The Prison Dilemma: Latin America’s Incubators of Organized Crime
The Prison Dilemma: Latin America’s Incubators of Organized Crime.

This series of five case studies and one policy report explores how government mismanagement, neglect and corruption have made the jails in the region powerful incubators of organized crime.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. The Prison Dilemma: Latin America’s Incubators of Organized Crime .......... 3
2. Reign of the Kaibil: Guatemala’s Prisons Under Byron Lima ....................... 30
4. Colombia’s Mirror: War and Drug Trafficking in the Prison System .............. 72
5. El Salvador Prisons and the Battle for the MS13’s Soul ............................... 90
1.
The Prison Dilemma: Latin America’s Incubators of Organized Crime

by Steven Dudley and James Bargent

The prison system in Latin America and the Caribbean has become a prime incubator for organized crime. This overview -- the first of six reports on prison systems that we produced after a year-long investigation -- traces the origins and maps the consequences of the problem, including providing a typology of prison gangs in the region.

Executive Summary and Major Findings

Prisons in Latin America and the Caribbean are in crisis. Following a concerted change in legislation that led to more hardline policies, the prison population has skyrocketed and the development of new facilities has not kept pace. The massive overcrowding has created many more problems than incarcerating suspects en masse has resolved. Those incarcerated -- thousands of whom have not even been formally charged with a crime -- live in deplorable, inhumane conditions that leave them vulnerable to coercion and recruitment by ever-more sophisticated criminal gangs.

Prison guards, and their police and military counterparts, routinely abuse prisoners and take part in corruption schemes that open the door for more crime. The jails have also become incubators of criminal activity; finishing schools for hardened criminals and places where powerful criminal groups organize, train up their members, recruit and plan further crimes. Many who enter as relatively low-level, non-violent criminals leave
as hard-core recidivists. Nevertheless, governments -- while fortifying efforts to capture and prosecute at historic rates -- have been slow to react to the changing circumstances within the jails, leaving space for criminal groups to strengthen themselves, hampering efforts to improve citizen security region-wide and undermining democratic governance.

Amidst this chaos, InSight Crime has found during a year-long investigation that numerous types of prison gangs have emerged.

The Inside Prison Gang is formed and functions under the logic of the prison; it frequently controls the most important criminal economies within the jails, such as liquor contraband and illegal drugs.

The Inside/Outside Prison Gang is the most formidable of prison gangs because it exploits the vulnerabilities of the prison system to develop criminal operations both inside and outside of the prisons.

The Insurgent Prison Gang is one that uses its ideology and discipline to exert control over the prison population, often in the interest of furthering its political cause.

The Drug Trafficking Prison Gang uses its huge influx of capital, connections and muscle to dominate the prison drug economy and, in some cases, monitor drug trafficking activities on the outside as well.

The Mara Prison Gang is formidable due to both its size and its ethos: that of exterminating its rival. The propensity of violence between gangs has moved authorities to separate them, thereby inadvertently accelerating their development.

The Military Prison Gang is a mix of ex security forces, which uses its connections and training to control prison economies and, in some cases, much more.

Pandillas carcelarias internas: se forman y funcionan bajo la lógica de las prisiones; suelen controlar las economías criminales más importantes dentro de las cárceles, como el contrabando de licor y drogas ilegales.

To address the issue of prisons, InSight Crime investigated these conditions and the crime they are fostering in Venezuela and Colombia, as well as the Northern Triangle region of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. And it produced a series of case studies on each of these countries, which it is publishing separately.1

1 See InSightCrime.org or es.InSightCrime.org. We also have a section dedicated to prisons (http://www.insightcrime.org/indepth/prisons) where you will find hundreds of articles on the subject from around the region.
This report is an overview of these findings and a series of recommendations to help remedy some of these problems.

**Major Findings**

1. Prisons are the most neglected part of the judicial chain. Governments systematically short-change and ignore prisons, leaving the system open to corruption and crime.

2. Deplorable conditions and corruption are starting points for criminal organizations. Prison gangs rally around the neglect and inhumane conditions; and they take advantage of the little training and low pay of their counterparts in the guards and administrative staff.

3. Hardline policies and overcrowding facilitate recruiting for prison gangs. Governments responded to early challenges of more organized and numerous criminal groups by implementing more hardline measures. These backfired: the jail populations swelled, leaving authorities more hamstrung and opening the way for criminal groups to reorganize and exert even greater control.

4. Segregation in jails is a Faustian bargain, which, at best, lowers violence in the jails, and, at worst, strengthens criminal organizations. In the overcrowded prisons, violence and discipline fell from the hands of authorities and led to drastic measures such as segregating the prisoners by gang affiliation. This only fostered the development of the gangs, who used the space and time together to get better organized.

5. There are few alternative policies, such as decriminalization and alternative sentencing, and few social, educational and job programs available to prisoners. Despite evidence illustrating that hardline policies do not work and in fact help criminal organizations, governments continue to place more faith in them than they do alternative forms of punishment and rehabilitation programs.

6. Prison gangs come in many forms, but share certain origins and characteristics. The prison gangs may be different but they all try to serve the basic needs of the prisoners -- everything from security to illegal drugs -- and they all rely on deep-seeded corruption to operate.
Introduction

Since the early 1990s -- when crime and murder rates began to rise in Latin America and the Caribbean and governments began to adopt more hardline policies regarding sentencing, pre-trial detention, gang activity, low level drug trafficking and drug consumption -- the prison population in the region has skyrocketed. In Brazil, for example, the prison population has gone from 173,000 in 1995, to over 500,000 today, the fourth highest in the world, according to the International Centre for Prison Studies.² El Salvador’s prison population has gone from 5,000 in 1992, to over 33,000 today, giving it the 12th highest incarceration rate per capita in the world. Mexico’s prison population increased from 155,000 in 2000, to 239,000 in 2012. Other countries in the region are not far behind.

However, these countries are not building enough prisons to keep pace with this expanding population. Venezuela has built just one new prison since 1999³ even though its prison population has more than doubled during that same time period; the country’s jails are currently at 315 percent capacity. El Salvador’s are at 325 percent capacity⁴; Guatemala’s are at 251 percent⁵; Mexico’s are at 126 percent.⁶

The conditions in these jails are, as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights’ Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty, Rodrigo Escobar Gil said following a visit to several Honduran prisons, “Completely contrary to human dignity.”⁷ Escobar Gil’s visit was prompted by a February 2012-fire in which 362 inmates perished at the Comayagua prison.⁸ Fire inspectors had warned government authorities for years of the high risk of fire at the jail.⁹ In one cell hit by the fire, investigators said 90 inmates shared a space made for 20.¹⁰

Honduras is not alone. In one El Salvador prison InSight Crime visited in 2012, close to 1,200 inmates crammed into a space made for just over 300; prisoners took turns sleeping in a small space that included hammocks spread over a toilet; numerous

---

² Prison statistics come from the International Centre for Prison Studies: http://prisonstudies.org/
⁴ http://prisonstudies.org/country/el-salvador
⁵ http://prisonstudies.org/country/guatemala
⁶ http://prisonstudies.org/country/mexico
⁹ IACHR, op cit., p.45.
¹⁰ IACHR, op cit., p.52.
inmates complained they had untreated medical conditions; and garbage piled waste high next to the place where the prisoners bathed with well-water.\textsuperscript{11}

Abuse is ripe as well. In El Salvador, reports of torture by military personnel led the government to eventually withdraw army troops from prisons.\textsuperscript{12} In Brazil, prisoners at one facility were piled by the dozens into miniscule spaces for days on end, left to

\[\text{Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research}\]


\textsuperscript{12} Jose Luis Saenz and Carlos Martínez, “La lista de peticiones que las pandillas hicieron al gobierno,” El Faro, 17 July 2012. Available at: http://www.elfaro.net/es/201207/noticias/9145/
wallow in their own feces and vomit.\textsuperscript{13}

Pre-trial detention is notoriously brutal throughout the region with prisoners abandoned for months, or even years, in cells not constructed for long-term incarceration.\textsuperscript{14} In Mexico, an astounding 42 percent of the prison population is pre-trial/remand prisoners.\textsuperscript{15} In other countries, it is higher still.

Corruption is also rampant in the system. In a Bolivian prison that InSight Crime visited in 2013, guards can earn as much as $20,000 per year in bribes,\textsuperscript{16} a minor fortune in a place where the World Bank says per capita income is closer to $2,500.\textsuperscript{17} In Mexico, prison guards have participated in jailhouse massacres and mass escapes.\textsuperscript{18}

Overcrowding, corruption and abuse have made prisons incredibly dangerous places where survival depends on new and old alliances. The jails are near perfect recruiting centers and incubators for crime. They permit criminal groups to fortify their hierarchies, and they have become safe havens and operational headquarters for gangs in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, and for criminal organizations in Colombia and Mexico.

In Mexico, they have helped strengthen criminal networks, some of which began in United States’ prisons,\textsuperscript{19} and in Venezuela they have begun to expand their reach from jails into the street-level criminal activity that has made that country the most violent in South America.\textsuperscript{20} In sum, they are a critical part of the organized criminal landscape throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

The resulting crisis has impeded efforts to foster citizen security in the region and undermined democratic governance. Prisons have become multipliers of criminal activity, not deterrents for it. Gangs in the Northern Triangle, for instance, have reorganized their troops, enhanced their recruiting and added to their criminal revenue streams disrupting life in myriad ways. Criminal groups in Mexico, such as the Zetas,
have expanded their influence and power within the jails. In both places, groups like the MS13 and Barrio 18 gangs, and the Zetas in Mexico have interfered in electoral processes. In the case of El Salvador, there is evidence that this interference was coordinated from prison.

This crisis is under-covered by journalists in the region and largely misunderstood by the public. Rather than thinking of the prisons as an integral part of the justice system, it is often viewed as a repository for criminals -- a place where policymakers can simply bottle up their problems and ignore the consequences that go with a hardline strategy of incarcerating low level drug offenders and consumers. This neglect and malfeasance is having disastrous consequences. It is fostering insecurity, and it is arguably the biggest gap in plans to shore up justice systems region-wide.

This project was established to probe these issues. Specifically, we sought:

- To develop a deeper understanding of the root causes of the troubled state of the prison systems in various parts of Latin America by doing on-the-ground research in some of the most troubled countries.

- To study and profile the criminal groups that thrive in the prison systems thereby gaining a more nuanced understanding of their modus operandi, their revenue streams, and how they have developed both social and political capital from the jails.

- To offer policymakers, governments, multilaterals, non-governmental organizations and others working on prison reform some recommendations on how to limit and/or diminish the influence of the criminal organizations that are using them to expand their influence and undermine citizen security and democratic governance region-wide.

To do this, InSight Crime researched and wrote five reports on prison-based criminal operations in Colombia, Venezuela, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, which can be consulted separately. This report is the overview. It is broken down by two major themes, rather than by countries. It covers the reasons why prisons fail and the criminal structures that emerge from them. Finally, it offers a series of policy-oriented recommendations.
Institutional Framework - Why Prisons Fail

The central condition for prisons to become breeding grounds for organized crime is a state incapable of upholding rights and imposing order, allowing criminal networks to fill the power vacuum for their own purposes and profit. In countries throughout Latin America, there are numerous institutional failings, both legislative and operational that create this situation.

But as we shall see, this crisis was largely of their own making. Strong legislative measures made incarceration the preferred option to deal with rising crime and insecurity. The resulting explosion in prison populations came with little corresponding planning or funding. Indeed, prisons are often a forgotten corner of the workings of Latin American states, and all too often are chronically underfunded in construction, staffing, and maintenance. This foundation of underinvestment means states often operate from a starting point where their control of and capacity to operate prisons is tenuous.

Hardline Policies and Overcrowding

Hardline security laws -- often referred to in the Spanish shorthand “mano dura” -- are a common political response to the security crises that regularly afflict many Latin American countries, but they rarely produce the desired response. While their impact on citizen security is debatable, their impact on prisons is not -- they lead to a flood of new prisoners into a system that is ill-equipped to cope and which cannot be expanded fast enough. This is clearly demonstrated in the Colombia case study. Between 2003 and 2014, the capacity of the Colombian prison system increased by close to 70 percent. However, overcrowding actually increased from 130 percent of capacity to 153 percent. The reason can be found in what has been labelled “punitive populism”: hardline security laws creating new crimes and lengthening sentences for others. The most visible impact of this was 2011’s Law 1453. Within ten months of this law coming into force, the number of prisoners in Colombia
increased by 15 percent.\textsuperscript{21}

In many countries, such laws are often focused on the drug trade, and prisons often fill up with low level, non-violent drug offenders. One of the most notorious of these laws -- which is now to the point of being overturned -- is Bolivia’s Ley 1008 was introduced in 1988 as a zero tolerance drug policy. In the statutes of the law, there is little difference between people caught in possession of small quantities of drugs, those working at the bottom rung of the drug trade and major drug traffickers. As a result, Bolivia’s prisons have filled up with inmates that have received harsh sentences for minor crimes, to the extent that in 2013, people sentenced under Ley 1008 accounted for 28 percent of prisoners.\textsuperscript{22}

The other common policy that fuels overcrowding is the overuse of preventative detention. Given the pressure on security forces to remove criminals from the streets and the incapacity to effectively monitor those out on bail or awaiting trial, preventative detention is a first resort in countries throughout the region. However, in many Latin American countries, the judicial systems are weak and inefficient, and processing court cases can take years at a time, filling up the prisons with people who have not been convicted. The percentages of prisoners who hold this status are startling in most countries around the region, and in the countries examined in the case study range from 27 percent of inmates in El Salvador up to 63 percent in Venezuela.\textsuperscript{23} Many countries have legislation that prohibits prisoners on remand being housed in the same wings as convicted prisoners, a necessary measure to separate hardened criminals and their firmly established internal criminal structures from prisoners who may be first time offenders, low level offenders or often even innocent. In practice, this frequently does not happen as the prison systems simply do not have the capacity to keep the populations separate.

Overcrowding is a key condition for criminal control of prisons. In severely overcrowded facilities, maintaining control and order becomes all but impossible, and authorities often abdicate their responsibilities and leave it in the hands of criminal networks. Overcrowding also makes the segregation of inmates based on the seriousness of their crimes or potential risk to others near impossible, bringing low level offenders into close contact with hardened criminals and drawing them further into criminality both within

\textsuperscript{21} Figures from Defensoría del Pueblo, accessed here: http://www.eltiempo.com/multimedia/infografias/carceles-y-presos-de-colombia/14739475


\textsuperscript{23} Figures taken from Institute for Criminal Policy Research’s World Prison Brief. Available at: http://www.prisonstudies.org/
the prison system and often after their release as well. While overcrowding starts from a point of simply not having enough prison places, there are two institutional policies above all others that mean simply building more prisons will never suffice: hardline security laws drafted by politicians playing to a popular desire for law and order, and the overuse of preventative detention in countries with inefficient judicial systems.

