as the UCA, has produced some of the best scholarship on the gangs to date. Both through publications of its own faculty and by organizing and overseeing research institutes in the rest of Central America, the UCA has been able to produce balanced scholarship on a topic that is all too often subject to generalization and hyperbole. Jesuits at the ERIC research institute in Yoro, Honduras have also contributed empirical research (Castro and Carranza 2005).

Thus the approach of Catholic-affiliated ministries to gang violence highlights social solutions, working at the local and national level to combat the demonization of the gangs and at the community level to provide alternatives to gang affiliation to youth who might see the gang as an attractive possibility. Although they may not have put it quite as emphatically as Padre Pepe did, all of the Catholic priests and lay-workers I interviewed agreed that the proper approach to gang ministry is a social one. Most emphasized to me that they tried to downplay or avoid religious topics altogether when working with youth so as not to offend or scare off youth from evangelical families. Some of the organizations, such as Grupo CEIBA and Fe y Alegría, were founded as a direct outgrowth of the liberation theology movement of the 1970s and 1980s while others came from less progressive traditions such as the Salesians. But in all cases, the priests and lay directors are well-aware of the social roots of gang violence and firmly believe that education and job training are the best means of both preventing gang affiliation
among youth and of luring current gang members out of the gang. Religion *per se*, they agreed, is of little use in addressing the gang phenomenon. Finally, none of those involved in Catholic gang ministry emphasized the religious underpinnings of their work. Whether because they took such religious framing as a matter of course (and thus, unnecessary to mention) or because they believed explicit religious discourse to hold an offense to religious pluralism, or perhaps because their motives sprang from more secular sources, coordinators of Catholic gang-related ministries including priests, avoided religious language altogether.

Comparing Strategies

What do we learn from reviewing and comparing evangelical and Catholic strategies for addressing gangs and gang violence? First, despite the diversity of strategies and discourse that exist among Catholics as well as evangelicals addressing the gang issue, some clear differences emerge. Across the board, evangelicals were intent on extracting gang members from the gang, and religious conversion was assumed to be the best pathway for bringing about such an exit. A few ministries were now involved in prevention but these groups always continued to promote gang exit. All evangelical groups incorporated a significant evangelical-spiritual component as part of their ministry. Catholic ministries on the other hand, avoided topics of spirituality except in a very broad sense (such as “values education”) either in deference to the evangelical youth who participated or because they deemed it irrelevant to the topic at hand. Although some Catholic ministries were involved in social reinsertion (the non-religious equivalent to
evangelical “restoration”), more than half approached gang ministry from the angle of prevention, advocacy, or scholarship. Additionally, whereas evangelicals described the gang issue as “a spiritual problem” or one with spiritual roots, and thus an ideal target of religious ministry, Catholics like Padre Pepe believed that churches, Catholic or evangelical, must recognize above all that only the government, by providing jobs and reducing poverty, can adequately address the gang issue.

Another way to conceive of the diverging tendencies between evangelical and Catholic-inspired approaches to the gang phenomenon is that of two very different approaches to shame. If, as I have argued in earlier chapters, shame and the shame-rage spiral are key factors motivating youth to join the gang and to participate in criminal violence, then it may be useful to differentiate varying approaches to gang outreach in terms of whether and how these programs deal with shame. Evangelical gang ministries invariably seek to provide gang members with opportunities for acknowledging and discharging shame by setting the stage for a conversion experience that is public and that incorporates an emotional-symbolic recognition of guilt for past deeds. When such acts lead to a successful exit, as they sometimes do, both the individual and the congregation gain emotional energy. The faith of the congregation in its message and its pastor is renewed and the individual is able to lay the groundwork for a new identity as an “hermano”—a sibling belonging to a new family with time and a vested interest in seeing the convert succeed. The failure of a public conversion to result in visible changes in behavior and lifestyle can drain the emotional energy of a congregation. If too many conversions fail, a pastor, a congregation or a ministry will eventually be viewed as gullible or naïve. Nor are evangelical gang ministry promoters unaware of the role of
shame. When Carlo Tercero preached of an “inner sickness” that drives gang youth to carry weapons, it was surely shame that he spoke of.

Catholic ministries on the other hand, approach the topic of shame indirectly. Groups like the Youth Corner or Grupo CEIBA in Guatemala City or el Polígono vocational school in San Salvador seek to provide youth from impoverished backgrounds with the skills they need in order to find employment and a steady income, thus protecting from the shame of not being able to provide for their own needs or those of their families. Even Catholics who advocate on behalf of the dignity and human rights of current or former gang members are in effect attacking the sources of shame by trying to leverage against negative perceptions of these youth as dangerous and worthless elements of society.

It is impossible to draw any firm conclusions on the basis of the research conducted for this study, whether Catholic social ministry or evangelical conversionist approaches will have the greater impact on the future of gangs and gang violence in the region. But a few tentative assessments seem appropriate. As we saw in the previous chapter, a not insignificant number of ex-gang members found in evangelical religion a means for restructuring their lives, staying safe, and finding a job and more than a few appeared to be thriving years after they had converted. Even eminently religious resources, such as emotional conversion experiences can go a long way toward setting the stage for a long and difficult transformation of one’s personal and social identity.

Furthermore, we know from other studies (Ranum 2007) as well as from men interviewed for this project that those who remain in the gang the longest have the highest reported levels of criminal activity and that youth who do not leave the gang often “graduate” to
become hired hit men or to freelancing for the drug cartels. Thus, promoting effective approaches to gang exit is of crucial importance in order to find non-violent options for making a living among a population of youth especially susceptible to being rejected by employers. Nevertheless, most neighborhoods continue to struggle with gang violence, regardless of the quantity or profile of converts leaving the gang for good. JJ may well have left the gang, abandoning drugs and violence in favor of evangelical Christianity but new gangs continue to plague his neighborhood, evidenced by the fact that local parents bring their children to him begging for his help in “talking some sense” into their son or daughter. Thus, prevention measures such as providing safe after-school programs that help children and youth to stay in school or that provide alternative career training for those who do not, especially in marginal neighborhoods where the gangs are prevalent, cannot help but make a positive impact even if the results are far less visible than the bible-toting ex-gang member.

The diverging approaches to gang ministry also speak to a larger story—one regarding the separate trajectories of evangelicalism and Catholicism in Central America. It is no secret that evangelicals in Central America have grown dramatically in number and in proportion to the overall population in recent decades. Nevertheless, in the 1980s and 1990s, most of the attention in the media and among academics was on Protestant growth in Guatemala. But evangelicals in El Salvador and Honduras appear to be catching up or even surpassing (in the case of Honduras) those of Guatemala in the most recent polls of religious affiliation. Table 5.3 shows the percentage of the population self-reporting as Protestant or evangelical during the past three decades.
Evangelicals are clearly gaining adherents from the ranks of the Catholic church. In a region of the world in which only a few short decades ago the Vatican could claim near universal Catholic sway, adherence to the Catholic church is undergoing a dramatic decline. In fact, as Table 5.4 shows, according to the most recent polling data from Honduras, Catholics no longer enjoy majority status. Fewer than half of respondents claimed to be Catholic in that country in 2007.
TABLE 5.4
PERCENT CATHOLIC IN CENTRAL AMERICA
1980-PRESENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
<th>Most Recent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(SOURCES: (CID-Gallup 2007; Holland 2009; Pew 2006)

Scholars have been debating the reasons for evangelical gains and Catholic declines for at least two decades. In Central America, the wars and political instability were often cited as key factors. David Stoll argued that evangelical congregations, by virtue of their apolitical theology were providing political escape from the raging civil war in Guatemala (Stoll 1991; Stoll 1993). That explanation provides some explanatory power for countries like Guatemala which experienced dramatic evangelical growth during the height of the civil war—growth which leveled off significantly during the 1990s (Gooren 2001) as the civil war was drawing to a close. But the same explanation of
political conflict does not apply for Honduras, which did not undergo an open civil war\textsuperscript{44}, and where an explosion of evangelical growth has taken place in the last two decades. In fact, a number of researchers have simply expanded the notion of “refuge” to include economic rather than merely political features. Sheldon Annis argued on the basis of ethnographic work in a rural Guatemalan town that evangelicalism provides economic advantages for indigenous families that convert, better positioning them to succeed in a changing economy (Annis 1987). Virginia Garrard-Burnett (Garrard-Burnett 1998) has argued that evangelical theology provides a source of solace for Latin Americans facing crises and offers a means of adapting in ways that give converts a new sense of leverage despite truly difficult odds. John Burdick studied economically disadvantaged Pentecostal churches in Brazil and concluded that such congregations provided refuge from status judging while uniting members in a “cult of affliction” (Burdick 1993). Andrew Chesnut, borrowing loosely from Rodney Stark’s supply-side theory of religious economies (Stark and Finke 2000) contends that in places like Brazil and Guatemala, “Pentecostal churches responding to popular consumer demand, developed products that offer healing of the afflictions of poverty and positive personal transformation for those who have been rejected and stigmatized by societies that have the steepest socioeconomic pyramids in the world” (Chesnut 2003). Furthermore, he argues that especially important to Pentecostal growth are its emphasis on ecstatic religious experience, faith healing, help in

\textsuperscript{44} Although the Honduran military did exercise considerable control over the population, no open guerrilla resistance took shape in that country and forced extra-judicial killings were in the hundreds compared to the thousands in El Salvador and in the tens of thousands in neighboring Guatemala.
addressing domestic strife, conversionist mentality and an army of lay marketers with local testimonies and experiences (2003:49). Setting aside the matter whether or not his rather strict supply-side approach to explaining Protestant growth can be adequately proven using Chesnut’s data, his observation about the attractiveness of evangelical-Pentecostalism’s religious goods is, I think, helpful since it places emphasis on the entrepreneurial activity of evangelical-Pentecostal congregations and leaders.