24 Interview via Skype with Oliverio Caldas, consultant for Unidad de Servicios Penitenciarios y Carcelarios of Colombia, May 2016.
Deplorable Conditions and Corruption

Underfunding and government neglect have left prisons across the region in a state of chronic disrepair and prisoners living in appalling and unsanitary conditions, where even their basic needs such as adequate food, water and medical treatment are not met and other requirements such as access to work and study programs come sparingly. Conditions such as these can fuel criminality both directly and indirectly. The indirect impact comes from forcing the majority of prisoners who are good candidates for rehabilitation and resocialization into a survival mentality in a brutal, Darwinian environment they share with hardened criminals. By negating the possibility of them carrying out productive activities during their sentences, inmates are pushed further towards criminality, both inside the prison and when they leave.25

More directly, appalling conditions can strengthen criminal networks that organize around these issues or even take over functions of the authorities. The most prominent example of these are the two preeminent criminal networks in Brazil today, the Red Command (Comando Vermelho) and the First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital - PCC). Both of these groups formed as prisoner rights organizations, standing up for prisoners against the brutal regimes imposed by the authorities and clamoring for justice in the midst of widespread abuses. However, movements that began with a distinct political bent soon morphed into powerful criminal networks, whose reach extended into city slums across the country, and who now run a broad range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, not only in Brazil, but in at least two other countries as well.

While these groups are the most extreme example of how neglect in prisons can strengthen criminal groups, they are not the only ones. In other prison systems such as Venezuela, the prison authorities’ inability to perform basic functions means criminal networks have stepped in to run operations such as the acquisition and distribution of food and medical supplies, thus increasing their power and influence along with the legitimacy of their role as the true prison authorities.26

Underinvestment in prisons also fuels what is perhaps the most important determining factor in criminal control of prisons -- corruption. Without corruption, criminal economies, the lifeblood of criminal networks operating within the system, would not have nearly as much space to function. Guards and administrators that are poorly paid, overwhelmed and vulnerable to threats -- which when dealing with organized crime structures can extend beyond the prison walls -- make for excellent targets for

---

25 Ibid.

corruption to allow the movement of contraband and the flaunting of prison rules.  

Corruption is not limited to the low paid rank and file, and in numerous countries there is extensive evidence of corruption and collusion much higher up the chain of command — corruption that is critical to the bigger crimes carried out within the prisons. Some administrators see the prisoners as allies, and in some ways, the prison gangs can make their lives easier. The result is often a dangerous quid pro quo. Collusion between the high-level prison authorities and the networks that operate within the prison can help the authorities maintain some kind of order in prison wings that would be extremely difficult to impose with the resources available, while also giving those authorities a share of profits from criminal activities that can be extremely lucrative.

**Segregation**

In countries facing the challenge of housing organized crime networks that are bitter rivals outside of the prison system, government’s often find themselves faced with the prospect of a Faustian bargain that also contributes to criminal control of prisons: segregation. In order to prevent prison violence between rival structures in facilities where the authorities are ill-equipped to maintain order themselves, different groups are often allocated their own wings or even entire prisons. This can generally reduce violence by keeping apart the warring factions, although in the case of Colombia in the early 2000s, even this was not enough when the prisoners amassed sufficient firepower to blast through to their enemies or controls were not strong enough to keep the rivals apart. However, the price to pay for segregation is strengthening the criminal networks in their own wings or prisons. The practice concentrates unchallenged power and allows these networks to operate more smoothly and with better organization. When combined with the state’s inability to effectively police these facilities, it can lead to the development of extremely powerful criminal organizations capable of not only of running criminal activities within prisons but also influencing the underworld outside of prison walls.

The most brutal example of the effects of segregation can perhaps be found with the paramilitaries of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), who in the early 2000s managed to turn their section of Bogota’s La Modelo prison into an armed fortress

---

27 There are numerous instances of guards who refuse to facilitate corruption being subject to reprisals outside of the prisons in cases. For example, see: Miguel Barrios, “Urabeños ofrecían $10 millones para matar teniente,”, El Heraldo, 27 March 2014. Available at: [http://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/urabenos-ofrecian-10-millones-para-matar-teniente-147361](http://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/urabenos-ofrecian-10-millones-para-matar-teniente-147361)


used to launch attacks against their guerrilla rivals -- both of which had been segregated from the general population -- and a debt collection office for drug trafficking and other criminal activities where over 100 people are believed to have been murdered, dismembered and disposed of in the sewer system.\textsuperscript{31}

However, the example with perhaps the most lasting impact has been that of the Northern Triangle gangs, especially in the case of what was until recently the fully segregated Salvadoran prison system. Here, segregation allowed the gangs to turn the prisons into their own criminal fiefdoms and bases of both internal and external operations, facilitating the development of a gang hierarchy where power flowed down from incarcerated gang leaders. In the case of the MS13 gang, it also permitted the leadership to negotiate a truce with its rivals, play a role in the presidential and congressional elections, and expand its criminal portfolio.

When these factors -- crumbling facilities plagued by corruption, populist hardline security laws, overuse of preventative detention in inefficient judicial systems and segregation by organized crime group -- combine, the result is that organized crime can take over prison systems as well as project their power outwards. There has been no better example of this than El Salvador and its Mano Dura policies, which created a perfect storm of conditions that strengthened gangs inside and outside of prisons. These laws gave police sweeping powers to arrest people based on signs of gang affiliation. The police duly used the laws to round up approximately 14,000 thousand suspected youths, who were held in prison on preventative detention -- less than a third were ever convicted.\textsuperscript{32} As the ill-equipped prisons were flooded with youth who had been accused of having a gang affiliation, the authorities began a policy of segregation in order to prevent violent clashes between rivals. The gangs’ ranks swelled with new recruits, including many who had only loose connections to gangs or even no connection at all but spent months or years in gang-controlled prisons.\textsuperscript{33} Their ability to organize hierarchically and establish internal and external criminal operations was boosted by their undisputed control of the segregated prisons, and they could operate with virtual impunity as the under-resourced and corrupt authorities could and would do little to intervene beyond the prison perimeters.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
State Response

The state response to the prison crises and the criminal control it produced can be broadly divided into two approaches to designing and maintaining prisons: 1) maximum security; 2) developing more humane prisons and enhancing rehabilitation programs. In the security first approach, previously taken in countries such as Colombia and to some extent, El Salvador, the focus is on modernizing security features and imposing strict security regimes to break criminal control. In the alternative approach, the objective is to provide more humane institutions, uphold basic rights and provide social and educational programs, giving inmates a path away from crime.
The benefits and drawbacks of each approach are numerous, and it is likely a best case scenario would incorporate both, based on a functioning system of identification and segregation according to prisoners’ risk to others and their likely capacity for rehabilitation and resocialization. In all cases, these programs cannot operate in a vacuum. Social programs, as well as legislative measures allowing ex-convicts the opportunity to purge their records, are minimum requirements to avoid recidivism.34

However, Latin America has proven a poor test ground for any such theories as attempts to implement one type of regime or the other are undermined by the same institutional failings. Venezuela is the most extreme example of this, as the country has persistently announced elaborate plans and laws for a deeply progressive and humane prison system but has failed to deliver on even the most basic of its promises.35 Constitutionally enshrined prisoner’s rights to work, study, sport and recreation mean little when basic food and medical needs were not met.36

Taking the route of focusing on maximum security, Colombia has often ended up at a similar destination. For example, the new maximum security facility at Valledupar, colloquially known as La Tramacua, was constructed little more than a decade ago but has become so notorious for its appalling conditions and constant human rights abuses37 that Colombia’s Constitutional Court ordered its closure unless improvements were made.38 The lesson from both countries is clear: no matter what type of prison regime the authorities want to implement, it will fail unless issues of overcrowding, underfunding, corruption and abuse are not addressed.

34 Interview via Skype with Oliverio Caldas, consultant for Unidad de Servicios Penitenciarios y Carcelarios of Colombia, May 2016.
Prison Gangs

The result of the hardline policies, systematic neglect, malfeasance, abuse and corruption is, of course, more crime and more sophisticated criminal organizations that operate both inside and outside of the jails that are supposed to contain them. Prison gangs is the short-hand version for what amounts to a plethora of different types of criminal groups operating within the penitentiary system. They can be formed on the inside or the outside. They can be ideological, religious, nationalistic or ethnic. They can be relatively young or on the elderly side. They can be new arrivals or old guard. They can control criminal economies or simply tax them.

Despite their differences in origins and goals, they have a lot in common. They understand that prison is a parallel society, one in which force, combined with social control are essential. Their origins are almost always related to serving the basic needs of the prisoners, namely security, but also illegal drugs, contraband and other services. They rely on a combination of corruption and fear, and their knowledge of the prison system often proves vital to their ability to rise to the top of the underworld both inside and outside of their jail cells.

The following is a list of six types of prison gangs that InSight Crime found during its investigation.
Inside Prison Gangs

Inside Prison Gangs is the name we have given to the criminal structures founded within prisons, and primarily shaped by and concerned with internal prison dynamics.

These structures perform two primary functions. The first is to fill the vacuum left by an absent state and act as a regulatory body that maintains some semblance of order inside the prisons, taking on roles such as allocating cell space and devising and enforcing their own rules, often with violence. The second is to control criminal economies such as illegal drugs, contraband and extortion networks to ensure their own privileged position within the system.

The structures and operations of these networks can vary widely, but their hierarchies are often determined by the ability to control the other inmates and eliminate rivals through violence, with the maximum leaders commonly those who have seized power by force. In most cases, their outside criminal connections or criminal records play little direct part in determining who assumes these positions.

In many cases, the prison authorities on some level collude or cooperate with these structures, or at least acknowledge and respect their position within the prison. Their motivations for this are directly related to these structures’ purposes; the authorities rely on them to provide the order they cannot, and collude with them to claim a share of the profits from criminal economies, mostly through facilitating the passage of drugs and other contraband, but also through the allocation of space, the distribution of privileges, and movement of prisoners between jails.

The Venezuelan prison gangs headed by leaders known as “pranes” are one of the most prominent example of these structures. The pranes have near total control of their prisons or wings beyond the prison perimeters. They draw up and enforce prison rules, regulate activities that include controlling things such as access to food and medical services, and they tightly control prison economies, including an elaborate extortion system, which each prisoner must pay.39

Who becomes a prison pran is usually determined by violence, and the Venezuelan prison system has seen horrific atrocities and massacres committed by those seeking to claim or assert power.40 The role of the pranes is recognized by the prison authorities

---


that maintain contact with these leaders and have been known to negotiate with them.\textsuperscript{41} Evidence is mounting that in some cases the pranes have garnered such power they are beginning to transition into what we call Inside/Outside Prison Gangs by running external extortion, kidnapping and drug networks from within the prisons.\textsuperscript{42}

A less violent example of an Inside Prison Gang are the “delegates” in Bolivian prisons. In some cases, delegates are elected representatives of the prisons, who inmates have themselves chosen to manage the logistics of prison life and even act as prisoner advocates to the authorities. However, this system has long since begun to degenerate into corruption, with these structures profiting enormously from criminal economies and maintaining extortion networks that charge for access to privileges such as free movement or visitation rights. In extreme cases, these networks have reportedly enforced their authority with murder and torture.\textsuperscript{43}

**InSide/Outside Prison Gang**

The InSide/Outside Prison Gang is the maximum expression of a prison-based criminal organization. It was born in the prisons, so it understands the logic of force and the prisoners’ hierarchy of needs. Its ideology revolves around this understanding, and its growth and reach are dependent on its ability to capitalize on the gaps in the system and what the state does not provide.

It also establishes a thriving criminal economy that functions inside and outside of the prisons. This criminal economy is, in part, based on its control of the prisons. It uses the visits of many gang and non-gang members to keep this economy going on the inside. And it creates sophisticated networks of accounting and business practices on the outside.

Some of these InSide/Outside Prison Gangs have incredible social and political power as well. They influence the way people dress, styles they adopt and the means of communicating. They can, in some instances, create their own non-governmental and political vehicles to fulfill their legal, social and political needs, as well as those of their sympathizers.

Brazil’s PCC is the preeminent Inside/Outside Prison Gang for multiple reasons. To begin with, it was born in Brazil’s prison system, following a bloody prison riot in

---


Sao Paulo state, which left 100 prisoners dead. Several survivors of the massacre were transferred and borrowing a political platform from another prison gang -- the Comando Vermelho or Red Command -- they began organizing for justice and prisoners’ rights. The government, in an effort to stop the PCC’s growth, split up the leadership in other prisons, but this simply allowed them to multiply and take over other prisons.

The PCC has since grown to become Brazil’s most powerful organized crime group. Using the prisons as their base, they have become some of the chief distributors of drugs on a local and an international level. They have bases in Paraguay and Bolivia, and perhaps elsewhere. They have a vast network of lawyers, accountants and political operators, who have sought to use their influence or create political parties that represent the criminal group. And they have an elaborate and sophisticated internal justice system, which they use to discipline their own members and those that break the rules in the communities they control outside of prison. In short, they are an incredibly evolved criminal organization that illustrates the scary potential of prison-based gangs.

Another example, albeit slightly less evolved, of this type of prison gang is the Barrio Azteca. Born in the El Paso, Texas prison system, this group initially began as a means of organizing the large Mexican and Mexican-American population inside the jails to defend themselves against the powerful biker gangs and others. It has since grown to include cells on both side of the border, now controls large portions of prisons in both countries, and seems to be positioning itself to become a major player in the international drug trade.

Like the PCC, the Barrio Azteca -- or “La Familia Azteca,” as it likes to call itself -- has strict rules that are enforced on the inside and the outside. Family members of Azteca members are subject to punishments, as well as members. The Aztecas have benefitted from this discipline, entering alliances with criminal organizations such as the Juárez Cartel and the Zetas. Both of these higher-level criminal organizations have provided the Aztecas with a better understanding of the needs and modus operandi of drug trafficking.

However, the Aztecas are still far from being the PCC. They made some critical strategic errors during the battle for Ciudad Juárez during the 2008 - 2011 period, the most important of which was the assassination of US Consulate representative in 2010. The

45 Ibid.
US indicted 35 of its members for the murder, 33 of which were later captured, and many of whom have already been convicted.48

**Ideological Prison Gangs**

Ideological prison gangs are composed of members of insurgencies, rightwing paramilitary groups or other politically motivated organizations that organize within the prisons. In the prison system, these groups replicate their external hierarchies and command structures and often source arms, allowing them to form internal military cells.

Some of these organizations, especially those on the leftist side of the spectrum, shun the prison’s criminal economies such as drug sales, but they have frequently been implicated in extortion schemes. Most of these groups follow a leftist ideology, which often manifests itself within the prisons in the form of organizing around prisoners’ rights and advocating for better treatment and conditions.49

These groups often have enemies within the prison system, including the authorities, which single them out for abuse. In some cases, they have also been known to confront rival armed groups among other inmates, which can be either ideological enemies or simply common criminal structures that are disputing internal control and territory.

The guerrilla insurgents of Colombia represent the principal example of ideological prison gangs, in particular the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC), the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN) and leftist urban militias affiliated with these insurgencies. In many cases, the external divisions between these structures are not replicated internally, and they combine to form one structure. Sometimes political prisoners, who are often ideological bedmates but not insurgents themselves, fall under their protection.50

In the past, imprisoned guerrillas have been separated into separate wings, allowing them to control territory within the prisons. Within their prison fiefdoms, they amassed powerful arsenals and engaged in combat with their rivals in paramilitary groups.51 They have also engaged in ideological activities, forming connections with


49 Colombia’s guerrillas for example have organized to lobby for access to medical treatment, legal representation and cultural activities. Interview via Skype with Alexandra Gonzalez, Fundacion Comité Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, 2016.

50 Ibid.

Colombian prisoner solidarity groups on the outside,\textsuperscript{52} which act as a conduit for their advocacy and attempts to draw attention to abuses and poor conditions within the prison system.

In recent years, these guerrilla groups have had a more dispersed presence, limiting their ability to form power bases within prisons, making for structures more concerned with their safety and conditions than with taking or holding power or territory within the prisons.\textsuperscript{53} An expected release of many FARC prisoners as a result of the guerrillas’ peace process with the government\textsuperscript{54} may further dilute the influence of these groups within the prison system, making ideological prison gangs an increasingly rare phenomenon.

\textbf{Drug Trafficking Prison Gangs}

Drug trafficking prison gangs represent perhaps the most varied and complex dynamic in the different types of prison criminal structures. Few drug trafficking organizations have the sort of concentrated manpower that ensures their territorial domination, and as an inmate population they may be more disperse than armed groups or street gangs. However, in the past, drug trafficking organizations that have doubled as paramilitary counter-insurgency armies have attained such territorial dominance.

The lack of numerical dominance means in prisons affected by these actors, outside power, wealth and hierarchies are not necessarily replicated internally. However, they are a major influence. A dominant prison structure may be composed of members of several different criminal organizations, but the leader is selected from the highest ranking member of the largest faction. Those with significant power on the outside will not automatically be granted that power on the inside, but the prisoner’s external wealth and influence will at least guarantee a position of respect from, if not a role in, the dominant structure.

In some prisons, the dynamic is further altered by the separation of top level drug traffickers into maximum security facilities, removing them from the wings where prison gangs rule. These figures may have channels of communication to underlings elsewhere in the prison to exert power internally, but it is unlikely they will perform an active role as the head of a prison network. They also commonly continue to conduct external business using contraband communications equipment or messages passed through visitors, and for many this is likely a priority over controlling internal networks.

The now demobilized United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and their successors -- referred to as BACRIM, which is a play on the Spanish for “criminal

\textsuperscript{52} See the work of the Fundacion Comité Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos at: \url{http://www.comitedesolidaridad.com/}

\textsuperscript{53} Interview via Skype with Alexandra Gonzalez, Fundacion Comité Solidaridad con los Presos Politicos, 2016.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
bands” -- represent some of the most powerful of these organizations to develop significant internal prison structures.

In the early 2000s, the AUC established a “collection office” in La Modelo prison in Bogotá that combined their internal and external criminal interests. Internally, they formed an armed structure to combat guerrilla inmates and control criminal economies. This structure was also used for the AUC's external criminal activities, especially collecting on drug debts, and is implicated in the disappearance of 100 people, many of whom were brought into the prison after crossing the AUC on the outside, where they were murdered, dismembered and disposed of within the jails’ sewer system.55

Examples of drug trafficking prison gangs continue today in Colombia. The BACRIM, the successor groups that formed following the AUC demobilization, continue to operate in Colombia's prisons, but they do not have the sort of territorial hegemony gained in some prisons by the AUC. Prison criminal structures tend to be composites of members of a range of criminal groups such as street gangs, common criminals and armed group members, and hierarchies are determined by the combination of external and internal influence. Nevertheless, the power of the paramilitaries continues to carry significant weight.56 Top leaders and traffickers from these groups conduct business and influence outside events from their maximum security facilities,57 but their stays in the Colombian system are usually brief due to extradition.

Mara Prison Gangs

The Mara Prison Gangs, it can be argued, are the direct result of Mano Dura, or Iron Fist, and US deportations. Prison populations in the three countries where Mano Dura was developed and applied -- the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras -- skyrocketed during the 2000s. This coincided with US policy to begin deporting en masse ex-convicts. The numbers tell the story. Between 2001 and 2010, the United States deported 129,726 convicted criminals to Central America, over 90 percent of whom were sent to the Northern Triangle.58 The rise in gang activity led to legislative proposals to criminalize membership in a gang. For a time, having a tattoo was enough to land someone in jail.59

56 Interview via Skype with Alexandra Gonzalez, Fundacion Comité Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, 2016.
The resulting influx in prisons of maras put these governments in an impossible position since there was no corresponding plan to expand prison infrastructure, security services, rehabilitation programs or any other portion of the penitentiary system. First, they could not accommodate them. Second, where they did accommodate them, it was too close to their rivals. Third, when they separated them, they allowed for them to reorganize themselves.

To be sure, some mara leaders preferred jail. It was, quite simply, safer for them and their families, especially once these governments systematically separated them from their counterparts. They reestablished their hierarchies, their rules, their initiation rites and other important aspects of gang life. The direct threats they faced on the inside increased their esprit de corps -- it was, quite simply, a matter of survival. Prison eventually took on new meaning. It was a way for younger members to more quickly move up the ranks, and for older members to think strategically and long term.

The imprisonment of the gang leaders also led to an important shift related to criminal economies. Once on the inside, gang leaders’ needs changed. Put simply, they needed more money to pay for lawyers, for their families, for their girlfriends, for paying bribes and other unforeseen expenses. This necessitated a shift in the way the gangs extorted. Once a relatively small-time, hyperlocal revenue stream, extortion became more systematic. The most common target was the bus and taxi collectives. Other distribution companies were next on the list, such as propane gas distributors. Finally, the gangs extorted local businesses with cash on hand, such as small shops, mechanics and even street vendors.

There is some reason to believe that the maras leadership may also be benefiting from the contacts they have made in jails. These include high- and mid-level members of drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). The traffickers see utility in the gangs, especially as it relates to murder-for-hire, car theft and other services the gangs can delegate to their members on the street. The gangs see the utility in aligning with the DTOs as well, namely they can take over some wholesale distribution points in major urban areas in these countries, some of which is already happening.

The maras’ move to the jails impacted their political and social outlook as well. They became more closely affiliated with organizations that work inside jails with inmates.

---

60 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
and outside jail with inmates’ families. Some of these organizations are international in nature while others are religious. They all have the potential to give the gangs more social capital in their communities. The gangs have used this social capital to enter into politics. They have influenced voting in at least one of the three nations of the Northern Triangle, possibility determining the outcome of the last presidential election in El Salvador.

**Military Prison Gangs**

Military and police who are imprisoned are not like the rest of the prison population. They are often trained in self-defense, use of sophisticated weapons, intelligence and counterintelligence. They have contacts inside the system, since they once formed an integral part of it. They understand legal loopholes better than the other inmates. They have an easier time communicating with guards and other officials as they speak the same security forces language. And they are normally in more danger because of their former position and law enforcement activities, which may have included incarcerating some of their fellow inmates.

The result is a different type of criminal organization very often segregated a priori from the rest of the population, and is one that depends less on force and more on cunning, intelligence and networks working within the system. These networks, in particular, are the core of what makes this type of prison gang more subtle, harder to see and harder to control. It is through such networks that these former security forces inmates can be placed in a safer space inside the prison either permanently or temporarily. They can also isolate or transfer prisoners. They can exert some influence on privileges such as visitation or the development of business opportunities. And they can develop their own business opportunities.

They can also provide security. Using their experience and contacts, they can protect themselves and their followers. Over time, they can usurp power from the most abusive of prison leaders. And at their apex, these types of prison gangs can establish an elaborate and well socialized set of rules upon which the entire prison is governed. This may include eliminating certain types of drug consumption, in particular crack cocaine, which is the cause of serious conflict inside prisons throughout the region.

The most well-known example of this type of organization was the type established by Bryon Lima in Guatemala. The former army captain and Special Forces soldier

---


66 Ibid.


68 Ibid.
was able to fight off assaults from gangs and other rivals for years, before eventually establishing control over a good portion of the system. By the time, his former boss, (r) General Otto Pérez Molina, became president in 2012, Lima’s power was unparalleled. Not only did he have several thriving legal and illegal businesses inside and outside of the prison, he was exiting and entering at will, was extorting large-scale drug traffickers for their “safety,” and was naming who would be director of the penitentiary system, among other high-level posts.  

Lima’s reign came to an abrupt end in July 2016, when another powerful prisoner allegedly shot and killed him and 13 other inmates.  

But his model of exerting control over the prisons -- and reaping the benefits in the process -- will no doubt be replicated by others.


Conclusions and Recommendations

Penitentiaries are part of a larger story in Latin America. Throughout the region, governments have embraced a hardline strategy against crime. This includes implementing stricter penalties for illegal drug usage as well as low-level drug distribution, incarcerating more suspects, and building more prisons and maximum-security penitentiaries. Among the most important legislative actions that impacted prisons were “Mano Dura” or “Iron Fist” anti-gang measures in Central America; drug laws such as Bolivia’s Law 1008; prison segregation laws, and legislation on pre-trial detention.

But while some measures have temporarily improved citizen security and justice, others have not; and while some areas of the justice system have been given some resources, others have not received nearly enough attention. Overall, what is abundantly clear is that the resource-strapped governments in the region cannot keep up with increasingly high number of accused and sentenced criminals. The conditions in these prisons speak for themselves. What’s more, rather than serving as places of rehabilitation or providing alternatives for wayward youth, jails have become incubators for various types of criminal groups.

The reality is that no part of the chain of justice -- from the police to the prisons -- can be treated in a void. Nonetheless, there are some ways in which the government officials and foreign governments can ameliorate the problem.

Recommendations

1. **Prioritize prison reform.** The cold reality of prisons is that they are vastly under-resourced, especially considering the explosion of the incarcerated population and the sophistication of the criminal operators functioning from within.

2. **Focus on prison conditions.** Money allocated to prisons should focus less on discipline and more human conditions within the jails. These are what fuel the growth and control of these prison gangs.

3. **Establish a holistic approach.** There is a strong need to consider both hardline measures for violent criminals and recidivist offenders, as well as a need to separate and implement rehabilitation programs for the non-violent.

---

and first time offenders. This is the segregation that is needed in jails, not one which is dependent on criminal affiliation.

4. **De-segregate jails that are divided along criminal organization-lines.** The de facto recognition given to prison gangs due to segregation is a powerful means of helping them to establish control over jails, as well as a way to provide them with the space and safety to achieve their criminal hegemony.

5. **Focus on segregating non-violent prisoners and non-violent pre-trial detainees from violent ones.** Segregation could be useful, if the focus is on keeping prisoners divided more by crime than by gang affiliation.

6. **Focus on alternative sentencing legislation and decriminalization of small time dealing and consumption of illicit drugs.** Hardline anti-gang laws and anti-drug laws focused on small time dealers and consumers do not work. The time is now to search for a more achievable equilibrium between citizen security and overcrowding the prisons to the point of providing criminal gangs near full operational control over them.

7. **Study prison gangs like criminal groups that are operational on the outside.** Prison gangs come in as many forms as those that operate on the outside. Each one has a slightly different criminal economy and end-game, and in order for authorities to neutralize them, they need to be seen from those perspectives.
2. Reign of the Kaibil: Guatemala’s Prisons Under Byron Lima

Following Guatemala’s long and brutal civil war, members of the military were charged, faced trial and sentenced to jail time. Even some members of a powerful elite unit known as the Kaibil were put behind bars. Among these prisoners, none were more emblematic than Captain Byron Lima Oliva, who, for a time, imposed his rule inside the jails before being swallowed by the same system he helped create.
Byron Lima spent nearly three decades developing ways to protect himself. At first, it was his job. He was an officer in the Guatemalan army who fought against leftist guerrillas for years. Later, he was an intelligence officer, worked with the presidential guard and was a shield for political groups whose secrets he also often protected.

Later, Lima had to protect himself inside prison. Despite his powerful network of friends and colleagues, and a celebrated military career, Lima was prosecuted and sentenced to 20 years in prison in the case of the murder of Bishop Juan José Gerardi, a crime that he would always insist he did not commit. The sentence left him in one of the most dangerous and ruthless penitentiary systems in the world. And while Byron Lima may have had many allies, he had also made many enemies both inside and outside of Guatemala’s prisons.

Drawing from his experience in the army, the former captain developed intelligence networks that infiltrated the inmate community, and the administrative sections of the penitentiary system. He also built an army of loyal and devoted inmates who were ready to die for him if necessary.

Lima’s widespread political connections reached the presidential palace, and he used these connections to eliminate his enemies before they got to him. Sometimes he used force, other times guile. He removed most of his enemies, for example, by getting them transferred to other jails. The local press eventually began referring to him as the “king” of the prison system.

But Lima had a weakness, and an unexpected one at that. Whenever Lima walked the corridors of the Pavón prison -- which would be his last jail -- he was shadowed by a small contingent of bodyguards. At first glance, it was impossible to distinguish this group from the masses of prisoners milling about the prison yard. But a closer look gave away a semicircle of men following a few feet back, in their leader’s footsteps.

These guards were sometimes powerful inmates in their own right, the bosses of some of the 22 prison wings that Lima attempted to control in the Pavón. For logistical and security reasons, he had to rotate his guards. If he assembled a group that was loyal to him, he had nothing to worry about. But if some were susceptible to external pressure or had their own interests that were contrary to his, Lima was vulnerable.

On July 18, 2016, Lima was vulnerable. Pavón is a big, sprawling structure that looks like the campus of an underfunded university. It has basketball courts inmates use to play volleyball and soccer, and a thoroughfare known as “6 Avenida” (6th Avenue) that serves as the de facto cultural and economic center of the prison. It is about 3 meters wide and 60 meters long and has restaurants, stores and workshops. It is flanked by a
church that stands above it and a bridge that covers it, creating a short tunnel.

On that day, Lima and an Argentinian woman visiting him were headed to 6 Avenida to have breakfast. His bodyguards were present while he was walking towards the tunnel, but the air was heavy. Lima knew that trouble was brewing. The origins of the attack against him are still unknown, but the former captain was in a state of alert and had obtained a bulletproof vest through his contacts. Lima had reason to worry. He was a combative personality who had launched attacks on some powerful enemies, including other inmates at the Pavón. These struggles had climaxed during the previous administration, a government that had once catered to Lima’s every need. What’s more, Lima was distracted that day: a beautiful young woman from Argentina, who would later be described as his girlfriend, was visiting him.

Authorities have yet to clarify exactly what happened next, but the initial investigation showed that halfway down the stairs leading to the tunnel-like entrance of the 6 Avenida, Lima and his guest were ambushed by several men, possibly some that were part of the contingent of bodyguards meant to protect him. Shots were fired. Lima took at least two bullets to the head and died instantly, according to a high-ranking police officer in charge of the investigation who spoke to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity. The Argentine guest was also shot dead, along with several of Lima’s men.

The hired-guns and their allies then took advantage of the ensuing chaos and settled various other scores, the official said. In all, 14 prisoners were assassinated, four of which were decapitated. Bullet casings were littered in three different crime scenes along the 6 Avenida, the most important of which contained Lima’s body. The crime rocked the penitentiary system’s status quo and shook the foundation of a nation still dealing with the powerful networks that Lima exploited to become the “king” of the prisons.

The Kaibil and the Bishop

On April 26, 1998, the night Bishop Juan José Gerardi was assassinated, all seemed calm around the San Esteban Parish. The drunks were fast asleep in front
of their cars. The bishop’s roommate, Father Mario Orantes, was in his bedroom, and a group of men were drinking beer at a nearby corner market called Don Mike. The bishop arrived at the parish around 11 p.m., returning from his usual Sunday dinner with his brother.

But according to the investigation that followed -- which would last years and affect not just the penitentiary system but the entire country -- neither the drunk in front of his car, nor the men drinking beer and smoking cigarettes at Don Mike’s (nor Mike himself, in fact), nor Father Orantes were who they seemed to be. All were working with, colluding with or were forced to provide information for the feared Presidential Security Service (Estado Mayor Presidencia - EMP), then the most powerful security unit in Guatemala’s government.