My interviews with ex-gang members and leaders of religious gang-related ministries provide further evidence that evangelicals in the region are highly motivated religious marketers, promoting first-and-foremost spiritual goods for social problems. While most of the evangelicals I interviewed do not ignore the social context surrounding the problem of gang membership and violence, most insist that a conversionist or “rebirth” approach will always be the most effective means of addressing the problem. In fact, evangelicals’ emphasis on the possibility of individual transformation for all propels them toward gang members as ideal targets for ministry. Although the risks and complications associated with gang ministry mean that only the most ambitious evangelical pastors and laypersons will actively engage in gang ministry, gang members continue to hold great potential since conversion can lead to powerful new testimonies with special payoff to congregations that host them. Central American Catholics and in fact even priests who are under considerable pressure to slow or stop the attrition in their own parish, seem reticent to “bring religion” into the picture when dealing with the gang issue. Convinced that the gang issue is an eminently social, political, and, economic phenomenon, they avoid religious language when addressing the gang issue. Even those groups, like Unidos por la Paz (United for Peace) and Fe y Alegría that promoted
reinsertion (or used to do so) among ex-gang members, were loathe to promote Catholic faith as providing pertinent answers or unique relevance to the plight of gang members.

In short, evangelicals continue to grow because they continue to seek out members, promoting conversion as a “refuge” from the debilitating effects of chronic shame. Recognizing that many gang members are tired of the hyper-machismo mentality and lifestyle of the gang, evangelical gang ministry leaders and pastors promote alternative masculinities, often borrowing military metaphors and language in order to reframe non-macho behaviors as risky and courageous. One ex-gang member used violent language to describe his forays in evangelistic outreach with two other converted ex-gang members in an attempt to find and convert new gang members. “If we used to fire away [at the enemy], why not fire at them again but this time with the Word.” In fact, the project of reform itself can become a source of masculine identity. Abandoning la vida loca, eschewing weapons, taking up the lifestyle of a teetotaler domesticated husband becomes a project of “conquering sin.” “Be strong like a soldier,” Gustavo remembered being told. “Only the courageous join forces with the kingdom of Heaven,” said Calín. In addition, evangelical religion provides men—especially those who can provide evidence of having been “beyond hope,” and thus serve as an inspiration to others and as evidence of evangelical religion’s effectiveness—with opportunities for leadership and public recognition at every level. From internationally-traveled pastors and evangelists like Ricardo and Camilo to home bible study leaders like Nelson or worship band members like Armando, such converts find opportunities to reconstruct an identity waiting for them upon their conversion.
At least one poll shows evidence that the evangelical masculinity project is gaining in popularity. While reliable data on religious affiliation by gender is difficult to find, a recent poll conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research at San Salvador´s highly-respected Jesuit university provides a surprising view of religion and gender presented below in Table 5.5.

TABLE 5.5

PROFESSED RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AMONG SALVADORIANS BY GENDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(SOURCE: (IUDOP 2008)

Incorporating a random sample of 1,200 respondents leading to a 2.8% margin of error, the poll showed that while Salvadorian men are less likely to report being religious, following a well-documented world-wide gendered characteristic of religion, Salvadorian men are just as likely to report being evangelical as Salvadorian women are. But Salvadorian men are less likely than are women to report being Catholic. Indeed, according to the poll, fewer than half the men of El Salvador call themselves Catholic while nearly a third report being evangelical. The table is surprising for at least two reasons. First, most evangelical congregations at least claim to place serious lifestyle demands on the men who belong to them. Meanwhile men calling themselves “Catholic”
in a traditionally Catholic society such as Central America need not make such lifestyle adjustments. Of course, not all evangelical men follow the rules, and some Catholic men make significant donations of time and effort to their local parish. But, as many of the men in my interviews pointed out, converting to evangelical faith is considered a serious business. To do so and not follow the rules of staying away from bars and discotecas is playing with fire, “messing with Curly.” Second, the prohibitions to interpersonal violence, extra-marital sex, and especially drinking, hit men particularly hard because they threaten to limit pastimes traditionally associated with rituals of barrio masculinity. Indeed, some ex-gang members remembered agonizing over the decision to convert in part because they feared being called gay or a *maricón* (fag). Viewed in light of such prohibitions, the relatively high ratio of evangelical men in El Salvador seems especially unexpected.

But when viewed in light of the findings of this chapter and the preceding one, the poll’s findings are less surprising. Evangelical congregations and social-spiritual ministries promote conversion as *the answer* for men facing problems that seem out of their control. They provide convenient alternatives for retaining a sense of masculinity by framing piety as “conquering sin” and by offering a variety of opportunities for the development of a religious career. Finally, due to its cadre of religious entrepreneurs motivated by religious narratives of transformation and compassion, evangelicalism is able to saturate the barrio with testimonies of males who have successfully pulled-off a transformation, modeling the possibility for other youth seeking to enhance their own prospects for achieving stability (and perhaps some notoriety) in an environment fraught with insecurity. Meanwhile, Catholics who invest time, energy, and resources in youth
centers, education, and public advocacy essentially forfeit any religious “payoff” in terms of new members.

Conclusion

Both Catholics and evangelicals have spearheaded gang ministry in Central America, sometimes eliciting an outcry from neighbors and the media who believe them to be cozying up to hardened criminals. But they approach such ministry motivated by very different frameworks and with differing perspectives on the nature of the problem itself. Evangelicals involved in such ministry tend to view the gang as a spiritual problem—exacerbated perhaps by poverty or disenfranchisement—while Catholics involved in gang ministries understand the problem through a framework of social justice. With few exceptions, evangelicals view conversion as the most important means of addressing the gang problem and thus found ministries that seek to “rescue” individual gang members and re-establish them within their communities through “restoration” programs. Some Catholic ministries have engaged in similar promotion of gang exit and communal reentry but most promote prevention of gang entrance through youth programs and educational institutions designed to provide alternative means of personal and vocational development for children and youth in marginal neighborhoods. More recently, a few evangelical gang ministries have also begun to engage in prevention but even these programs generally incorporate a strong religious conversion component such as Maras para Cristo which has planted a church among children of gang members in a
neighborhood where an older generation of gang members have been killed or are in prison.

In part because the short and long-term effects of “prevention” programs are difficult to gauge, comparing the effectiveness of Catholic and evangelical gang ministries is difficult. Indeed, part of what energizes evangelicals involved in gang ministry is the ability to be able to point to converted ex-gang members who now thrive as members of a congregation and the local community as verifiable, if not especially numerous “success stories.” On the other hand, evangelicals involved in gang ministry tend to be especially vulnerable to underestimating the social forces connecting gang members to wider problems of crime, violence, and drugs. Some evangelical pastors such as Rev. Josè and Pastor Alvaro appeared to have learned such lessons while at least one, Pastor Willy, seemed alarmingly unaware or unconcerned by the risks associated with evangelizing powerful gang members and their friends. In any case, evangelical pastors and gang ministry coordinators remained staunchly convinced of the possibility of and the need for transformation among even the most deeply involved gang members while Catholics such as Santos and Padre Pepe had come to conclude that attempting to help gang members leave the gang was unrealistic at best and at worst, an invitation to gang members to take advantage of one’s naiveté.