At the time, Capt. Byron Lima Oliva was a member of the EMP. He would later claim that he made only one mistake that night: sleeping at its office near the crime scene. The presidential palace is located in front of the parish where the bishop parked his car for the last time, and where something unfolded that, to this day, no one has been able to fully explain. The only certainty is that Bishop Gerardi was assassinated, most likely by several men who used a cement block to cave in his skull.

The motives behind the murder still divide this country, 20 years after the signing of a peace agreement between leftist guerrillas and the government. For the government investigators and civil society organizations, it is clear that Bishop Gerardi was targeted for his work, specifically for his efforts with the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala - ODHAG), and the development of a project called the Recuperation of Historical Memory (Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica - REMHI). This project documented more than 54,000 civilian deaths between the 1970s and the signing of the 1996 peace agreement, almost all of which were committed by the Guatemalan army. The report that followed was titled “Guatemala Nunca Más” (“Guatemala: Never Again”) and was published just two days before the concrete block struck the bishop’s head, leaving his bloody corpse inside the parish garage.

But other sectors of the country -- and in particular those who are part of or are still close to the powerful military -- saw Bishop Gerardi’s death in a different light. They said it was either linked to common crime, or it was a “crime of passion” related to Father Orantes’ troubled homosexual affairs.

Because the murder happened only a short distance from the presidential palace, the EMP ran its own investigation. Lima always claimed that he was not part of the EMP team that first arrived at the crime scene. And the Lima family says that the motive to ensnare him was a political set up; the real culprits, they say, were part of a gang called
Valle del Sol that was involved in car theft, and theft and resale of religious icons.

The murder also shook the international community. The last assassination of such a high-ranking religious figure was that of Archbishop Óscar Romero in El Salvador in 1980. The majority of Guatemalans hoped the civil war was behind them, its horrors a thing of the past. But the murder felt like déjà vu and brought with it the deep divisions that remain in this nation of 15 million people.

For years, the investigation into Gerardi’s death stalled and stumbled. Witnesses disappeared. A bomb was discovered hidden in a judge’s house. And as the death threats mounted, several prosecutors absconded, abandoning their careers in the process. The case became so twisted in knots that, for a time, the main suspect was Balú, the parish German Shepard, a point that led to more than a few head-scratching news stories.

In the end, four men were tried and convicted. Captain Byron Lima Oliva, along with his father, Col. Byron Lima Estrada, who had retired in 1993; Sgr. Maj. Obdulio Villanueva and Father Mario Orantes. On top of being a member of the EMP, Lima Oliva was also a member of an elite group of soldiers called the Kaibil. The unit was named after a legendary indigenous leader who had fought Spanish conquerors. In 2001, after the threats, the conspiracy theories, the exiles and the murders, the three soldiers were finally brought to their first jail: the Centro Preventivo of Zona 18 in Guatemala City. The penitentiary system would never be the same.

**A Kaibil Behind Bars**

The Gerardi verdict divided the country. Part of Guatemala rejoiced, while another part mourned. In the eyes of the human rights community, the army symbolizes all of Guatemala’s wrongs: a militarized political class, the butchering of innocent civilians to maintain a profoundly unjust status quo, and impunity. For those protesting the verdict, the incarceration of three soldiers -- and most of all that of a Lima’s father, the retired colonel -- was a clear sign that the guerrillas and the human rights community were seeking vengeance, not only through reports like “Nunca Más” but also through the judicial system.

Within the prison, a few inmates were preparing a vengeance of their own.

“When we got to the [Centro Preventivo], no one wanted us in their area,” Lima told InSight Crime during one of our several visits with him in 2016. “You have to remember that during my work at the EMP, I had arrested several kidnappers and drug traffickers that were there [in the prison]. We were also still wearing our military uniforms when they put us in there. The only chief (prison boss) who took us [into his sector] said that from each of us -- that is my father and me -- he wanted 15,000
quetzals (about $2,000), [or] 30 thousand total”.

That extortion payment in Guatemala’s prisons is dubbed the “talacha.” It is generally unchallenged and in many cases is condoned by prison authorities, who often get their cut from the fee. Using this system, the prison warden can raise a sort of tax from the boss of each sector. The tax amount is based on the number of inmates living in that sector, and the special privileges that the prison warden gives them. The chief then taxes the inmates in his sector to pay the warden.

The talacha can be paid in cash or in labor.

“La talacha, if you don’t have any money, means cleaning. But not the usual cleaning,” a gang member and former inmate with Lima in the Centro Preventivo of the Zona 18 told InSight Crime. “It means cleaning the floor with a mop in your hands, sometimes squatting, in your underwear or even naked. It also means cleaning the toilets, where everyone has taken a shit, with your hands. After a while you can’t even stand up because your legs have gone numb, and if you try to get up, you’ll fall on your ass.

That’s hard, and you have to do it twice a day.”

The former inmate was made a “talachero” -- the equivalent of an indentured servant -- on more than one occasion, since his family could not raise sufficient funds to pay the extortion fee. The prisoners that lack money, do not get visits, or don’t have any

### Guatemala's Prison System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRISON POPULATION TOTAL (including pre-trial detainees / remand prisoners)</td>
<td>20,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRISON POPULATION RATE (per 100,000 of national population)</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-TRIAL DETAINES / REMAND PRISONERS (percentage of prison population)</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMALE PRISONERS (percentage of prison population)</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUVENILES / MINORS / YOUNG PRISONERS INCL. DEFINITION (percentage of prison population)</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREIGN PRISONERS (percentage of prison population)</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS / INSTITUTIONS</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICIAL CAPACITY OF PRISON SYSTEM</td>
<td>6,742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCCUPANCY LEVEL (based on official capacity)</td>
<td>296.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)
products to sell or exchange within the prison are called “rusos” (Russians) and, as a collective, “la Rusia” (Russia).

At first, Byron Lima, his father and Villanueva also had a hard time. The Limas are a military family, which carries deep meaning in Guatemala. The former captain’s grandfather was murdered by Guatemalan guerrillas in 1970. His father, Colonel Lima Estrada, was a fearsome officer and later chief of the army’s most important intelligence apparatus, the G2, during the 1980s, a period in which the military was responsible for a number of forced disappearances, according to several Guatemalan and US government files unearthed by the National Security Archive.

The colonel also took part in the 1983 military coup against the then-head of state Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt. And before the end of the decade, he was linked to yet another attempted coup, this time against Guatemala’s first civilian government in 30 years. Byron Lima said that this coup was partly motivated by the first lady’s request for military honors at the army base under his father’s command. The colonel refused since he viewed the first lady as a “communist.” But the coup failed and the colonel was never awarded the rank of general because of his involvement in the conspiracy.

“My father was involved not for political motives, but because my father did not agree with [the fact that there was] a former guerrilla who was president,” said Lima, erroneously referring to the then-president as an insurgent sympathizer.

Byron Lima grew up in this environment, one loaded with conspiracies, anti-communism and naked displays of male power. He was never a top student, but he stood out during physical training, which allowed him to swiftly climb the military ladder: first as a Kaibil, then as a paratrooper (Guatemala’s special forces) and later in various intelligence services. He was an instructor at the military school, while the famous Gen. Otto Pérez Molina was there.

Pérez Molina would later become the army’s representative during the peace agreement in the 1990s, and Lima would serve under him at various junctures. When Pérez Molina was in charge of protecting the presidential family of Ramiro de León Carpio -- who took office following another attempted coup instigated by some of colonel Lima Estrada’s old friends in 1993 -- Lima worked with him. And then again when Pérez Molina took over the EMP towards the end of the 1990s.

The army captain was also integrated into the so-called “crisis committee,” the anti-kidnapping and anti-bank robbery task force. The post put him in direct contact with the victims of kidnapping -- which had proliferated after the war -- including some of the most powerful elites in the country: the current or soon-to-be ministers, and titans of finance and industry.
The third soldier incarcerated in his military fatigues with Lima and his father was Sgt. Maj. Obdulio Villanueva. He was well-built and well-trained, and he had already served time in prison following a strange incident when he was working with the presidential guard. On January 14, 1996, President Álvaro Arzú was horseback riding along with his joint chiefs of staff when a milkman named Pedro Sas Rompich came driving towards them. The car, which was packed with goods, could not brake in time and hit a horse, sending a guard flying to the ground. Another guard took out his weapon and fired at the milkman, killing him. The injured rider was Capt. Byron Lima; the man who killed Rompich was Villanueva.

Villanueva received a light sentence, and witnesses claimed they saw him leaving his prison the night of the murder of Bishop Gerardi. Various prosecutors on the case also said he threatened them during the investigation.

While the three soldiers were war veterans who had gone through combat multiple times, the situation in prison was different. They were at a disadvantage. Lima said that even after they paid the talacha, the prison bosses were not happy that former EMP were in their jail. They viewed the presence of military tenants as an insult and began harassing them relentlessly. Lima said the leaders of his sector tried to attack him because he had spent too much time in the shower. The young Kaibil made use of his military training and his black belt in karate to give them a beating. During the fight, they found out that Lima was both fearless and resourceful, using a five-pound weight from the gym to keep them at bay.

While narrating his story, Lima stood up and showed off his wounds, not from the war but from staying alive in jail and later taking command of his sector. He eventually got enough power to kick the drug dealers out of his area. He had particular ire against those selling crack, a potent derivative of cocaine. Then he went after those extorting the other prisoners. Those he banished from his sector were all sent to sectors where no one wanted to live.

Meanwhile, Lima reportedly started treating the prisoners in his sector like he had treated the soldiers in the army. They had to wake up at five in the morning, exercise and then do something productive for the rest of the day such as build something, work or do exercise. Things took an even more military twist when he ordered that graffiti be replaced by the Kaibil emblem, a skull gripping a knife with his teeth. Underneath they wrote the Kaibil motto: “If I go forward, follow me. If I stop, push me. If I retreat, kill me.” He also did something unheard of in Guatemala’s penitentiary system: he stopped collecting the talacha, which was a huge relief for the rusos in his sector. While the other prison bosses were looking the other way, Lima was creating his own army.
“Those men that everyone looks at as if they were shit, that don’t have any shoes, those are the warriors [you want] when the riot breaks out,” he told InSight Crime.

While he was creating his personal army, Lima was also using his experience in intelligence gathering and counterinsurgency to study his adversaries’ weaknesses. Inmates from other sectors secretly came to him to complain, asking the former soldier to take control of their sectors and liberate them from their bosses’ rule.

“They would talk to me about other sectors and tell me stories,” said Lima. “They told me that a leader of a sector had beaten an inmate, used his blood to make a brew and then forced the others to drink it.”

A long list of horrifying anecdotes followed. There was talk of a dog that inmates were forced to copulate; of punishments, like flooded cells for those who did not pay the talacha. If there was a genius in Lima, it resided in his capacity to understand that to win a war, you need to win the masses. And to get the masses, you need to understand their pain.

The rusos “know very well that when you do good, and if you do bad, they will come back to haunt you,” Lima explained. “It’s kind of like enemy that’s called the masses, or should I say, comes in a mass”.

Byron Lima gives speech inside prison during army day (source: Facebook)
Lima said this was how he had invaded the other sectors and, motivated by what he called a humanitarian impulse, took control of almost the whole jail. But there was one sector that he could not take in the Centro Preventivo of the Zona 18, a wing where they kept the worst of the worst of the jail, a group with whom nobody wanted any trouble and that not even Lima could subjugate: they were the “pandilleros,” or gang members.

The Dark History of Captain Byron Lima

According to the anthropologist Abner Cohen, in any given prison, power resides in controlling the resources that others need the most. Lima would very quickly learn to apply this philosophy.

“Lima’s power resides in his monopolies. He controls the contraband of everything you consume in prison. It’s always been that way,” a gang member who was jailed for nearly a decade under the former captain’s rule told InSight Crime. As he sat on a bench in the Pavón prison, he whispered. Lima’s spies were all around, collecting information for their leader.

Lima always denied he had anything to do with contraband, but others -- prisoners and local investigators -- constantly contradicted his claims. They said Lima used his political and military contacts to smuggle everything into the prisons where he has been an inmate and even in some places where he was not an inmate. He started with mobile phones -- dubbed “brujos” (wizards) -- which had unlimited calls. He would sell the calls to the other inmates by the minute. It was a gold mine. Hundreds of prisoners lined up to call their families, relatives, friends, and business associates.

He soon asked his contacts to pull some strings and got the inmate in charge of the alcohol contraband transferred to another prison. Lima then took over that business as well. Rum, vodka and tequila were smuggled in water bottles, while whiskey was brought in as apple juice using fake labels. They smuggled other alcohol in paint cans any time the administration decided to touch up an area.

Lastly, he cleaned out the drug dealers, using a combination of high taxes and violence. The competition was gone. Because of his contacts outside the prison, Lima could also obtain goods at far lower prices than his competitors. And if any of his competitors resisted, Lima could make use of his Kaibil fighting skills, or use his connections that he had made while at the EMP. Using these contacts, Lima could get an inmate transferred to another prison with worse conditions, or to one where that inmate had enemies. These contacts may have been Lima’s most powerful weapon.
Outside the walls of the prison, Lima enjoyed another kind of power. His military connections started with his classmates from the military academy but eventually stretched to his colleagues in the intelligence community and the special forces. For the Guatemalan military, the military academy class holds a very high value. Lima Oliva was Class 108 of 1984. As the years went by, Class 108 members climbed the echelons of power within the military and the government, including in the penitentiary system and the police.

Indeed, even though civilian rule was restored in Guatemala in 1985, the military is still present within the state bureaucracies. To be sure, there has been a de facto
militarization of various, traditionally civilian-led branches of government such as the customs office, the tax administration service and the healthcare system. Some of these military officials were civil servants, but many were part of criminal enterprises.

These military-criminal networks eventually took on a name: the Illegal Security Corps and Clandestine Apparatus (Cuerpos Ilegales y Aparatos Clandestinos de Seguridad - CIACS). The CIACS were crime facilitators more than criminal organizations. They were linked to everything from false passports to drug trafficking to large kickback schemes.

The most potent among them were dubbed “La Cofradía” (The Brotherhood) and “La Montaña” (The Mountain). Initially, they were networks that were frequently made up of members of one or two military academy classes. So powerful were they that the United Nations-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala - CICIG) was established in 2007 to counter them. (The CICIG later played a central role in the resignation of President Pérez Molina and that of his Vice President Roxana Baldetti in 2015, whose private secretary Juan Carlos Monzón was also former military).

For a time, monikers like Cofradía and La Montaña helped sort through who was who within the networks. Over the years, however, the CIACS evolved into a mixture of military, political and economic elites whose alliances were based on circumstances and were short-lived. They also often disregarded the class promotion system from the military academies.

Lima Oliva enjoyed another, more subtle power that he exploited to establish control of the jails. A former Attorney General’s Office investigator called it, “the silence.” According to the investigator, and other independent researchers such as journalists Francisco Goldman and Julie López -- both of whom delved into the Gerardi case for years while writing well-regarded books on the subject -- there were many more people involved in the murder than were sentenced, including some from President Arzú’s inner circle, as well as Kaibiles and EMP. In return for his silence on the case, Lima obtained privileges and protection within the prison system. Whenever he felt that his interests were in danger, he did not hesitate to threaten to break this silence. Shortly after his arrest in 2001, for example, he gave an interview to journalist Claudia Méndez Arriaza in which he issued such a threat.