Naiveté or not, evangelicals’ sheer confidence in the power of conversion to effect change, demonstrated by evangelical pastors and gang ministry coordinators suggests that one reason evangelicals continue to grow in the region despite relatively high lifestyle expectations for members relates to their insistence on promoting conversion as a response to social problems. Evangelical pastors and gang ministry
leaders promote conversion to evangelical Christianity as a means of gaining control of one’s life and future. As David Smilde has shown, such conversion can sometimes be an effective tool for personal projects of self-reform (Smilde 2007) among Latin American men. When conversion works for ex-gang members, these individuals are often “showcased” by pastors and gang ministry leaders as evidence of the power of evangelical religion and may even be fast-tracked into positions of leadership in a church or ministry. In any case, evangelical religion provides ex-gang members with many opportunities for developing a religious career while contributing to the on-going growth of evangelical religion.
CONCLUSION:
WHAT GANG CONVERSIONS CAN TEACH US ABOUT RELIGION
AND ITS LIMITS

Painted on the wall at the entrance to La Lopez Arellano, a sprawling urban satellite of San Pedro Sula, Honduras is a mural depicting a popular verse cited by multiple converts and evangelical gang ministry workers in Central America: 1 Corinthians 28-29: “And the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before God.” The mural originally held a pair of scenes. Next to the verse was a gang mural representing important symbols of the Batos Locos gang. The dual mural confused me at first. Although the Batos Locos “pane” was not as pornographic or violent as the “unofficial” gang scenes portrayed in tattoos and on the walls of many an urban barrio, it nevertheless told a pictorial story of a chapter in the history of this community that many here seemed eager to forget. Surely enough, when I visited the community for a second time in 2008, community leaders had painted over the gang symbols due to complaints from residents. But the pane with the biblical verse had been preserved with special permission from the neighborhood officials. The dual mural was the first of many pieces of evidence I was to encounter supporting the hypothesis I had come to investigate—that evangelical religion provides a widely-recognized and relatively “safe” alternative to the
gang, a way out for weary gang members. Indeed, to many of the young men and women I interviewed, both those who had converted and those who had chosen another pathway, my interest in the evangelical pathway seemed almost sophomoric and obvious. Nearly all of the former gang members interviewed knew of the “evangelical escape clause” and many brought it up without my even asking about religion. Moreover, many ex-gang members spoke of the unofficial but widely referenced follow-up to the escape clause—that gangs monitor those who profess a conversion, and anyone caught violating evangelicalism’s well-known prohibitions to drinking, smoking, or carrying weapons will be subject to a “green light.”

Nevertheless, as I describe in chapter one, a great deal of variety exists among the transnational gangs of Central America and no rule is fixed or universal. Like most social groups, particularly those in Central America, the gang cells vary greatly in size, structure, and “code enforcement.” Some cells are tightly networked through transnational ties of communication and hierarchical chains of command, while others, probably the majority, make their decisions, including what to do with deserters, at a local level. In this sense, transnational gangs like the M-18 and the MS-13 are comparable to franchises that provide logistical know-how, symbols, acquisition networks, and brand recognition to local affiliates (local cell leaders or ranfleros) while allowing considerable local autonomy. Since the mid-1990s the M-18 and the MS-13 have expanded significantly in the region both through the founding of more local cells as well as by co-opting local street gangs already in existence. By affiliating with a transnational gang, local street gangs gained a higher profile and increased access to small arms. Meanwhile, the shifting of major drug routes to the Mesoamerican isthmus
following U.S. authorities’ crackdown on drug Caribbean air and waterways also contributed immensely to the arming of the gangs and provided new opportunities for income-generation due to the availability of illegal drugs for local consumption. Together, these factors led to an evolution of gangs from mildly delinquent pandillas into well-armed and increasingly criminal maras.

But the increasingly criminal nature of gang activity should not obscure the fact that gangs are made up largely of children and adolescents. Although it is well-known that youth who join the gang tend to come from impoverished families at the urban margins, few gang researchers have examined the mechanisms that lead children and youth to join from such backgrounds to join the gang. I have shown in chapter two that the experience of shame played an enormous role in the decision of many ex-gang members to join a gang. Evidence of the experience of chronic shame suffused the accounts of many of those interviewed who described their own motivations and experiences leading up to the decision to join the gang. Ex-gang members wept or struggled to keep from doing so when they described experiences of parental abandonment, domestic violence, and poverty. For these youth, the gang, with its transnational symbols, its unique insider vocabulary and code of dress, its access to “adult” pastimes such as substance abuse and sex, and its violent rituals offered an attractive means of “bypassing shame” (Scheff 1988; Scheff 2004) via interactive rituals and symbols that generate shame’s opposite, pride, and access to what Randall Collins calls “emotional energy” (Collins 2004).

In fact, many gang members spoke of life in the gang as a liberating experience in the beginning. New recruits and sympathizers found a surrogate family, access to
resources, exciting rituals of violence and solidarity, and access to “adult” recreation. But
the experience soon changed in nature as the “boomerang effect” of tit-for-tat payback
and gang reprisals began to become more violent. Thus, for these youth, joining a gang
provided only a temporary escape from the debilitating experience of shame.
Furthermore, participation in the “adult” pastimes of la vida loca can often lead to
addiction and conflict, further enhancing the “shame-rage” spiral in which experiences of
shame lead to angry and violent outbursts, further shame and so on. Furthermore, raising
one’s profile through prolonged membership and increasing participation made gang
members and leaders increasingly vulnerable to attack from enemy gangs who sought to
humiliate opponents by going after local leaders and well-known members. Finally,
public perceptions of gang membership became increasingly negative in the early 2000s
as gangs became more active in generating income through extortion and the drug trade.
Thus, ex-gang members told of growing “fed up” with life in the gang even as gang
leaders began tightening their grip on members through the claim ¡Hasta la morgue!

But in spite of the rhetoric of the gang, other pathways to leaving exist than on
that of the stretcher though each of these has its own advantages and drawbacks and none
represents a sure bet. Gang members aburridos with the gang life can request permission
to calmarse or “settle down” to the life of a parent or breadwinner, retaining their
connection to the gang while diminishing or ceasing their participation in the violence
and dangerous pastimes of the gang. Still, the calmados are often kept on a “reservist”
status and can be called upon for duty should a pressing need for “defense of the barrio”
arise. Some gang leaders also continue to levy monthly dues from calmados for buying
weapons. Nor does calma status do much to improve the chances that a formerly-active
gang member can find a job or avoid becoming the victim of off-duty police officers or local vigilantes. A “fed up” gang member can also migrate, severing at least temporarily his or her social networks in order to gain a modicum of safety in anonymity abroad or in another part of the country. But starting over in the absence of useful social networks is not easy and it is made even more difficult by the presence of tattoos and the possibility that communication across cell networks may reach to the new community of residence.

The third option involves making use of the “evangelical escape clause.” The caveat to the morgue rule cited by experts and former gang members in all three countries, and among converts and non-converts alike, involved leaving to convert and join an evangelical church. While my interviews did not include conversations with current gang members or leaders and therefore did not allow me to pinpoint with certainty the reasons for the existence of the clause, the reports of several ex-gang members’ conversations with gang leaders on the matter leave no doubt that for some gang leaders at least, extending a “pass” to converted deserters reflects both a desire to stay clear of divine retribution, and a recognition that converts are far less likely to join with the opposition or engage in economic competition through criminal free-lancing. Furthermore, precisely because evangelical religion is associated with strict codes of personal piety, the costs of conversion in terms of lifestyle changes discourage a stampede of gang members out of the gang via evangelical religion.

Nevertheless, from the data gathered in this project, it appears that conversion is a popular, perhaps the most popular pathway for those who do leave. In all, fifty-one of the sixty-three gang members I interviewed reported having undergone a conversion and thirty-nine professed a continuing commitment to evangelical faith. Although my sample
was not statistically representative, the presence of evangelical converts among gang members at every gang recovery program, Catholic, evangelical, or non-affiliated, made it reasonable to conclude that the preponderance of evangelical converts among ex-gang members was not merely an artifact of the selection process. Meanwhile, at the walk-in tattoo-removal clinic, where youth were not “selected” through a gatekeeper or contacted via another informant, four of seven ex-gang members reported having undergone a religious conversion experience (one of them had converted to Mormonism) and three of these remained active in a congregation. Among some interviewees, youth had both converted and migrated but in most cases, converts remained in their own communities. Not surprisingly, a number of ex-gang members reported conversions that no longer held meaning for them. They had “tried on” religious conversion but were unable or uninterested in carrying through with the evangelical program of strict pietistic morality and frequent worship attendance. In these cases, the individuals were protected from the “green light” of reprisal by the disintegration of their former cell or because they had migrated soon after abandoning the gang. In only one case, that of Antonio, was a “backslidden” ex-gang interviewee who left by way of conversion later killed, apparently by gang members and we can only speculate as to the reasons for his murder.