“Military officials got me involved in all this, but you listen to me, because I have information to give: don’t ask me for names, because I’m referring to high-ranking colonels,” Lima said. “I won’t give their names, because I fear them, but I point towards them and send them this message: why did you get me into this mess?”
In later years, Lima refused to clear up what he meant by those threats, and he denied that this form of blackmail had any influence on the power he amassed in prison.

“I like to speak frankly because nothing can be concealed from God, but you shouldn’t let yourself be misled by rumors,” he told InSight Crime.

‘Bring Us Lima!’

Lima’s war inside the penitentiary system has been mainly against the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the Barrio 18, the two most formidable gangs in the region. For years, the prison bosses marginalized the gang members, and confined them to the worst areas because they were deemed too violent, filthy and troublesome to be mixed in with the general population. In other words, they were considered a plague. Eventually, this abuse would fuel their rise.

The gangs’ built-up resentment exploded in a jail called Pavoncito, against the man in charge of the jail, Julio César Beteta, alias “Negro Beteta.” Beteta had maintained control by torturing prisoners, in particular gang members.

“The truth is that that dude had given the homies so much shit,” one gang member told InSight Crime. “He abused and humiliated them. He kept them as talacheros and would hit them with a rod”.

The gang members say that the abuses led the two gangs to temporarily set aside their bloody feud and form an alliance inside Guatemala’s prisons. It was not as hard as it sounds. In fact, these prison pacts are frequent in southern California, where many gang members are from. They call them “southern pacts” or “southern blood” (“correr el sur”). The gangs are also part of the same umbrella organization, known as the Sureños, giving them some common ground. After the accord, the gangs obtained knives,grenades and munitions, and waited.

On December 23, 2002, they launched their offensive in what would later be termed a “kill or be killed” attack. Beteta was neither Kaibil nor military, but he had the support of his uncle, the former Sgt. Maj. Noel Beteta. The latter had been one of the first soldiers to be sentenced for crimes against civilians, specifically for the murder of the anthropologist Myrna Mack, who had been working in the conflict-ridden Quiché department. And Noel Beteta’s resources and training, which had enabled him to protect his nephew, were in many ways similar to that of Byron Lima’s.

But Noel Beteta was not incarcerated in the Pavoncito prison, and his power did not reach far enough to protect his nephew from the horde of gang members bent on invading sector after sector until they collected payment in blood from Julio César
Beteta for the numerous talachas and abuses he had committed. Beteta’s army of rusos may have outnumbered the gang members, but they were unprepared and unarmed for the most part, whereas the gangs were fueled by weapons and hatred.

In a matter of hours, they had taken over the prison and cornered Beteta in a small sector. He was well-armed, and at first, they could not dislodge him. So they pierced a hole in the roof, poured flammable liquid through the hole and set the place on fire. Julio Beteta was forced to come out, and half an hour later, the gang members were posing for pictures holding his decapitated head.

At one point, a young gang member grabbed a puppet that he had found during the fighting that resembled a soldier and ripped the head off with his teeth. He then placed the decapitated figure next to Beteta’s head and screamed: “We want Lima! We want Lima! These heads are proof of our power. We are sureños. We want Lima! Bring us Lima!”

A Kaibil’s Survival

Luis Lima was 19 when they put his father, Col. Byron Lima Estrada, and his brother, Capt. Byron Lima Oliva, in jail. He was readying himself to leave for Belgium to study, but he quickly realized that the event had changed his path forever. From that point forward, he dedicated his life to the legal fight to get his family out of prison, and to the survival of his family while they were still behind bars.

While studying political science in a Guatemala City university, Luis helped smuggle the first mobile phones into the Centro Preventivo, initially to communicate with his incarcerated kin and later to help establish the lucrative phone business. He also worked on the transfer of rival prisoners so his brother could take over the alcohol contraband. But his most important task was the creation of a legal and judicial network to protect his father and brother.

“We had to learn how to lobby the right judges, the prosecutors and how to handle information to put all the pieces in place. It’s like chess,” the 35-year old political scientist explained. “These became mixed networks because, first you meet a criminal, then you meet lawyers, then prosecutors, after that politicians. You start meeting the whole world”.

Like his brother, Luis denied Lima’s silence was at the heart of his power. Instead, he argued that Lima was protected because from inside the prison, he collected valuable information about kidnappings, car thefts and arms trafficking, which helped authorities resolve other cases. “In the end, you could say that we were undercover because it wasn’t really our world. I mean, we ended up there because the devil willed
Byron Lima, for instance, once told military intelligence that a group of bank robbers were planning on escaping from jail. Lima knew them and knew exactly what area they would use to escape. He knew where they were keeping their weapons -- including one that could shoot down a police helicopter -- and on what day they would make their move. To prove to the authorities the utter trust the bank robbers had in Lima, Lima sold them several bulletproof vests. The night before their escape, authorities grabbed them and transferred them to another prison, from which they would eventually escape anyway. This is how, according to Lima’s family, Byron Lima maintained his influence, his network and his control over the system.

“So you accumulate all this. Because at some point it will be useful to exchange for favors, for information. Here, as they say, the one who holds the information holds the power. Information is power,” Luis Lima explained.

In early 2003, that information would save Byron Lima’s life. The captain had seen how the gang members had taken control of Pavoncito and how they had challenged him directly, so he, his father and Villanueva prepared for what they knew was coming. Like good soldiers they knew when to fight and when to retreat. This was not the time...
to confront an alliance of angry gang members who were furious with the incarcerated military elite.

The three began their preparation by getting Colonel Lima Estrada to a hospital under the pretext that he was ill. They then created escape hatches from their sectors for both Lima and Villanueva should the gangs attack.

The gangs coordinated throughout the jails and had a good intelligence system. But on the day of the attack, February 12, Lima was in the administration offices. His military companion, however, did not have the same luck. As the story goes, Villanueva tried to wedge his way through a hole in the wall, but he was heavyset, got stuck and was cut to pieces by the gangs’ machetes.

“Contacts are to protect yourself … to shield yourself,” Luis Lima told InSight Crime. “It’s about survival. It is survival”.

**The Kaibil Empire**

In 2011, Lima’s former EMP boss and the ex-Gen. Otto Pérez Molina was elected president of Guatemala. Shortly after the election, Lima Oliva sent an email to another former military officer, retired Lt. Col. Mauricio López Bonilla. López Bonilla had headed up Pérez Molina’s campaign and his Patriot Party (Partido Patriota - PP). As a reward to López Bonilla for his work on the campaign, the new president named him as the interior minister. The post gave López Bonilla the power to determine who administered the prison system, which is what led to Lima’s email.

By the time Lima sent this email to the newly named interior minister, Lima was already the most powerful prisoner in the system. After the murder of Villanueva in February 2003, he had been transferred to a prison known as Boquerón, but not before exacting a little vengeance of his own against the gangs by poisoning their food in the Centro Preventivo. None of them died, but more than a hundred gang members got seriously ill.

Lima was later moved to Pavoncito, Beteta’s former fiefdom, where there were no gangs, since they were moved to Escuintla. In Pavoncito, Lima was free to set the rules and establish a monopoly on contraband. He also got his full revenge on the gangs. In 2008, authorities transferred four high-profile MS13 leaders to Pavoncito, two of which were involved in the murder of Villanueva. The gang members were killed, decapitated and their heads were put on display -- just like Beteta’s had been in that same prison, as Villanueva’s had in the Centro Preventivo, and as Lima’s almost was.
The murders allowed Lima to close the loop in his fight with the gangs, imposing his will over them for good. Numerous sources -- some of them government investigators, others former and current prisoners -- told InSight Crime that they believe the authorities had sent the gang members there to die, as a kind of blood offering to Lima for the 2003 attack against him.

With Pérez Molina as president, Lima’s military colleagues also took over the core of the government. Estuardo Galdámez (Class 108) became a congressman. Juan de Dios Rodríguez (Class 108) became the head of the most important state-owned company in the country, the Guatemalan Social Security Institute (Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social -- IGSS). And Luis Lima was appointed as the intermediary between the executive branch and Congress, after having managed the PP’s campaign in the Quiché department.

Byron Lima also took part in the campaign. Inside Pavoncito, he established a clothing cooperative where they made orange T-shirts, baseball hats, and other paraphernalia for the PP. This was one of Lima’s many businesses inside jail. More recently, he had a company that built workout machines, which he sold to local governments, and another that made clocks and paintings bearing Kaibil and paratrooper insignias.

Still, Lima insisted that he knew how to separate business from ideology. In 2011, his cooperative made paraphernalia for Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega’s presidential re-election campaign, which the Sandinista leader won.
When Pérez Molina won the presidency in 2011, Lima began setting the table for another type of business. According to CICIG investigators, the email sent by Byron Lima to the Interior Minister López Bonilla contained names of some of his “candidates” for high ranking offices: Eddy Fisher Arbizú and Édgar Hernández from Class 108; Col. Luis Alberto González as well as his father-in-law, Samuel Reyes Samayoa. López Bonilla chose González to be the director, Fisher as an assistant director, Hernández as the head of transfers and Reyes Samayoa as the administrative technical advisor.

SEE ALSO: Guatemala’s Mafia State and the Case of Mauricio López Bonilla

With his network in place, Lima’s empire became more evident. According to a CICIG investigation, the former army captain used his colleagues to arrange prisoner transfers (see CICIG organizational chart below). The price ranged from $7,000 to $20,000, depending on the prisoner’s resources. Investigators from Guatemala and the United States, as well as three US attorneys defending drug traffickers, said that Lima also extorted criminals, including some of the most prominent drug traffickers who were awaiting extradition to the United States. Those who refused to pay were tortured or humiliated. In one case, Lima’s men allegedly beat a trafficker named Walter Montejo, before dumping a sack of feces on his head. Montejo allegedly paid Lima $800,000. Lima’s transgressions became too much, even for the Pérez Molina administration, when he began regularly leaving the prison to visit his family or his friends. According
to investigators, it wasn’t unusual for Lima to leave the prison and go to a nightclub on a weekend. They said he traveled in a two-car convoy of bulletproof vehicles owned by the interior ministry, accompanied by prison guards.

In 2013, police intercepted Lima’s convoy as he returned from one of his many forays into Guatemala City and accused him of leaving the jail without proper authorization. The director of Pavoncito, as well as numerous guards, were with him when he was stopped. Lima was furious, though, especially with Interior Minister López Bonilla whom he called “a traitor to the nation”.

The accusations against Lima would lead nowhere, but his arrest was authorities’ first effort to slow him down, and it started the process whereby the CICIG could collect information on his scheme to monetize prison transfers. The CICIG later formally accused Lima and upended his network of intimate cohorts inside the prison administration. CICIG’s charges were much more serious than the earlier ones about unauthorized visits to Guatemala City: they increased the likelihood Lima would remain in prison and jeopardized his political aspirations.

‘Byron Lima for President’

It was 9 a.m. on April 5, 2016, and inside Guatemala City’s Pavón prison, the corpse of Marcelo Noj Ajau hung from a nylon cord in a bathroom. His body hovered about a foot from the ground and had turned deep purple. One of his hands was still in his pocket.

The sector boss, nicknamed “El Oso” (The Bear), told Lima that Noj Ajau had gotten up in the middle of the night and had hung himself. Lima, visibly irritated, did not believe El Oso’s account.

“This body doesn’t look like someone who hung himself,” Lima said confidently. “I’ve seen many in my life, and the tongue sticks out. This guy’s tongue isn’t sticking out, not at all. He’s been beaten. And on top of that, I saw another man with a black eye in this very sector. Bring him to me!”
A group of men hurried to find the inmate. A few minutes later, a young man who could barely walk was brought to Lima. His face was swollen, and he had blood stains around his mouth.

Lima started to ask him questions, but the inmate hesitated: “I’m not going to get in trouble for snitching?”

“Nothing will happen to you,” Lima reassured him.

“Are you sure?”

The inmate’s tone had obviously been forged by years of living in a world where silence meant survival. Lima did not answer him. He simply stared straight into the inmate’s eyes, and the bruised man started talking.

He told Lima that the sector chiefs had beaten him all morning and forced him to give them 300 quetzals ($40).

“Bring me those in charge,” Lima ordered.

An overweight white man appeared almost immediately, carrying the money. Lima told him to return it to the beaten inmate.

“Here it is”, the overweight man said. “Here is exactly what I took from him that I’m handing back. We did it because he broke the rules and was extorting one of our family members by phone”.

“That’s not the way we do things”, Lima replied.

Lima had softened his tone, but the boss had spoken. The issue was settled. Lima then dismissed El Oso as leader of the sector and replaced him with an inmate they called “Tortillero”. For Lima, the motives for Marcelo Noj Ajau’s murder were clear, and the case was closed.

Lima settled dozens of cases like this during his eight months in Pavón. These were situations the prison administration did not want to handle, so they relied on Lima. And Lima understood that by filling this vacuum, he gained power.

Shortly after resolving the leadership issue, Lima gave InSight Crime a tour of the prison. The commotion surrounding the murder of Ajau had already dissipated.

Lima stopped in front of a passing prisoner and with a strong voice told him to come
closer.

“You, come here. Tell my friend here who arrested you”.

The prisoner looked into Lima’s eyes and answered meekly: “You, you arrested me captain”.

Lima said the prisoner had kidnapped his cousin when he was a member of the “crisis committee.” During the rescue, Lima shot the man. They were now in the same prison, but Lima wanted to show his visitors that he was not a tyrant like Beteta had been.

“Did I ever hurt you?” the former army captain asked.

“Yes. You, you shot me in the back, captain,” the inmate answered, seemingly confused by the question.

“No, no, I mean since then”.

The man shook his head. We continued with the tour.

As we walked, we passed prisoners making hammocks, toys and hats along the 6 Avenida. The inmates who passed us stopped and saluted Lima, “Good morning, captain”.

Soon we entered what is called Genesis, a school where inmates get classes in English, German, graphic design, geography and other subjects. Lima taught Portuguese, which he spoke fluently. Toward the rear of the prison, prisoners were raising pigs, ducks and chickens. As we waded through this mass of men, Lima called out to one and ordered him to tell us what happened to him the month before.

“I had an appendicitis”, he told us. “The infirmary wouldn’t let me in, but the captain busted the door down with an axe”.

Later, an elderly man approached us. His face was wrinkled and arthritis had curled his fingers. He told us that his wife was also an inmate, and she, along with other elderly female inmates, had grown tired of asking for help from the prison authorities without getting any response, so they had turned to Lima.

So did younger women and even the director of the female prison who, right in front of us, thanked Lima for sending food, blankets and other things to the female inmates. She also thanked him for the chicken sandwiches the former captain had sent the previous Christmas.
The sense we got that Lima was campaigning was not a coincidence: the former army officer’s ambitions extended well beyond the prison’s walls. By early 2016, Lima and his brother Luis were creating the National Refoundation Party (Partido de Refundación Nacional). Its slogan, according to Luis Lima: “Take back the Constitution.” Byron Lima was also working on a different project called “Love for Guatemala” (“Amor por Guatemala,” or AGUA), which Luis emphasized would be inclusive.

“We have former guerrilla fighters. We have war veterans. We have environmentalists. We have magistrates. We have union members. We have indigenous people. We have farmers. We have groups of women. We even have homosexuals,” Luis Lima, the self-proclaimed progressive member of the Lima family, explained.

Byron Lima did not talk openly about these political projects, but he was not shy when it came to discussing his own ambitions. His Facebook page was entitled “Byron Lima for President,” and it showed pictures of those who visited him in jail, including congressmen, diplomats, and the now-President Jimmy Morales who was then a comedian and TV personality. The next step, Lima insisted, was his own bid for the presidency.