The possibility of escaping the “green light” death warrant often assigned to gang deserters is not the only reason gang leavers seek out evangelical religion. Evangelical congregations provide many of the resources ex-gang members most need in order to start over after the gang. Because converted gang members represent the quintessential “sinner-turned-saint” testimony that gives credibility to the evangelical belief that “God can change anyone,” members and especially pastors of these congregations have a
vested interest in helping converted ex-gang members succeed in finding work, overcoming addictions, and avoiding crime. Pastors use resources of time and social networks in their attempts to find work for converts and to keep tabs on their behavior. Meanwhile expectations regarding frequent worship attendance and the prohibition of alcohol and dancing help to keep converted ex-gang members out of the social circles where gang friends and activity dominate while “proving” the genuineness of deserters’ motives to gang leaders and erstwhile members.

Indeed, viewed in light of what conversion can do for the ex-gang member, evangelical religion appears to be pragmatic, a convenient tool for getting out of an incredibly tight jam. That is in fact how several converted ex-gang members described their decision to convert. Reflecting on an increasingly bleak future in the gang, cognizant of the evangelical escape clause, and well-aware of the resources offered by evangelical religion for overhauling a spoiled identity, these young men reported making a strategic decision to accept the invitation of evangelical Christianity to be “born again,” trading in a homie identity for that of an evangelical hermano. Such strategic conversion narratives somewhat undercut the mystic view of religious conversion as the sudden and unexpected blinding light that stops an unsuspecting individual in her tracks, forcing a change of course mid-path. Rather, in such contexts evangelical conversion resembled a kind of “twelve-step plan” accompanied by a more particularized religious doctrine, rituals, and symbols than its Alcoholics Anonymous counterpart.

But my research has revealed that more than mere strategy was at work in the conversion of many ex-gang members. In a few cases, former gang members told of experiencing conversion in spite of their immediate plans to remain in the gang. Other
ex-gang members remembered wanting to convert, even hoping for a conversion, but not being able to carry through with the project for some time. After all, conversion to evangelical Christianity includes not only benefits but also costs to one’s freedom and identity, especially for young men in the macho barrio. In six cases, ex-gang members, without prompting, dated their conversion to an emotional experience, usually that of weeping, that allowed them to believe that something important and not entirely under their control was afoot. That is, the experience of weeping provided a biographical marker representing to the struggling gang member himself that a fundamental change was in fact already underway. Just as important, crying in the presence of sympathetic and even enthusiastic onlookers allowed ex-gang members to publicly express remorse for their acts and gain a measure of trust with a sub-population (the congregation) of the community. In that sense, emotional conversions played a role akin to Braithwaite’s concept of “reintegrative shaming” (Braithwaite 1989) wherein ex-offenders are allowed to publicly express remorse for prior acts and lifestyles that have violated the trust of the community. I argue that such shaming and reintegration provides an important first step in discharging chronic shame and exiting the “shame-rage” spiral that helps to fuel participation in gang violence.

Contributions to the Sociology of Religion

Max Weber famously claimed that religious ideas can be the “track switchers” of history, playing the role of a catalyst in a particular time and place in history (Weber 1963). Track switchers do not lay the tracks to determine the course of the train, nor do
religious ideas guide the course of history, but they can and sometimes do set the stage for a change in course that would not have occurred but for the persistence of a particular religious worldview held by a particular people. I suggest that emotional, embodied conversion experiences can and do play a similar role at the level of the individual and his or her life trajectory. Men like Emerson, Pancho, and Ricardo experienced conversion as a profoundly embodied, subjective experience that set in motion a series of events changing the course of their lives significantly. In effect, their bodies, having rebelled against the strictly macho emotion display rules of the barrio, gave them permission and even led them toward the pursuit of a new set of ends. Joining a congregation subsequently provided further social supports affirming the new project and offering certain resources for framing and extending such a project. But I have argued that the effective lever for such projects of personal change is not merely religious ideas or even networks of social support, but includes and sometimes begins with an embodied experience in which a former gang member finds himself weeping and trembling beyond his control. Even though some converts had already been hoping for a conversion, they needed a “clue” to suggest to them that such a change was possible, likely, and indeed already underway. The experience of weeping and even trembling, sometimes uncontrollably in public provided that clue. The public, embodied acknowledgment of shame before a sympathetic audience (the congregation or, in the case of Emerson, the hermanas) laid the groundwork for a newly-energized project of self construction.

Recognizing that religious conversion experiences can play such a role does not mean that conversion, or evangelical religion for that matter, can run rough-shod over the economic and social landscape ignoring the “tracks” which restrict the life outcomes of
barrio youth. Although a few of the converted ex-gang members have experienced an impressive “comeback” in terms of life outcomes no doubt in part because of the evangelical community’s desire to showcase such turnarounds, most have achieved only a very modest “success.” Evangelical congregations do their best in providing access to a job, but even when successful, the jobs they provide usually entail manual labor with dismal pay. Since poverty and especially relative deprivation were key motivators in the decision of such youth to join the gang in the first place, further follow-up work may be necessary before we can say for sure that most or all converted ex-gang members are able to avoid new rounds of chronic shame as it becomes clear that while they may have avoided the morgue, their long-term prospects for economic success are only marginally improved by their religious transformation project.

It is clear that evangelical congregations in Central America are well aware of the track-switching potential of religious emotion and in particular, of emotional conversion experiences. The efforts and resources poured into evangelistic campaigns in neighborhoods like Chamelecón, Honduras testify to the deep faith possessed by evangelicals like Pastor Josè who believe that even the most violent youth of society can “switch” tracks in the midst of a carefully-choreographed service aimed at arresting both the attention and the emotions of gang youth. Even though only a minority of evangelical congregations take risks and expend resources aimed at promoting gang conversions, the fact that nearly all evangelical gang ministries insist on promoting gang exit rather than engaging in prevention reveals the faith of evangelicals in the track-switching enterprise. Nor are Central American evangelicals, the vast majority of whom self-identify as charismatic or Pentecostal, innovators in their emotional, conversionist enterprise.
Emergent religious movements and denominations, from the trembling Quakers of sixteenth-century England to the raucous revivalists of the Methodists and the Baptists of late 18th and early 19th century America, to the electrified Pentecostals of Brazil, have promoted emotional religious services aimed at setting the stage for conversion. That a great many sociologists have studied the theology of such groups and their social or political organization rather than the emotional and embodied aspects of their worship practice simply reflects the rationalist bias of our discipline. This dissertation, then, joins a swelling call among sociologists of religion to reclaim the Durkheimian attention to religion as an embodied affair, engaging the emotions through rituals of interaction (McElmurry 2007; Neitz 2004; Smith 2008; Warner 2007; Winchester 2008). Recent developments in the sociology of emotions, including Scheff’s emphasis on the central role played by shame in the maintenance and deterioration of social bonds, and of Randall Collins in the chaining of rituals, provide enormous opportunities for sociologists and other scholars of religion to better understand how religion “works” at the level of the individual and how such individual experiences are tied into ritual chains extending beyond the individual in both space and time. Doing so may require us to conceptualize a denomination or religious tradition as what Hochschild calls an “emotion institution” whose emotion logic plays a no less defining, formative role in the lives of its members than does its theology or its structure. But the potential payoffs are significant since doing so would allow us to forge conceptual links between religious institutions and the lived experience of the people who populate them. The study of how and to what effect religion “takes root” (or withers) in the individual and her daily practices can be deeply
illuminated by just this attention to emotion, the body, and the rituals meant to engage them.

So What?

But a larger question looms over my project—one that haunted me throughout the course of nearly three years of research, interviews, and analysis of gang deserters and converts. Do evangelical gang conversions make any difference? That is, what, if any, is the overall impact on the gang phenomenon of exit-by-conversion? Although the question had been on my mind for some time, I felt especially confronted by it when I met Chuz, a twenty-eight-year-old paraplegic living in a ramshackle tin room perched precariously on a steep hill in the community of La Lopez. Chuz was one of two former Batos Locos I interviewed, both of whom had lost the use of their legs in separate gang shootings and both of whom had since converted to evangelical Christianity. But whereas Ramón dressed well, had a job in his family’s cell phone repair business, and spoke at length and with glowing optimism about his church and his future, Chuz answered my questions with a single word or a short phrase and without any enthusiasm. He kept referring to “this thing that happened to me” as though the shooting had all but ended his life. Chuz’s dismal tone was mirrored by the dilapidated conditions of his surroundings. In a nearby lean-to, Chuz’s partner and two daughters made tortillas for sale by hand, browning them the old-fashioned way on a wood-fired skillet called a *comal*. The “door” to his abode consisted of a dirty piece of fabric hung horizontally in front of his bare
foam mattress. When Chuz mentioned that he went to church, I asked him to tell me more about that experience. He said that on Saturdays and Sundays hermanos pick him up and take him to the “The Potter’s House,” a mega-church located a few kilometers down the highway. There, he had “accepted Christ” some time ago, and he enjoyed going to the services because he liked “to hear the word.” Later I wondered about the meaning and impact of Chuz’s conversion and attendance at worship. If, as evangelicals insist, the gospel can save and transform anyone, why was Chuz so clearly struggling to access that optimism and move forward with his life even after a professed conversion and an ongoing participation in the amped-up worship and social networks of the hermanos? And why did his situation and his outlook so clearly contrast with those of optimistic Ramòn?

Chuz’s story is an important reminder that while religious beliefs, networks, and experiences can and do make a difference in certain situations, “switching the tracks” of a life trajectory, sometimes those “tracks” veer only a little from the current course. Human experience and the social extend far beyond religion. A great deal of the difference between the trajectories of Chuz and Ramòn can be attributed to differences in networks of family support. Chuz had little support from extended family but instead was responsible for at least three dependents. Meanwhile, Ramon, slightly younger and still single had no dependents and was able to rely on his family of origin for housing, an income, and a steady job. Indeed, his role behind the counter in his family’s mobile phone sales and repair business was the perfect place for Ramón to cultivate an identity as a capable contributor despite his disability. Although they lived in the same barrio and had belonged to the same gang cell, the diverging trajectories of the two young men
illustrate the inequality that exists even within low-income barrios and that follows youth into the gang as well as out of it.

Religious conversion and evangelical Christianity alone cannot solve the gang problem. Although conversion and communal experience of emotion-laden religious rituals can provide important resources for personal projects of change among worn-out gang members, conversion and evangelical religion seem to have done little to stem the flow of children and adolescents into the gang. In fact, many of the youth I interviewed reported having grown up in evangelical homes governed by at least one devout, church-going parent or grandparent. Ricardo remembered hating the evangelical faith of his father who would taunt his gang leader son with the Bible itself. “When my father would see me passing by on the street” Ricardo recalled, “he would recite the biblical text, ‘The whip for the horse; the rod for the stubborn!’”  

Ricardo’s statement is a reminder that growing up in an evangelical household does not necessarily protect children and adolescents from the experience of shame that pre-disposes so many toward joining the gang. In fact, it can easily be turned into a source of further disintegrative, stigmatizing shame and strengthen a youth’s resolve to participate in the gang.

In fact, the many “faces” of evangelical Christianity in Central America have much to do with its as yet unfulfilled promise of bringing prosperity and democracy through cultural shift. Almost two decades have passed since David Martin argued, and

\footnote{Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a more blatantly counterproductive attempt to shame a child into submission than to appropriate Proverbs 26:3: “A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools!” (New International Version).}

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not without some persuasive evidence, that Pentecostal sectarianism could provide a cocoon out of which cooperative, democratic social skills could emerge. Like their spiritual ancestors the British non-conformists, the Pentecostals, Martin argued, are a “periphery religion” drawing converts from the poor and empowering them to “make their autonomy visible” via conversion (Martin 1990). Christian Smith advanced a similarly Weberian culturalist argument, holding that evangelicalism, not liberation theology holds the most promise for a democratized future in Latin America (Smith 1995). And yet if evangelical religion is helping to usher in democratic reform, it has taken a very long route to doing so. In spite of continuing growth among evangelicals, including a recent poll showing Honduran Catholics to make up fewer than half of all citizens of that nation, true democratic reform seems as elusive as ever. Indeed, the June 2009 coup staged by the Honduran military with full support of its congress stands as evidence that the structures of democracy continue to be weak and subject to the dictatorial power of the gun barrel. Meanwhile, heavily-evangelical Guatemala continues to be plagued by corruption scandals reaching all the way into the president’s cabinet. El Salvador, a country where nearly thirty percent of the population now profess evangelical faith, holds the ignominious title of the most violent country in the hemisphere (Portillo 2008). In light of such social and political realities, it is difficult not to ask when thousands of religious conversions to teetotaling, domesticated

46 Ousted President Manuel Zelaya is hardly a paragon of democratic leadership but the manner of his arrest and deportation make clear the profound lack of faith among elites and the ostensibly supportive majority in due process or legal impeachment.
evangelicalism may add up to lowered levels of violence and a political culture of transparency.

The gang phenomenon is no different than the larger political problems facing Central America. In order to arrest the gang violence in Central America, more than conversion, indeed, more than the exit of all current gang members is needed. For as long as chronic shame is abundant in the barrios of northern Central America, the symbols, drugs, sex, and weapons of the gang will continue to hold irresistible allure for thousands of children and youth. And that chronic shame will continue to persist and even increase so long as its sources remain unaddressed. The steep pyramids that separate and stratify Central Americans on the basis of race and class remain intact, held together by tacit agreements between a handful of elites and a military that has long since passed its expiration date. Nor will the temptation to gang violence diminish so long as the small arms flow continues, buoyed up by an ever-more-intensive battle between drug cartels competing for territory and personnel. And only when the United States learns to deal with its insatiable demand for illegal drugs in ways other than declaring a “war” on them will the temptation to bypass shame by making a fast buck for an afternoon’s work begin to fade. Already, the extension of the U.S.-led war on drugs into Mexico has pushed the violence of the drug trade further into Central America despite additional weapons and logistics aid to these countries as well (McKinley 2009; Press 2009). Providing more sophisticated weapons and helicopters to national governments will do little to stem the tide of violence, and many of these resources continue to find their way into the hands of organized criminals and even gang members.
The gangs of Central America will not be going away anytime soon. Street gangs have been present in the barrio for at least four decades and they will likely find many new joiners in the decades to come. The task facing local governments and the international community is to tackle the structures that perpetuate shaming through persistent inequality, unemployment, and failing schools while undermining the accessibility of weapons and drugs. Churches can join in the effort through social and religious programming but by themselves they will not be able to solve the problem with preventative or restorative programs. That will require a joint effort between civil society, government and the international community as well as generational changes in educational spending, tax codes, judicial structures, law enforcement, and trade agreements. In the meantime, however, the task of providing gang members with safety, a job, and a transformed identity is a worthy goal, well-suited to the sociological particularities of evangelical religion. If evangelicalism struggles to deliver on the promise of democratic reform and economic progress, society is not the worse for its contribution of an army of good Samaritans ready and willing to believe in the transformation of the despised.
APPENDIX A:
METHODS

The transnational gangs of Central America constitute a deeply stigmatized social group disenfranchised within whole societies already relegated to the margins of the global economy. Research on social groups that are poorly understood by outsiders begs for a qualitative approach in order to gain a more complete understanding of the marginal social world, with its particular symbols, values, and contextual features before developing or testing formal hypotheses of narrow claims regarding its causes or impact.

My study was guided by a desire, rooted in both curiosity and empathy, to better understand the Central American gangs and their rumored regard for evangelical religion. As such my approach was one that Andrew Abbott calls “semantic explanation”—translating observations from one set of phenomena into the explanatory realm of another in such a way that they become more understandable (Abbott 2004). Abbot delineates the semantic approach to “pragmatic” explanation on the one hand which tries to explain a phenomenon in such a way as to make it subject to manipulation or eradication, and “syntactic” explanation on the other. In the latter, social scientists attempt to explain a phenomenon as a particular case of a larger subset logically flowing from a few simple axioms. Most culture theorists take a semantic approach to explanation because we believe that certain realms of social life cannot be fairly or adequately understood
through measurement alone. If they exist in “quantities” at all, it is only in a very loose sense, as in the number of self-professing adherents to a particular religion in a given country.