“I’m going to be president, don’t you ever doubt it,” Lima told InSight Crime without hesitation. “I’m going to be president of all Guatemalans, not just the civil society. And I’m not going to accept that any -- forgive me -- son of a bitch talks shit about Guatemala, because I will put him in jail ... I’ve been a prisoner. So you think I’m gonna be afraid of gang-bangers? I’m not gonna be afraid of them. You think I’m gonna be afraid of those murderers who are killing the bus [drivers]? I’m not afraid of them. You think I’m afraid of shooting down an airplane carrying drugs? I’m not afraid of that.”

Towards the end of the tour, we came upon a small shack made of wood. Inside was a middle-aged black man with piles of papers, microphones and headphones around him. This was “Pavón’s Voice,” a community radio station that broadcasts music,
The Voice also issues a series of rules that Lima had decreed: no spitting or littering, no gangs, and no threatening other prisoners. Lima told InSight Crime that he had the DJs read the rules every hour, so they would be permanently inscribed in the inmates’ minds.

Death of a Kaibil

While Lima might not have feared the gang members, there were others who gave him pause, including a drug trafficker named Marvin Montiel Marín, alias “El Taquero.” Marín had been jailed for the murder of 16 bus passengers coming from Nicaragua in 2008, whom he had burned alive when he did not find a cocaine shipment he thought was in the bus.

El Taquero did not care if Lima resolved disputes between prisoners or sent chicken sandwiches to the female inmates on Christmas. But he did care that the former army captain was trying to stop his crack dealing within the jail. Crack is not just a lucrative business, it is a destructive one because of the theft and violence it engenders.

“The worst of the cancers, that’s called the rock,” Lima told InSight Crime. “It’s called crack. That is the worst thing there can be within a prison.”

However, Lima could never get rid of this business easily. In the case of the Pavón, for instance, he said he had only managed to take charge of half of the jail’s 22 sectors because of crack, and that he was waiting to transfer the roughly 20 or 30 dealers like Marín who still operated to other jails.

“They will go down or they will go free, or they will be transferred,” he said, speaking of the offending drug peddlers. “But what I am trying to do is make sure that no one else picks up where they left off.”

A few days after Lima’s death, InSight Crime obtained a report from the Office of Civilian Intelligence (Dirección General de la Inteligencia Civil - DIGICI). The report said that a convicted drug trafficker named Eduardo Francisco Villatoro Cano, alias “Guayo Cano,” had paid Marín a million quetzals ($132,000) to kill Lima. The alleged motive, according to the report, was Lima’s theft of more than “2,000 packages of cocaine” from Guayo Cano, who was incarcerated in another prison. The report also cited Lima’s efforts to prohibit the sale of crack.

“The information obtained suggests that the confrontation could have originated from Byron Lima’s alleged prohibition with regards to the sale of drugs within the penitentiary, which directly affected the businesses run by inmate Marvin Montiel Marín, alias ‘El Taquero,’ [who was] responsible for the sale of narcotics within the
“prison,” read the DIGICI memorandum. But something did not fit. Officials from the interior ministry confirmed the authenticity of the document, but it was too simplistic, and there were parts that were simply incorrect. For example, the DIGICI described Lima as a criminal involved in theft and resale of drugs, something neither US antinarcotics agents or any Guatemalan investigators have said about Lima. And a high-ranking police officer told InSight Crime that Marín had isolated himself during the attack, and suggested that El Taquero was more of a scapegoat than the actual intellectual author of Lima’s assassination.

What’s more, Lima’s enemies were not limited to Pavón. Following his brother’s murder, Luis Lima made a short video in which he said it was “a crime of the state.” Specifically, he pointed towards people inside the current government whom he said were fearful Lima might revive the Valle del Sol theory of the Gerardi murder. Others thought Lima was killed for the opposite reason, namely that he could have incriminated some of his former EMP bosses and political figures, that his famous “silence” would end and that he could bring down whatever was left of the various CIACS and their political allies.

If Lima broke his “silence,” it could have impacted others as well. Lima’s former allies Otto Pérez Molina and Mauricio López Bonilla, as well as several graduates of Class 108, were also in jail facing corruption, money laundering and other charges. López Bonilla and Lima’s fight was particularly public and playing out via the media and social networks. Lima’s closely held secrets could have also extended to cases against these former officials. And the former captain had insinuated more than once that he was sick of the cynicism and the lack of respect former soldiers showed to the institution he most revered: the military. The fact that Pérez Molina never wore his military uniform while he held office, for example, never ceased to irritate Lima.

However, the Byron Lima case was about more than murder. It touched on the ongoing battle for Guatemala’s soul. Like Lima, the country’s efforts to project an image of stability quickly dissolved into corruption and crime. Lima’s short-lived empire embodied this dichotomy as well; the order, control, security and progress he sought to create inside the jails clashed with the chaos he himself engendered and his own efforts to enrich himself at the expense of others.
“In every Guatemalan jail, there is a Byron Lima,” Luis Lima told InSight Crime shortly before his brother’s death. “But there are good Byron Limas and bad Byron Limas. There’s the Byron Lima that helps with the prison’s healthcare system, with the prison’s education system, with the prison’s work programs. And there’s the bad Byron Lima who can extort, who can beat people up, who promotes vice.”

Depending on who you ask, Lima was a protector or an aggressor, an honorable soldier or an extortionist, a military leader or a smuggler, a future president or a fearsome “king” of the prisons. At the end of day, Lima’s murderers were neither the drug dealers, nor his former companions. What killed Byron Lima was the eternal paradox called Guatemala.

*Reporting and writing by Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson and Steven Dudley. The original version of this story was written in Spanish. It was translated by Tristan Clavel and edited by Mike LaSusa. Top photo of Byron Lima by Moises Castillo, Associated Press.*
3.

Where Chaos Reigns: Inside the San Pedro Sula Prison

In San Pedro Sula’s jailhouse, chaos reigns. The inmates, trapped in their collective misery, battle for control over every inch of their tight quarters. Farm animals and guard dogs roam free and feed off scraps, which can include a human heart. Every day is visitors’ day, and the economy bustles with everything from chicken stands to men who can build customized jail cells. Here you can find a party stocked with champagne and live music. But you can also find an inmate hacked to pieces. Those who guard these quarters are also those who get rich selling air-conditioned rooms, and those who pay the consequences if they get too greedy. That’s how inmates live, on their own virtual island free from government interference, in the San Pedro Sula prison.

The Lawyer’s New World

The lawyer still remembers how he felt when he arrived. The year was 2012, and he was entering a new world. There were new rules and new roles. Time passes differently on the inside, he found out quickly, and banalities, while trivial on the outside, are treasures that one has to pay for and defend at any cost on the inside.
He was in a tough position. The prison is divided by the type of inmate you are and the group with which you are affiliated. The most numerous prisoners -- and therefore the most powerful group -- are called “paisas.” Paisa is a generic name in Central America for inmates who have no affiliation to a larger, organized criminal group: car thieves, petty drug dealers, and murderers are all paisas. The paisas are the largest bloc, but they are far from being unified. Their power disputes have led to treasonous acts and conspiracies, coup d’etats and wars.

Inside this new world, the lawyer also found infamous predators. The Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS13) and the Barrio 18, which according to government authorities and the US Treasury Department are two of the largest and most dangerous gangs in the world, were housed on opposite sides of the jail because of their perennial blood-feud.

There were also inmates with mental problems and a group of female prisoners, each of whom have their own section. There were ex-police officers as well; ironically, they were housed next to the MS13. And there were those who had prestige or contacts in high places. They had a separate cell bloc and each prisoner had their own cell, which they refer to as “private rooms.”

The lawyer had been a prosecutor in the Attorney General’s Office. In jail, everything to do with the government is the enemy, so he sought refuge. Luckily, he had contacts and something more important: money. One of his contacts, who was arrested in the same police raid that had snared him and faced similar charges, invited him to live in his “private room.” They shared the space, and lived in the bloc with the other privileged prisoners. They were, quite simply, the prison’s bourgeoisie.

It only took a few days for the lawyer to understand how the system worked.

“The prison administrator told me there were no private rooms. But if I wanted, he would sell me a small piece of the cell bloc, so that I could build my own private space,” he explained to InSight Crime.

So the lawyer negotiated a fee with the prison administrator to build a room. The inmates like to say the cost depends on “how big the frog is,” a local expression referring to the amount of money you look like you have. Payments can reach as high as 200,000 lempiras (roughly $9,000). The lawyer paid 55,000 lempiras (approximately $2,400). The money was registered in a budget item called “non-governmental expenses.” The administrator said this money went towards prison expenses, but nobody believed him.

The lawyer also had to pay for labor and materials. In total, the room cost him 200,000 lempiras, but it came with its perks. He lived in one of the poorest prisons in the world, but he had access to luxuries that even inmates from first-world countries would envy:
a television, a microwave and a PlayStation, to name a few. The cell not only provided comfort, but security as well, which the lawyer had quickly come to appreciate.

It was just a few days after his arrival that he had heard the first gun shot. When it started, he was confused. Then he heard another, and he began to grasp what was happening. A full fledged gunfight soon broke out. The lawyer said it sounded like a thunderstorm. The riot that followed lasted several hours, which for the San Pedro Sula prison was short.

The fight itself was a product of the regular in-fighting among the paisas. One paisa group from Cell Bloc 25 was apparently trying to rebel against the then leader of the jail, José Raúl Díaz, alias “Chepe Lora.” The shower of bullets were from Lora’s men, who were putting down the insurgency. The battle left five dead. Prison authorities later asked the boss’ permission to take the bodies away, and everything went back to normal. It was then that the lawyer understood that he didn’t really understand anything about his new world.

The ‘Pesetas’ Era

The San Pedro Sula prison wasn’t always under the paisas’ control. At the end of the 2000s, it was an even more difficult place to understand and to control. Without clear leaders or dominant groups, any shift in power disrupted the entire institution. And a misstep could be taken as an affront. Only one thing was clear: gang members and paisas could not be in the same cell bloc. Mixing them was like preparing a bloodbath.

Prison authorities dealt with this problem by putting the paisas in the largest area of the jail, which could hold up to 1,200 inmates. For a long time, each inmate was responsible for protecting himself. He would have to get his own machete or pistol, or pay someone to get it for him.

But there was a crack in the system, a fissure that no prison official saw: the Honduran gangs are not well organized, and their leaders do not have the same authority over the rank-and-file members as they do in neighboring countries such as El Salvador. There are numerous internal conflicts, and many members desert the gangs altogether. These deserters are known in gang argot as “pesetas,” and they are separated into a separate bloc, away from their former counterparts.

“If you are a peseta, they can’t put you where your [former] gang is [because] they would chop you up immediately, and they can’t put in the other gang’s area because the same thing would happen. The prison isn’t large enough to create another compound, so [the pesetas] have to live with the paisa population,” explained a former peseta prisoner to InSight Crime.
But the pesetas carry the gang in their soul, and they do not stop leading the gang life just because they have abandoned their particular gang. So it was natural that within the prison, pesetas from various gangs united to form their own group. It was a powerful group, probably the most organized of any of those within the paisa sector.

This power increased when they started requesting money from visitors. These requests soon became demands. Once they became aware of their power, they sought more, and soon they began to govern the entire paisa sector at the point of their blades and the ends of their guns.

The prison represents danger, but it also represents opportunity -- legal and illegal -- from drug sales to contract killings to prostitution. There is even a motel for couples. The pesetas took control of these businesses (and they were careful to provide prison authorities with their share of the profits). Soon, they were also taxing petty drug dealers, alcohol smugglers, and the prisoners who rented out telephones.

One day they would extort an inmate, the next day they would rob someone’s food. To a degree, the abuse was painful but acceptable for the inmates; it was still within the realm of how far a prison gang can push its limits in Central America without provoking revolt. But the pesetas went further. In fact, they committed what many consider the gravest sin of them all when they started targeting visitors.
“It got to the point where the pesetas raped some of the girls that were visiting,” the same peseta ex-prisoner told InSight Crime. Tempers rose, but “no one did anything because [the pesetas] were well organized and controlled the weapons.”

Everything changed in April 2008. The San Pedro Sula prison houses crude men, criminals and those whose reputation precedes them. One of them was Roberto Arturo Contreras, alias “Chele Volqueta,” a bank robber who had escaped prison several times. He had earned his nickname during his most recent escape when he went full speed in a “volqueta,” or dump truck, and slammed it against the prison’s southern wall, creating an enormous hole, all the while firing at prison guards. Several months later, he was captured and sent back to the same prison, where inmates greeted him with a cheer fit for a rock star.

This criminal, like all criminals, had enemies. These enemies could not touch him within the prison, since he had weapons and men. So his enemies paid those who could get to him. At noon on April 26, 2008, while Chele Volqueta was eating stewed chicken in a small prison restaurant, the leader of the pesetas, Jhonny Antonio Jiménez, alias “The Immortal,” shot and killed him. Some say that the Chepe Volqueta choked on his own blood on the floor of Randy’s dining hall, while others claim he choked in the ambulance en route to the hospital. Still others swear that it was a clean kill without much blood. Details always get lost or garbled when recounted by inmates. One thing was clear, though: Immortal had killed San Pedro Sula’s acclaimed bank robber and escape artist in Randy’s dining hall.

A dark cloud fell over the inmates. If they could kill a man of such prestige and power, they could kill anyone. Someone had to act. Three of the oldest and most recognized inmates met with each other; something had to happen or else everyone would be at the mercy of the pesetas.

In stepped a 40-year-old man named Francisco Brevé, a thief with a reputation approaching that of Volqueta. Brevé gathered his men and their weapons, and they responded. One of the attackers, who was 18-years old at the time, said that it wasn’t difficult to put an end to “the plague,” as he referred to the pesetas. Brevé’s men were concentrated in a tight formation with pistols, machetes and grenades, while the pesetas, confident in their power, were scattered across the compound, far from their arsenal.

The massacre was quick. It lasted barely an hour, and left eight dead. But there were a lot of pesetas, and Brevé’s men couldn’t kill all of them. Those who survived were sent to Támara, the prison in Tegucigalpa, where many of them were killed by the friends and admirers of Volqueta.
On that day the pesetas’ blood ran through the San Pedro Sula prison like an irrigation system, giving birth to a new group of “strong men” headed by Francisco Brevé, who from that moment on would be known as Don Brevé.

**The Prison Market**

A man lifts an enormous brown sack. His wife sees him struggling and decides to help. Between the two of them they drag it little by little down the sidewalk. The heat has already set in, even though it’s only 8:00 a.m. They are, like many others, in line, trying to get into the prison. We huddle next to the wall that still provides a little shade. Those who come later will be at the mercy of the burning sun.

The line moves slowly. The conversation turns equal parts raunchy and utilitarian. A group of older men discuss whether having lots of sex helps people live longer. “Each time you are with a woman, it takes several seconds off your life,” says an older man. Others interrupt him.

“I would have died years ago,” says a heavy-set man.

“I owe God about ten years,” says another.

There are four of them, but only two are actually here to visit someone in the prison. The rest are waiting to either buy or sell merchandise, including the couple struggling with the large sack. The prison is, quite simply, an enormous market.

Across from us, up against the other side of the wall and protected by a metal roof, is the line for women who are waiting to enter the jail. The first two in line are pregnant. Behind them, several other women are carrying small children who squirm in their arms as the sun blazes above.

The pregnant women and women with children enter the prison first. Behind them are several younger women who are fixing their hair and makeup -- beautiful, mixed-race girls, some of whom have dyed their hair blond. Several are wearing such skimpy clothes that there is hardly a need for them to lift their skirts when the female guards check for contraband.

A prisoner walks from the door inside the prison and shouts at the top of his lungs: “Chicken, shampoo, chicken! Don’t lose your place in line, don’t lose your place in line. Chiiiiiicken!”
Several people give him money, and he returns shortly with some bags of fried chicken from inside the jail. They give him a tip, and then he goes back through the prison door.

Inside, the inspection is but a mere formality. We give our names, we give our destination, and we go inside. The interrogation lasts no more than a minute. No one asks us what we are doing.

The guard requests our IDs and then hands us each a metal token with a number. “Don’t lose it,” the guard says.

We are with Germán Andino, an artist and journalist, and Daniel Pacheco, an evangelical pastor. The pastor is one of the most well-known activists in the city thanks to his work with gangs in the Rivera Hernández neighborhood, one of the most dangerous in Honduras.

We go past the iron gates and enter the prison. A large group of gang members forms a circle around Pacheco, shaking his hand and saying hello. Most are from Rivera Hernández, and they are happy to see him. They proudly show him the new space they have built within their cell bloc.

They are members of the Barrio 18, the most violent street gang in Honduras. Like the MS13, they are held in special compounds, apart from the paisa population and far away from the rival gangs. A skinny gang member known as “Virus” with five gold chains hanging from his neck is waiting for us.

We had already agreed to meet. He takes us to a large room where at least 30 gang members are watching television or talking with visitors.

We climb a flight of stairs and come to an area where there are five bedrooms. In the last room “El Susurro” is waiting for us. He is lying down like a king and looking up at a flat-screen television mounted on the wall. In his room, there is a mini bar and a pole dancing pole. On his bed are three smartphones. His small refrigerator purrs. He offers us Coca Cola, then, from bed, begins to talk to us.
Competing for the Throne

Don Brevé changed many things in the prison. In a rush to protect himself from potential rivals, he outlawed weapons, from shivs to firearms. Up until then, hiring a hit man was a typical way to discipline a member of your own group or to take revenge on an enemy, like Immortal did to Chele Volqueta. But this new rule made hired killing more difficult within the prison.

Don Brevé also forged a closer relationship with Hugo Hernández, the administrator of the prison. In return, prison authorities legitimized his leadership, giving him the title of “inmate general coordinator.” From that point on, the coordinator has been the intermediary between the administration and the inmates. Complaints, special requests and suggestions are all channeled through him. And the administration communicates its directives to the inmates via the coordinator. This system provides some control. But it is up to the coordinator to impart these orders. And if the coordinator cannot keep the peace, he is of no use to either the administration or the prisoners.

The coordinator also has to keep business flowing. The entire prison economy passes through the hands of the coordinator and the administrator. They hand out the licenses to businesses that operate in the prison corridors -- the restaurants, workshops, and small stores. (The main corridor where these businesses operate is called, in a bit of dark jailhouse irony, the “Zone of Death.”) They also give permission for the construction of new rooms and the installation of cable television and other amenities. They provide rooms when visitors come or when prostitutes service clients.

Everything has a quota that must be paid. This quota goes from the business operator to the coordinator to the administrator and, the inmates say, to the warden. To cover up the constant movement of money, they use rubrics like the aforementioned “non-governmental expenses.”

Together, Don Brevé and the prison administrator Hernández worked out ways that allowed the prison population a measure of peace, or at least for those who lived in the paisa sector.

Don Brevé confronted more than one inmate during his time as king of the San Pedro Sula prison. He always won. To cite just one example, Manuel Araújo was a man who had watched everything unfold from the shadows. Perhaps encouraged by the changes, he decided to defy the new king’s orders. He openly carried a weapon, and he armed to the teeth a group of men who had worked with him in the past. Eventually, he and his men took control of part of the paisa compound.
But Araújo’s rebellion did not last long. He was ambushed on the steps of a motel on a day that no one visited him. They shot him from above and from below. Don Brevé’s personal chef and five of Araújo’s gunmen were killed during the brawl. In total, the shootout left nine dead and three injured.

“We killed Manuel because he wanted to take power,” a former inmate told InSight Crime. “He wanted control and began to do the same [things] as those damned pesetas.”

As historians always say, history is written by the victors. And in these stories, Manuel Araújo will always be a tyrant who violated the visitors’ rights and terrified the inmates. Who knows if his rebellion was justified or not. He is dead now, and so is his version of events.

Except for the violent demise of Manuel Araújo, the prisoners who lived through Don Brevé’s period say that peace reigned in the prison. Don Brevé did not have many enemies. And if he did, they preferred to keep their hatred tucked away in the shadow of the cells, so that no one would notice.

But the era of peace was unavoidably coming to an end. Don Brevé was about to finish his sentence. He would be free soon, and blindly promised the inmates that he would continue his good governance from the streets. With the support of Don Brevé and other inmates, one prisoner said he would be Don Brevé’s representative inside the jail. His name was Mario Henríquez, and he promised to be a good leader.

**The Barrio 18 Cookout**

It’s Sunday, and the line to enter the prison is much longer than on the other days. The sun appears to have noticed the gathering crowd and beats down on us like some sort of capricious god.

After the pantomime search at the entrance and the ritualistic handing over of the metal token, we find ourselves once again inside the Barrio 18 compound. There is music and dozens of children running everywhere. In the kitchen, several gang members and their wives are cooking lunch for everyone.

One of the leaders boasts that, “We aren’t fed by the government. We prepare our own food and buy our own air [conditioners] and our beds.”

It’s true. The Barrio 18 sector is like a refrigerator. It is full of air conditioners and fans. On the second floor, which they have built by hand and with their own materials, they have installed several poker tables and a billiards table with professional cue sticks.
Mandy rests under the table, shaking her ears and sniffing us. She is a nine-month-old pit bull, a breed that is outlawed in Honduras for its supposed violent tendencies. Somehow, though, it’s allowed in this prison.

Lunch hour arrives and all of the visitors are served a plate of fried chicken, french fries, and cabbage salad drenched in sauce. A gang member brings us the plates and buys us a half-liter of Pepsi in the store that they run. This time, the leader El Susurro doesn’t talk to us. He is busy with his own visitors.

In the long line to leave, we meet the visitors from the other sectors. The atmosphere is tense. Those who visited the MS13 look at us with distrust. The women, some of whom are gang members as well, give us an evil look, but no one says anything.

Most of those waiting in line had entered the paisa sector. They carry out armfuls of goods they bought inside.

Suddenly a pickup truck comes barreling through the main gate at full speed, almost crushing us. From the Barrio 18 compound Javier Evelyn Hernández, alias “Flash,” one of the gang’s leaders in San Pedro Sula, appears. A pistol handle can be seen poking from his belt.

Behind him are five other gang members. All of them are wielding home-made grenades disguised as soda cans. These are powerful, artisanal weapons, and some of them are packed with nails. Time seems to stop. Flash and his bodyguards keep an eye on the pickup until it goes into the gang’s compound. Walking back, they get into the truck and close the gate separating them from the other sectors. The soldiers, police and the rest of the visitors breathe a sigh of relief.
The Young King

Unlike Don Brevé’s era, the reign of Mario Henríquez was marred by terror and abuse. Under his rule, in which he too was given the title of “general coordinator,” extortion was the least of the inmates’ problems. Henríquez’s men, for instance, robbed the government-provided food from the poorest inmates, so that they could resell it to the restaurants in the Zone of Death.

“He was growing and growing until it got to the point that we could no longer stand him,” one of Don Brevé’s ex-soldiers told InSight Crime. “He went around saying that he was the only boss of this prison, and really the only boss was Francisco Brevé, although he was free.”

The straw that broke the camel’s back came in February 2012, when the young girlfriend of one of the prisoners known as “Colocho” came to visit. Mario Henríquez’ men called her to their room when she arrived, and Henríquez raped her. The woman left the room sobbing, and then she told Colocho what had happened. Colocho reportedly went crazy. He picked up a grenade, planning to kill Henríquez and the rest of his men, and to take them with him to the next life “all at fucking once!” But Don Brevé’s ex-soldier impeded his path.

“I was also walking with a grenade in my hand, like an Al Qaeda jihadist,” said the former soldier.

Shots were fired, but it wasn’t the moment for a full-on battle. A 26-year-old man calmed Don Brevé’s former troops with promises of bloodshed in the near future, the blood of Mario Henríquez. That man was José Raúl Díaz, better known as “Chepe Lora.” And precisely one month after the first dispute came the coup d’etat.

“That was a shootout because they were armed, and heavily armed. But we took them by surprise,” one of Don Brevé’s former troops, who would later become a soldier for Chepe Lora, told InSight Crime.

Chepe Lora targeted several cooks who were part of Henríquez’s crew. They later set fire to the kitchen, while the bodies were still inside. Of all the cooks, only one named Roberto, an old prisoner who had spent many years behind bars, survived. But the barbarity of that day left him crazy. Now he wanders the corridors, talking to himself like a ghost.

Henríquez’s eyes were shot out, and his head was thrown off the roof of the prison.
Henríquez and his gunmen hid inside his cell, one of the luxury cells built at a cost of thousands of dollars. But they met the same fate: fire and lead. They all died. Two inmates then dragged Henríquez’s body from the cell.

“Shrek dragged him out,” a former inmate told InSight Crime, referring to a fellow inmate who went by the name of the famous DreamWorks character. “With a hook, he took off his head and stuck a hen in the hole. They were letting out the anger that had built up towards Mario for having ordered a beating once. Then [another prisoner called] ‘The New David’ cut off his pigeon [penis].”

They say they gave Henríquez’s penis and guts to his own pet dog. They later decapitated the dog. Henríquez’s eyes were shot out, and his head was thrown off the roof of the prison. Thus his rule came to an end, consumed entirely by the prison he once ran.

When the fighting calmed down, the oldest prisoners discussed who the new leader would be. Chepe Lora interrupted. With his young crew at his side, he informed them that he was the new coordinator of the San Pedro Sula prison.

Several inmates we spoke with remember the Chepe Lora era as one of peace and prosperity. Ex-inmates told us of parties with prostitutes, live music and gourmet food. The administrators also remembered it as a time of peace. Chepe Lora surrounded himself with young people. It was a way to break with the old structures.

Chepe Lora was a Robin Hood figure in the neighborhoods of San Pedro Sula as well. Stories circulated of people coming to the prison to ask him for money to buy food and medicine. He even went beyond his dominion of the paisa sector to talk with the Barrio 18 and the MS13. By threatening them with the same fate that befell Mario Henríquez, it is said that he managed to intimidate and subject to his will two of the largest gangs in the world, something many presidents have found impossible.

The journalist José Luis Sanz of the Salvadoran digital news outlet El Faro visited the prison in 2012, while Chepe Lora was still in power. Sanz described him as a reasonable man with a lot of scars. Chepe Lora was missing a finger and had stitches all over his body. Sanz titled his article, “The Just King of Honduras’ Prison from Hell.”

The Third Visit

It’s a weekday, which means the line to get into the jail is much shorter. The guard lowers his head slightly and takes a 50-lempira bill into his hand. This gives you access to the prison without a word, an ID or a signature on an entry list.
We pass through the entrance towards the Zone of Death, the hallway where the restaurants and shops are located. It is difficult to distinguish between visitors and prisoners, and there are no guards inside.

After walking a few meters, we enter through a thick metal door that separates the “private” quarters from the rest of the population. We sit down in the cell of one of these inmates, a former policeman who was interned around the same time as the lawyer. His room has a refrigerator, cable television, a private bathroom and a double bed. On the floor next to the bed, there is a canister of the protein powder Nitro Tech, a jar of fish oil, and a box of Corn Flakes.

There are between 10 and 15 inmates in this section. They are ex police or ex military, as well as some drug traffickers. There is even one member of a wealthy family who was convicted of homicide. The former policeman was captured with hundreds of thousands of dollars on him, but he says the money was loaned to him so he could open a car lot, and insists that he is innocent.

His judicial process is ongoing. More than half of the 17,000 prisoners in Honduras are in the same situation; that is, they are waiting for their trial to end, and a verdict to be announced. At least that way they can plan out their lives.
In the meantime, the former policeman becomes part of the system. The older inhabitants of the “privates” tell us that lineage doesn’t matter. The most important thing is money. You have to pay the prison administrator, in this case Hugo Hernández, however much he asks for.

“And how does Hugo Hernández know how much to charge?” we ask one of the older inmates.

“He does the math,” one of them tells us. “If you have a lot of money, he can charge up to $20,000. If it’s someone who is almost broke, like me, he charges $5,000. But that’s if there is space. If not, they sell you nothing more than a piece of floor, and you have to build and furnish your place. They give you one day, just one, to put in whatever shit you want. Your television, your air conditioner, your kitchen, your bed and anything else you want. After that, if you want to put in something else, it costs more money.”

Not all the money goes to Hugo Hernández. The coordinator also takes a slice, keeping the prison bourgeoisie happy as well. He is also the one who chooses “the most honored and honest” inmates, whom he sends to work in the “private” sector. Each of these elites have under their charge one or several inmates who are essentially their stewards.

“They sent me to buy food in the dining hall, to buy liquor, or beer if he wants to drink,” one of the steward-inmates explained. “In addition, I cleaned his room and made sure nobody robbed anything from him. My boss was a good guy. He gave me some of his food, and sometimes we played FIFA on his PlayStation. But he always beat me.”

Each inmate also pays the coordinator a monthly fee of 500 lempiras for the “administration.” They say that this fee also goes toward the mysterious “non-governmental expenses” line in the budget. These practices have become so institutionalized that they give each person a receipt. (See example below)
Wanting to get the official story, we came back to the prison on a different day. After one hour of waiting in the main office, watching how visitors and large sacks of merchandise entered and exited unchecked, they told us that the director, Colonel Pedro Donoban, was waiting for us. It was a brief meeting. He waived and gesticulated with his enormous arms. He even slapped his desk a few times, and then told us to leave the facility, which we did, accompanied by two soldiers.

We also managed to meet with Hugo Hernández, the administrator, that same day in the Gran Hotel Sula, the largest and most prestigious in San Pedro Sula. He appeared nervous. During our conversation, he was sweating and compulsively eating a large desert. We started the interview diplomatically.

Don Hugo, we understand that there is a certain division among common prisoners and those who pay to have a private space within the facility. Several of these individuals have said that they paid up to $10,000 to have this space.

“That’s a lie,” he answered. “What they pay is a monthly fee of 500 lempiras ($20) to support the prison. I give them a receipt and everything. But nothing else, I don’t charge anything.”

Don Hugo, how does the administration justify the existence of a special place where the inmates can build their own rooms? Testimonies from several people point to unofficial charges that give them access to these privileges.

“Aaaah, it’s not like that. That is a lie...from what I understand, that doesn’t happen.”

What do you mean?

“My understanding is that [that] doesn’t happen.”

Is it possible that the inmates are building their own rooms without you, the administrator, realizing it?

“No, it’s that, look... I... don’t... I don’t know.”

How do you determine who is deserving of a private room and who isn’t?

“Ah... no.. I mean, it [depends on] what there is. If there is [a private room], we give it to them.”

So you just have to ask for it?
“Yes... and if there’s [a room], they give it to them. What happens is that sometimes there are people who have a room, and they rent it out. Because they need to...That’s what they say, since I don’t know very well the rules inside. It’s dangerous to be in there. Inside the gate, those are different rules.”