I chose to study the intersections between religion and gang exit using a research design based heavily on interviews with ex-gang members, and I supplemented this with interviews of local experts in the field of youth violence and short ethnographic forays. My data gathering took place during four months spent in the field over four separate trips, the first of which took place in January of 2007 and the last one in March/April of 2008. The decision not to spend a longer period of time in the field was driven mostly by practical considerations involving stateside commitments to work and family. My familiarity with the region and my existing social networks based on over six years of having lived and worked in Guatemala City’s working-class barrios and from having traveled around northern Central America surely gave me a head start, but there is no substitute for compiling extensive ethnographic field notes based on years of fieldwork. Although I would never have been able to conduct participant observation on life in the gang since I am not nor ever could be a member of a transnational gang or for that matter an ex-gang member, nevertheless I do not deny that more time in the field could have strengthened my claims and nuanced further my conclusions. Furthermore, I would have preferred to enhance my data with interviews of current gang members in order to compare their reports of why they have not yet chosen (or managed) to leave the gang with those of the leavers. But one of the conditions for gaining permission from my wife and in-laws to conduct research related to the Central American gangs was that I would not interview anyone currently active in the gang. Although I am inclined to think that I
could have interviewed some current gang members without completely compromising my own safety or that of my family, I chose not to add to my family members’ anxiety by seeking to track down and interview active gang members. In any case researchers of gangs in the U.S. have observed that interviews with current gang members are not always highly reliable. As Irving Spergel has noted, “Gang members have a tendency to feed outsiders and themselves a set of standardized answers” (Spergel 1992). Several researchers in the field confirmed this assessment. In contrast to active gang members who are often highly motivated to enhance the image of the barrio, I found ex-gang members, perhaps because they are considered “outsiders” by the gang but many in society still see them as mareros, to be more than willing both to critique the gang while also defending it against facile stereotypes circulated by the moral entrepreneurs of the press and the government. Most spoke of their experience in the gang with a mixture of nostalgia and regret.

Interviews with Gang Experts

The first leg of my research involved hearing from those who study gangs or work with gang members. I entered the field in January of 2007 after having read as many studies on Central American transnational gangs as I could find. I began interviewing gang experts including professionals, academics and practitioners, all of whom helped me to deepen my knowledge of the process of gang exit by sharing with me their expertise based on years of experience or research. I continued to carry out these interviews with knowledgeable outsiders throughout my research such that by May of 2008 I had
conducted thirty-two interviews in-person with individuals employed at nearly two dozen agencies including think tanks, churches, parishes, non-governmental organizations, and government-related institutions. Since my research questions leaned heavily toward religion and the responses of religious institutions, a number of those interviewed were clergy, including five evangelical pastors (not including three ex-gang members-turned-ministers), three priests and one Presbyterian minister. Among the secular professionals who helped me to deepen my understanding of gangs and gang exit and provided me with access to ex-gang members willing to be interviewed were four psychologists, three sociologists, two social workers and a clinical psychiatrist. I also interviewed several lawyers, an undercover police officer, and the presiding judge for Guatemala’s only juvenile court. Most interviews were recorded for later analysis but in six cases, either because the individual preferred not to be taped or because taping seemed an intrusion to the particular context, I took careful notes and later reconstructed the interview based on my memory of the conversation. Due to limitations of time and money, only fifteen of the “expert interviews” were later transcribed and coded for analysis.

One final outsider who shared with me his opinions regarding the nature of “the gang problem” was Honduras’s former president, Ricardo Maduro. At a public debate of former and aspiring Central American heads of state hosted by my university, President Maduro defended himself against reports stating that his “iron fist” policies had led to a number of alarming human rights violations by giving tacit permission for off-duty police or vigilantes to engage in “social cleansing” (Medina and Mateu-Gelabert 2009; Ribando 2008). Since my question during the forum obliged him to elaborate further his defense, the former president approached me afterward, eager to correct what he felt sure was a
misunderstanding regarding his government’s response to the gangs. By an awkward coincidence, the gringo Ph.D. candidate was seated next to the former president (and long-time business magnate) at a follow-up dinner giving Mr. Maduro even more time to describe his approach as that of a “multi-pronged strategy” aimed first and foremost at increasing efficiency and collaboration between government agencies. Not surprisingly given the setting, he was careful not to refer to the policy by the names his campaign had used to promote it and to win his election. So much for mano dura (iron fist) and cero tolerancia (zero tolerance). Nevertheless to his credit, the former president seemed to relish open, honest debate. His responses pushed me to think more critically about the challenges facing an incoming politician who inherits corrupt, inefficient security and judicial structures charged with protecting the citizenry in a violent society.47

Interviews with Former Gang Members

The most prominent element of my research design involved interviewing former gang members themselves. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with ex-gang members formed the cornerstone of my research. I chose this approach for several reasons. First, many of the youth interviewed shared with me their considerable knowledge of the various norms, and forms of organization maintained by gang cells and many of these features tended to vary considerably from one context to the next. As a neophyte to the

47 Oddly enough, the originator of the “zero tolerance” policies turned out to be a good-natured dinner guest and a self-deprecating teller of presidential jokes.
topic of gangs, and having been exposed to many sensationalist accounts of gang life in the newspapers and on television, I wanted to hear as many “insider” accounts as possible. Interviewing ex-gang members helped me to develop a sense of both the commonalities shared across gangs and clickas as well as the differences between them. More importantly, extended interviews provided first-hand retrospective accounts of joining, participating in, and eventually leaving the gang from the perspective of the ex-member himself or herself. In this sense, the interviews provided a window into the process by which gang youth shape and are shaped by gang roles and role expectations. Other examples of well-recognized studies that rely heavily on interviews to illuminate the process of role entry and role exit are Arlie Hochschild’s classic study of the training of airline attendants (Hochschild 1983) and Helen Rose Ebaugh’s study of religious clerics and others who left a vocation with strong role expectations (Ebaugh 1988).

I am aware, of course, that retrospective accounts delivered in an interview setting do not represent a perfect re-rendering of the past. Instead, interview subjects highlight certain events in their past while downplaying or suppressing others, often in an attempt to create a coherent personal narrative or biography. The act of telling one’s story is itself an exercise in identity construction. Through the telling and retelling of stories we make sense of our lives and locate ourselves with respect to larger narratives that elevate certain symbols and ethics as virtuous and cast others as dangerous or simply a waste of time. Employing in-depth interviews exposed me to the process by which ex-gang members draw meaning from personal stories of triumph, defeat, and on-going struggle. These personal stories—autobiographies—illuminate the experience of gang life and of leaving the gang and starting over afterward. But they also draw attention to the ways in
which individuals “make sense of” their past, creating a meaningful or “usable” past that situates an anticipated future.

Other studies of persons with a difficult past such as violent offenders have noted this tendency to create a former life with definite lessons and meaning for the future (Laub and Sampson 2003; Presser 2004) but the practice is by no means unique to former gang members or ex-offenders. For example, quite a number of conversion studies have relied on interviews as a means of analyzing religious conversion (Beckford 1978; Staples and Mauss 1987; Streiker 1971; Stromberg 1993).

In order to provide ex-gang members with ample opportunity to “tell their stories” I incorporated an open-ended interview format that almost always began with the question, “Tell me how you came to be a member of the gang.” In addition to allowing subjects themselves to identify the elements they felt were most important to their experience before, during and after the gang, the open-ended format, especially in the opening question, helped to reduce the nervous tension that some ex-gang members obviously felt at the beginning of the interview. After all, how could they be sure that the gringo sitting before them did not work for the FBI, which had recently established a special regional office in San Salvador for countering gang activity? Beginning with a battery of questions regarding the personal characteristics of the participant would have alienated her or him and diminished the likelihood of establishing a context of trust for open dialogue. Over time, I learned to unobtrusively intersperse questions about age, family background, and specific gang affiliation over the course of the interview as it became clear that trust had been established. Of course, in many cases such details emerged during the open-ended monologues.
Ex-gang members varied enormously in their willingness and capacity to articulate their past. While such variance is by no means unique to this study, I found it especially frustrating early on. Some ex-gang members preferred speaking only in vague generalities about a part of their lives that in many respects, they would rather forget. My challenge in such cases was to persuade participants that their recollections hold value and meaning and are worth recounting, even if they include mistakes that are associated with pain and regret. I did not pry but I did learn how to rephrase questions in order to “prime the pump” so to speak.\textsuperscript{48}

In many cases, however, the greater challenge was not eliciting responses but guiding them in such a way as to ensure that the interview touched on topics of interest to the study while also allowing to emerge themes that were not contemplated at the outset of the project. For example, in my very first interview with an ex-gang member conducted in La Lopez Arellano, Honduras I found that the former Bato Loco wanted to talk about one topic and one topic only—vegetable gardens! Since I had been presented as a gringo menonita and the only prior contact the ex-gang member had had with my kind was via social projects promoted through the very active Mennonite Central Committee, the young man was bound and determined to convince me to supply funding for an urban gardening project he was sure could transform his neighborhood. I tried to remind him politely on several occasions that my role was that of a researcher, not an

\textsuperscript{48} I was also reminded each time I traveled from one country to the other that even in the tiny republics of Northern Central America, all three of which share borders with each of the other two, there are significant linguistic differences from one context to the next. A Guatemalan patojo (male youth or teen) is a bicho in El Salvador and a cipote in Honduras.
agriculturalist or community development worker, but in places like Honduras, where white North Americans are generally either tourists or development workers, a gringo in a popular neighborhood means one thing—the possibility of access to resources.

In fact, dealing with requests for money was one of several factors involved in negotiating my own subjectivity as a gringo interviewer. I had been advised by a Honduran gatekeeper not to offer monetary compensation since doing so could create conflict or a sudden increase in the population of “ex-gang members with a story to tell.” But I also felt a strong desire to compensate in some way for the enormous gift of time and transparency given me by the participants and so in place of cash I offered an obsequio (small gift) in the form of a college baseball cap. Doing so assuaged my guilty conscience only a little. After all, I was asking individuals to set aside time to talk about potentially dangerous topics associated with difficult moments in their lives. On the other hand, several ex-gang members saw me as an advocate who was “getting their stories out” in order to help other youth who are thinking of joining or contemplating leaving the gang. One youth asked for a copy of his testimonio on cd because he hoped to some day write a book about his experience in the gang and his life afterward. It was not an evangelical “testimony”—he is not particularly religious. Rather, the young man was convinced that barrio youth need to hear stories of life in the gang in order to be able to judge for themselves what belonging to the gang is “really like.” This youth began his

49 While the hats of the University of Texas and the University of North Carolina were popular for their bright colors, I was surprised to find that Notre Dame’s hombrecito peleador (little fighting man) also has a following in urban Central America.
interview, “Good afternoon, my name is. . . and I am twenty-six years old and thanks to God I have left the gangs.” In these cases, my role was that of someone who could “get their story out” in order to help other youth avoid the same fate.

Since religion, and specifically, personal religious encounters was a key topic of this study, how to present my own relationship to religion was an important concern. This is especially crucial in Central America where many evangelicals see themselves at odds with the Catholic church, if not in direct competition with it. Whenever possible I tried not to divulge my own religious identity as a Mennonite since most Central America Mennonites are closely allied with evangelicals or consider themselves to represent one more local brand of evangelicalism. Since in most interviews it was not clear from the outset whether the ex-gang member held any religious convictions, I did not want to enhance reactivity by giving the impression that I was interested in hearing a particular kind of exit story, that is, one with a “religious” moral. Nevertheless, establishing rapport with gatekeepers at evangelical churches or gang exit programs made it necessary at times to flash my religious “credentials” as an hermano. This was especially important given the close association of higher education and especially sociology with Marxism and religious skepticism. Evangelicals, nor anyone else for that matter, do not wish to be analyzed as specimens of a particular form of lunacy or as curious and entertaining oddballs. Evangelicals who work in gang ministry were understandably protective of the ex-gang members in their care and thus I found it helpful and even necessary in some cases.

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50 In the Central American the phrase gracias a Dios does not necessarily imply any particular religiosity on the part of the speaker.
cases to assure them that I was a person of faith who could be trusted. Even in such cases I tried to be transparent about the non-evangelical motives of my research and in at least one case, that transparency probably cost me an interview. One converted ex-gang member whom I contacted via another convert decided, after consulting with his pastor, that he preferred not to undergo an interview. When he telephoned me to inform me of his decision, “Rocky” indicated that, had the interview been conducted in order to help other gang members “leave the gang and come to Christ” he would have been willing. But he was not willing to give the interview merely for the purpose of extending research on the gangs.

In fact, the question, “What are you planning to do with my story?” was a common one and one for which I was under-prepared at first. Institutional Review Boards in the U.S. generally assume a certain familiarity with and at least mild support (however unenthusiastic) for academic research and its purposes among the population from whom researchers draw their samples. In the urban barrios of Central America, however, to say that a proposed interview will be conducted “for the purpose of social scientific research” falls pretty flat. Of more interest, especially to those unfamiliar with higher education and its goals is the question, “Whom will it benefit?” The most honest answer to such a question is that it will benefit first and foremost the gringo researcher and his career through the production of a tesis (dissertation), graduation, and perhaps the publication of a book useful for gaining tenure. Fielding this question over and over helped to expand my future research goals toward more directly addressing questions of how and why youth join the gangs and what might be done at a meso- and macro-level in order to reduce youth violence and help Central American children of the barrio avoid the traumas
faced by so many of those I interviewed. It also helped me to see the interview itself in a different light. Interview subjects sought to know “to whom” exactly they were talking when they spoke into the voice recorder.51

As mentioned above, interview subjects always engage in some level of conscious shaping of their own accounts based on deeply held commitments to a larger narrative or repertoire of stories. So how could I be sure that the accounts presented to me correspond in some way to the actual experience of the youth who spoke? After all, I was interested in hearing first-hand accounts of actual, lived experiences. On the one hand, there is no way of positively ensuring that interview subjects, in this context or any other, are not making it up as they go. As in all research methods, the interview format poses both advantages and drawbacks, one of the latter being that the researcher cannot verify beyond all doubts that everything reported to him actually took place. On the other hand, interviewers do possess tools for diminishing the chances that interviewees will engage in outright fabrication or gross exaggeration and strategies for spotting such instances should they occur. One means of motivating forthrightness was to work hard at establishing rapport with ex-gang members before or in the early stages of the interview. My ability to speak Spanish *puro chapin*, that is, with a Guatemalan accent helped me here. The presence of a *canche gringuote* (big, blonde gringo) who spoke with little if

51 Indeed, one factor that I had not anticipated before arriving in Honduras was that of where to place the hand-held digital recorder. Because Northern Honduras is very hot in April, and interviews were usually conducted rooms without air conditioning, fans created wind noise that interfered with the audio recording unless respondents held the device themselves. The device is roughly shaped like a microphone and I noticed respondents who held the device themselves seemed more apt to speak in “testimonial” format.
any perceptible gringo accent helped me to avoid a number of gringo stereotypes while providing a topic for conversation prior to the interview. Furthermore, having lived in working-class barrios for four of the six years I spent in Guatemala City, I was able to engage in a certain level of joke-telling and idiomatic expressions that surprised and delighted many of the respondents and put to rest at least some of their reservations stemming from the unfamiliarity of the interview situation.

In a minority of cases I was able to compare the broad outlines and major features of an ex-gang member’s autobiography with the story shared with me by the pastor, priest or gang ministry coordinator who knew them and in these cases I found no major discrepancies. In other cases I was able to corroborate stories of specific events via accounts from members of the same clique. But in most instances I had no means of formally verifying accounts, especially the specific events of gang entrance, activity or exit, or for that matter, for conversion to evangelical Christianity. Still, most accounts possessed one or more features that lent credibility to the biographies as representing actual lived experiences that had been passed through the lens of personal interpretation. First, I looked for and found evidence of internal consistency in the interviews in terms of the chronology of major events and the years that had passed since they had occurred or other major political events with which I was familiar. Second, evidence of emotional remorse, occasionally enough to slow down the interview while the participant took the time to regain control of his emotions, made it plain to me in such cases that the individual’s report of a particularly painful memory or the participation in a heinous or “shameful” crime was almost certainly not a fabrication. No self-respecting Central American man, converted or not, seeks out opportunities to weep, much less in the
presence of a little-known foreigner. These moments impacted me greatly and left me with the indelible impression that many participants were exposing aspects of their lives that continued to be a source of deep shame. They also provided me with the first “clue” that I needed to pay much closer attention to the role of shame and the emotions in the process of both entering and leaving the gang. In addition, participants who wept, or who had to work hard not to do so, helped to convince me that on the whole, interview subjects were not trying to merely strike a pose or project a carefully-crafted image of themselves or of life in the gang or out of it. Indeed, some of the converted ex-gang members told stories of on-going struggle that would fall flat as a motivational speech in a church or at testimony time. If they were “manufacturing” accounts of gang exit or conversion, they were borrowing only loosely and from very different templates. My last strategy for ensuring significant reliability involved interviewing as many ex-gang members as I could find from the most diverse contacts I could locate, thus providing for ample opportunities of comparison and contrasts and lowering the chances that I would hear only standardized accounts. This “multi-site design” also bolsters the generalizability of my claims (Glaser and Strauss 1967) regarding the nature of life in the Central American gangs and the challenges associated with leaving.

Sixty-three ex-gang members provided me with a usable interview. I conducted all interviews on-site and in Spanish, with two exceptions involving ex-gang members who had recently returned from the U.S. and preferred to speak in English. Ten ex-gang members were Salvadoran (two lived in Guatemala at the time of the interview), twenty were Guatemalan, and thirty-three were Honduran. Two were interviewed while serving time in a medium security prison in Guatemala. Fifty-nine were men and four were
women. A few had left the gang more than a decade earlier while a half-dozen had left less than a year prior to the interview. Most had been out of the gang for at least two years. As noted above, the articulacy of interviewees varied greatly and led to significant differences in length of interview. A few lasted over two hours but most were shorter with the average ex-gang member interview lasting about thirty-seven and-a-half minutes. Three participants asked not to be tape-recorded and in such instances I took extensive notes and drew up an account of the interview afterward incorporating both verbatim and paraphrased segments. All audio recordings of ex-gang member interviews were later transcribed yielding over six hundred fifty pages of transcripts in Spanish.

Field Work

This study cannot qualify as an ethnography in any formal sense since my time in the field was limited and taken up largely with locating participants and conducting interviews. Nevertheless, during four months in the field, I managed to shadow pastors on pastoral visits, attend an evangelistic campaign aimed specifically at ex-gang members and sympathizers, spend time at a tattoo-removal clinic, and accompany Salvadorian gang interventionists in their proyectos ambulatorios (walking gang exit projects). After occasions like these I took field notes in the evenings. I also wrote up field notes on my interactions with ex-gang members and promoters during and after interviews of

52 The interviews were not, strictly speaking, life histories although some ex-gang members shared at length about nearly every aspect of their lives from their earliest memories until the present.
particular significance. In these notes I recorded aspects of the setting, any noteworthy physical features of the participants, and any important elements not available in the text of the interviews. Finally, I wrote memos during and after my time in the field and this practice helped me to see my thinking as it took shape and to monitor my own emotions for clues to future questions I wanted to address to the data during the more formal stage of analysis.

Analysis and Presentation

Andrew Abbott has argued that, “Science is a conversation between rigor and imagination. What one proposes, the other evaluates. Every evaluation leads to further proposals and so it goes, on and on” (Abbott 2004). In other words, science is a dialogue between creativity and process. Good social science is that which allows time for developing and pursuing creative hunches while following careful procedures for analyzing them and discarding or elaborating on them accordingly. I incorporated a number of tools for enhancing rigor at the analysis stage of my data while allowing for unexpected themes or patterns to emerge giving rise to new insights, further analysis “and so on.” One tool for enhancing the conversation between rigor and creativity involved coding all transcripts of interviews with ex-gang members using the qualitative data analysis software MAXqda. Each participant was coded on several dimensions such as religion, gang affiliation and family background. Transcripts were coded paragraph-by-paragraph and, in some cases, line-by-line for broad themes such as religion, family, and violence as well as more specific sub-themes such as “conversion” and “domestic
violence” allowing for easy comparison across many texts and quick testing of assumptions. Memo-ing continued during the coding process. Coding also facilitated rapid retrieval. All analysis was conducted in Spanish. Only those excerpts selected for quotation were translated to English. I am responsible for all translations although I was able to rely on my wife’s native ear for more difficult or culturally complex words or phrases. I took some minor liberties when quoting from transcripts, for example by dropping vocalized pauses except when they appear to carry meaning. I also dropped words or phrases such as ¿me entiendes? (Do you know what I mean?) that were simply repetitive.

An intentional writing strategy was to begin most chapters with an extended quotation both in order to contextualize the material to follow and to minimize what some qualitative researchers have described as “fracturing the data”—that is, chopping up long interviews involving deeply personal and highly contextual stories into micro-bytes useful only for making a point here or there (Charmaz 2000). Since to some extent the incorporation of short quotations cannot be avoided and allows for illustrating the variety of perspectives and tendencies in the data, beginning with a large chunk of narrative from a particular individual allowed me to humanize the data by setting it within the context of a single life trajectory. Excepting Juan Josè who gave me explicit permission to use his name, the names of all ex-gang members have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewees while the names of all clerics and ministry coordinators (except for Pastor Willy and Pastor Alvaro) are not fictitious. These individuals practiced their ministry openly and deserve credit for their hard work.
Coding Converts

One methodological issue that I fretted about even before I reached the field was the matter of coding “converts.” What constitutes a “convert” and how would I know if I had found one? Definitions of “conversion” when they are discussed at all, vary considerably in the sociological literature. Among the more well-known definitions is the one offered by Snow and Malachek positing that a conversion involves a radical change in a person’s “universe of discourse” (Snow and Machalek 1983). The authors suggest using “rhetorical indicators” such as “the suspension of analogical reasoning” and “biographical reconstruction” to identify converts since it is assumed that the discourse of a convert will set her apart from non-converts. There are a number of problems with such a definition, not least of which is the fact that all biography involves “reconstruction” to one degree or another. Thus, determining who is a convert becomes a matter of degree and depends largely on one’s familiarity with the “actual” events or trajectory of the subject’s prior life. In any case, as other research makes clear, the Snow and Machalek definition simply equates religious conversion with religious conservatism since many religious conservatives are taught to speak in ways that reflect the “rhetorical indicators” of conversion even if they grew up in the faith (Staples and Mauss 1987).

A very different approach to defining conversion would be to simply follow the lead of the supreme court in its ruling on pornography—that is, to define a convert by concluding that “you know one when you see one.” This approach is not so far out as it may sound. In Central America evangelical converts, especially young men, tend to dress, speak, and, yes, even comb their hair differently than most of their peers in the barrio. And in the theologically conservative context of barrio evangelicalism, an
*hermano* generally carries his Bible with him in figurative if not a literal sense.\(^{53}\) Not only is it customary to carry a Bible to *culto* (worship), evangelical converts are taught to memorize scripture and recite it and a surprising number of converted ex-gang members did just that. Of course, not all evangelicals are “converts” in any substantive sense. Many actually grew up in the church. But since evangelical piety and the gang lifestyle are so diametrically opposed, among those formerly belonging to the gang a practicing evangelical is, by definition, a convert.

Nevertheless, in methodological terms, identifying converts through behavioral patterns such as speech, dress, and manner is not necessarily less problematic than using a conceptual definition such as the “radical shift” in a person’s “universe of discourse.” After all, many of the ex-gang members I interviewed still possessed tattoos, and more than a few, religious or otherwise, were still attempting to “unlearn” the *homie* manner. Nor had all converts adopted the evangelical demeanor as thoroughly as had Ricardo, now a reverend. Furthermore, as I suspected when beginning the project, some ex-gang members had in fact “attempted” an evangelical conversion but failed to pull it off completely or had in any case abandoned the project. Were these youth “converts” in any practical sense?

Given these difficulties I chose to take a route somewhere between the conceptual definition emphasizing “rhetorical indicators” and the substantive one underscoring

\(^{53}\) When in the early evening you encounter a young man wearing a button-down shirt tucked in and with most buttons fastened, you can be relatively sure that he is on his way to *culto* (worship). If he is carrying his Bible, you needn’t have any doubt about the matter.
radical, “visible” change from the homie lifestyle. On the one hand, I asked participants if they had any religious preferences, following up a “yes” with further questions about affiliation, beliefs, and practices. In many cases I followed the advice of a committee member and simply asked, “Do you consider yourself a Christian?” In Central America many people, especially evangelicals, use the term *cristiano* synonymously with *evangèlico* to distinguish evangelicals from Roman Catholics.

In any case, recognizing the need to go beyond discourse, albeit within the limitations of a methodology that emphasized interviews, I sought information about current practices including church attendance and pastimes. Since drinking alcohol is strictly prohibited by barrio evangelicals, any mention of current alcohol use meant that an individual was probably not a “practicing” evangelical convert. Worship attendance is also extremely important to barrio evangelicals and when a participant professed a conversion but did not report current or recent activity in a congregation, I tried to probe for a better sense of the individual’s current religious status. In short, I used a combination of three criteria in coding converts: profession of a religious commitment or a conversion experience, activity in a local congregation, and adoption of the evangelical lifestyle. I coded as “practicing” converts all ex-gang members who exhibited at least two of these three criteria and as non-practicing, those who reported a conversion but did not attend worship *and* were making no attempt at carrying through with evangelical lifestyle prescriptions. Except for one Mormon convert, none of the youth professed a conversion to anything other than evangelical religion. Whenever possible, I checked individual self-reports regarding religiosity against the assessment of an informant such as a gang ministry coordinator or another ex-gang member himself. I recognize that my
coding of converts and conversions reflects a certain degree of imprecision, but, I feel that a certain humility of approach is warranted, if nothing else, by the on-going lucha (struggle) among the converts themselves to maintain their own conversions.


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