**The Reign of Disorder**

When the lawyer and his cellmate entered the facility in 2012, Chepe Lora was the coordinator. They found out that the riot that had occurred that December was an attack on Cell 25, against those who were not following the rules and were attempting to reintroduce killings-for-hire of the type that were common during the days when the pesetas were in charge. Like the majority of the inmates, they were thankful that Chepe Lora was the coordinator for several years.

The lawyer spent just one year in the prison when a judge absolved him of the drug trafficking and money laundering charges. He is now a defense lawyer for many of the same San Pedro Sula inmates, but he doesn’t want to remember anything about his stay there.

“I erased all of that from my life,” he told us. “I don’t want to keep any of the memories that I have.”

For his part, the former policeman is still on the inside with the “private” inmates waiting for his trial to be resolved, for better or for worse. He is known to be prudent, a man who maintains calm in the middle of chaos. The other inmates call him “commander.”

*The question is if a power vacuum can be resolved by using brick and mortar.*

As with Don Brevé before him, Chepe Lora took the prison’s order and security with him when he left the facility. Following several battles for power, the prison is now under the control of a man known as “Chicha,” the name of a particularly strong brew of local hooch. But everything has fallen apart. There have been massacres, riots, thefts and quarrels between prisoners. The administrator, Hugo Hernández, was also sucked into the power struggles, killed in November in a drive-by shooting. The new king, it appears, doesn’t have the same charisma as his predecessor.

The current administration of President Juan Orlando Hernández recognized the futility of maintaining the prison, and in September 2016, said that the San Pedro Sula and Santa Bárbara facilities would be replaced with maximum-security prisons. They have already transferred the first inmates to the new facilities. Among those transferred, hands tied and in uniform for the first time in their lives, were Flash and el Susurro, the Barrio 18 inmates who received us in their prison quarters.
The question is if a power vacuum can be resolved by using brick and mortar. The prison system does not belong to the Honduran state. It belongs to those who prosper on the inside thanks to the lack of government control and those who understand that the disorder inside the jail is their best friend. The chaos legitimizes the system. It almost legalizes it. Without this disorder, a coordinator is no longer a king.

This was a lesson that Chepe Lora learned too late. He was shot down in early July 2014, only a few weeks after he had been freed. Some say that it was his immediate successor who ordered the hit, while others claim it was the MS13 because he had refused to green light the murder of an inmate that sold drugs to the Barrio 18.

What is certain is that his death had to do with this law of the jungle that emanates, silent and potent, from the corridors and cells of the San Pedro Sula jail -- where chaos reigns.

*Reporting and writing by Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson and Steven Dudley. The original version of this story was written in Spanish. It was translated by Steven Dudley and edited by David Gagne. Top photo by Rodrigo Abd, Associated Press.
Colombia’s prisons are a reflection of the multiple conflicts that have plagued the country for the last half-century. Paramilitaries, guerrillas and drug trafficking groups have vied for control of the jails where they can continue to manage their operations on the outside. Instead of corralling these forces, prison authorities have joined them, while multiple government efforts to reform the system have failed.
The first explosions rang out shortly after the day’s visitors had left Bogota’s La Modelo prison on July 2, 2001. They were the opening shots of a battle that would rage inside for around 20 hours as Marxist guerrillas fought off an assault by right-wing paramilitaries, while the authorities watched, powerless to intervene.

The attack began when paramilitaries blew open the doors to the wings housing guerrillas with explosives and around 150 inmates poured in, assault rifles and machine guns blazing, and grenade launchers firing. Word of the assault had already reached the patio’s 400 guerrilla inmates, who had retrieved their weapons from stash holes in walls, floors, and bathrooms, and had positioned themselves behind barricades.

By the time 500 police and guards retook the prison the following morning, ten lay dead, another 15 were wounded and the guerrilla wing of the prison was in flames. La Modelo was left as one more smoking ruin consumed by Colombia’s civil conflict.

Fifteen years on, and a new investigation into the dark secrets of La Modelo (pictured below) has revealed this was no isolated event -- Colombia’s war had entered the prison system.

Prosecutors are investigating the 2001 battle and two more massacres along with the disappearance of over a hundred people inside the prison as well as cases of arms trafficking, drug trafficking, and extortion. It was all part of an orchestrated campaign, says Carlos Villamil, director of the Transitional Justice unit of the Attorney General’s Office, which is handling the case.

“People committing crimes inside the prisons is nothing new. What was new is that this was a paramilitary policy to position the organization internally to take over the prison system,” he said.

According to Villamil, the orders came from the very top. The notorious Castaño brothers, Carlos and Vicente, who led the paramilitary coalition the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC), had charged two AUC commanders imprisoned in the maximum security wing with taking and holding La Modelo.
The paramilitaries’ ambitions were not limited to breaking the control of the guerrillas, says Villamil. They also controlled the prison drug trade, ran extortion networks, and even performed a key role in the AUC’s external business.

“The prison functioned as a drug trafficking ‘collection office,’” he said. “If people didn’t meet their obligations in the drug trafficking business, [the imprisoned paramilitaries] would be responsible for collecting the debt.”

In a heavily pixelated video provided by the Attorney General’s Office, a demobilized paramilitary who was part of the operation describes the grim logistics of this business.

“They would capture people in the street who had an order to kill out on them, then they would bring them to the prison and disappear them,” says the witness.

“They would cut their throats, or drown them, then chop them up,” he adds. “Then they would disappear them in containers of waste food.”

La Modelo was the frontline in the paramilitary campaign to drive back the guerrillas and take over the prisons, but it was not the only battlefield. Other prisons such as La Picota in Bogota and facilities in the cities of Barranquilla, Popayán and Bucaramanga also saw prison battles and dirty war tactics as the AUC tried to seize control.

The advances of the paramilitaries in the prison system mirrored the advances of the AUC across Colombia. Just as they did inside the jails, the AUC had built a dark alliance with drug traffickers and factions of the state and were driving the guerrillas out of their territorial strongholds with massacres, disappearances and assassinations.

The prisons were suffering from the same malady as the conflict zones: an absence of state control -- in the prisons a result of overcrowding and under resourcing -- had created a vacuum that was filled by corruption, armed groups, and organized crime.

This synchronization between the outside world and the prisons around the turn of the century was neither coincidence nor anomaly. Colombia’s prison system has long been a mirror to the country’s underworld and its civil conflict. Although the prisons have their own internal ecosystems of control and profit, who wields that power and how they wield it remains inextricably linked to events in the world outside.

Despite numerous attempts to reform the prisons, this dynamic largely continues to this day, and with both the war and the underworld currently on the cusp of seismic changes due to a peace deal with Colombia’s largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC), the aftershocks are once again set to reverberate around the prison system.
Prison Power: From El Patrón to El Cacique

One of the earliest, and to this day the most lurid reflection of Colombia’s underworld in its penitentiary system was an episode that would leave a permanent scar on Colombian thinking on prisons: Pablo Escobar and his personal prison, La Catedral, or The Cathedral.

By 1991, Pablo Escobar had spent over a decade as Colombia’s king of cocaine, flaunting his wealth and power, and taunting an impotent state. However, after becoming bogged down in a war against the state in an attempt to prevent extradition of drug lords to the United States, Escobar brokered a deal: he would surrender, but he would not be extradited. Instead, he would be held in a prison designed and built to his specifications.

La Catedral (pictured) was a monument to the unchecked ego and power of Escobar and to a failing state that could not even incarcerate its most notorious criminal. Dubbed the “Maximum Comfort Prison,” La Catedral was not so much a prison as a holiday home, complete with game rooms, a gym, a waterfall, and a soccer field. Escobar personally selected the prison guards, and they ensured the prison perimeter was porous, with everything from drugs to celebrity party guests passing through freely.

Escobar’s luxury confinement lasted 406 days. He escaped La Catedral after the authorities, pushed into action by murders at the prison, attempted to transfer him to a common facility. He would spend the rest of his life on the run before the police finally caught up with him and he was gunned down on a Medellin rooftop on December 2, 1993.

Nothing but the foundations and a single watchtower remains of La Catedral today. However, the episode’s mark on the Colombian prison system endures thanks to two government responses to the debacle: the return of extradition, and the construction of new maximum security wings to house crime bosses and commanders of armed groups.
Outside of the prison walls, the fall of Escobar and his associates, and later his main rivals in the Cali Cartel, marked the end of the cartel era. Drug trafficking was no longer the preserve of monolithic criminal organizations that controlled every step of the supply chain, but of networks of smaller traffickers, less powerful but more agile and not as vulnerable to decapitation.

In addition, the boundaries between the worlds of drug trafficking and Colombia’s civil conflict were eroding fast. The FARC was on the march, seizing up to a third of national territory in a rapid expansion largely funded by their growing involvement in the drug trade. Paramilitary counter-insurgent groups rose up to combat this advance, and they too formed a symbiotic relationship with the world of drug trafficking.

As a result, in the 1990s, the prisons filled up with guerrillas, paramilitaries and members of drug trafficking organizations, concentrating this volatile underworld dynamic within the prison walls.

Juan Camilo Hernández, a now demobilized fighter from the AUC, entered this world when he was captured and sent to Medellín’s Bellavista prison in 1997.

On his arrival, Hernández was escorted to an area reserved for paramilitaries, which was little more than a corridor in which each prisoner staked out their tiny plot of space and sought what privacy they could find with curtains or wooden boards.

“The fact that we were locked up did not mean we had lost the ideology of being a combatant, and the ideology of the AUC was to kill guerrillas”

Within the corridor, paramilitary discipline was maintained. Every morning they would line up and receive news of combat from the outside world, or be issued their jobs for the day. But discipline was not the only thing the paramilitaries sought to maintain.

“The fact that we were locked up did not mean we had lost the ideology of being a combatant, and the ideology of the AUC was to kill guerrillas,” he said.

Within the prison, the paramilitaries’ mortal enemies were never far away. Hernández’s wing, which in Colombian jail argot is known as a patio, also had a corridor populated by guerrillas of the FARC, their smaller rebel cousins in the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN) and urban rebel militias. However, the rivals for the most part observed an uneasy truce, as the patio did not belong to either side. It belonged to the Cacique, or Chieftain.
“When you enter the prison, the guards leave you at the door and from then on it is the Caciques that are in charge,” said Hernández. “The Cacique decides who can be in the patio and who can’t, who lives and who dies.”

In the Cacique system -- which persists in many prisons today -- each patio had one leader, a crown claimed by the prisoner who could best project their authority internally.

In some patios, the highest ranking guerrilla or paramilitary would assume the role. Once a patio was under the control of one armed group, the authorities and the Caciques would ensure any new arrivals from their enemies were housed elsewhere. However, other patios saw a blend of prisoners, in which case the Cacique would be the highest ranking member of the group with the most internal manpower and wealth, which in Bellavista often meant leaders of Medellin organized crime networks and gangs.

The hierarchies of the external underworld and the alliances between different networks ensured this rarely provoked conflict, Hernández explained.

“If a Cacique sees a person higher up enter, then they will negotiate with his people, [and] say, ‘You run the patio, but let’s talk,’” he said.

In the system, the Cacique oversees a sophisticated organization dedicated to two things: maintaining order and making money. At their disposal they have lieutenants, bodyguards, workers and even servants. If the prison authorities want to act in the patio, they must first negotiate with the Cacique.

### Colombia's Prison System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRISON POPULATION TOTAL</td>
<td>120,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including pre-trial detainees / remand prisoners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRISON POPULATION RATE</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per 100,000 of national population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-TRIAL DETAINES / REMAND PRISONERS</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMALE PRISONERS</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUVENILES / MINORS / YOUNG PRISONERS INCL. DEFINITION</td>
<td>0% - Responsibility of Centro Especializado para Adolescentes (CESPA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREIGN PRISONERS</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS / INSTITUTIONS</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICIAL CAPACITY OF PRISON SYSTEM</td>
<td>78,246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCCUPANCY LEVEL</td>
<td>153.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on official capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)
From their first moments inside, the prisoners are aware of where the power lies.

“When you enter for the first time, they give you the rules. They say to you, “Look, this is how things are here,”” said Hernández.

The rules governing behavior in Bellavista were extensive and the punishment for breaking them was severe, ranging from a beating to a death sentence. Crimes such as theft and unauthorized murder were prohibited and even social norms such as not staring at other inmates’ female visitors were strictly enforced. The Caciques also took responsibility for prison rules such as attending the morning headcount and ensuring prisoners were confined to their cells at night.

The business of the Caciques, meanwhile, touched every aspect of prison life. Arriving prisoners had to pay for the right to a space to sleep, with options ranging from a tiny patch of floor to luxury cells. Those that could not pay would have to find space where they could, such as in a passageway or bathroom. Any prisoner with a business, such as selling water, washing clothes, or running food stalls had to pay for the right to operate. Contraband, especially drugs and alcohol was the exclusive business of the Caciques. Even soccer tournaments in the patio were pay-to-play.

“With the Caciques, those that end up in prison sell their drugs, and they leave richer than when they entered,” said Hernández.

While the patios of Colombia’s prisons began to resemble the country’s war zones, those that directed the fighting often remained far from the front lines, living in relative peace and comfort inside the prison system.

The new maximum security wings, which were built in the wake of La Catedral, were initially installed in four prisons. But instead of isolating the country’s most dangerous criminals, they became luxury wings for the wealthy and the powerful.

Among the first inmates of these wings were notorious cartel leaders and commanders of armed groups. According to an El Tiempo report from 2001, these prisoners enjoyed “bathrooms with luxurious wall coverings, wall-to-wall closets, ceilings decorated with plaster figures, Jacuzzis, saunas, gyms, and kitchens with private cooks.”

Not only did they enjoy a lifestyle of relative comfort, they were also free to run their operations both in and outside of the prisons with cellular phones and through the free flow of visitors.

Cali Cartel leaders like Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, for example, were convicted in the United States in 2006 of trafficking cocaine while imprisoned in
maximum security wings; the principal architect of the violence in La Modelo, Miguel Arroyave, alias “El Arcángel,” (pictured) gave orders from the comfort of the prison’s maximum security wing.

In 2001, the prison authorities, the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario – INPEC) declared this luxury regime to be over. After consulting with United States experts, they announced a new program for High Security Wings (Pabellones de Alta Seguridad – PAS) in which security would be airtight and the prison rules would be rigorously enforced.

José Crisanto Gómez entered those same maximum security wings seven years later, and saw little sign that INPEC’s words had been turned into actions.

In 2008, Gómez was transferred to a maximum security wing after he was threatened by a FARC inmate over his case. He had been accused of kidnapping after the FARC left the sick baby of one of their most high profile hostages in his care.

First in La Picota and later La Modelo, Gómez, a poor peasant farmer from an isolated rural area, lived alongside commanders of both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries, leading drug traffickers and corrupt politicians and military leaders until his release in 2012.

The world of the maximum security wings Gómez found was far removed from the savagery of the Cacique run patios.

“It is no secret that prisons are very stratified,” said Gómez. “People of high security risk or with good names are never going to be taken to the patios.”

Each prisoner had their own private room and bathroom and access to a kitchen to prepare their own meals. They were largely left to their own devices inside the wing and any outside animosities were laid aside.

“There was no Cacique that had everyone imposing his rules. Everyone there got along peacefully,” said Gómez. “Things were very organized. There was this coexistence between the prisoners.”

The inmates made large payments to the guards to allow them to live how they pleased, Gómez said. This also involved bringing in contraband, including the top of the line
cellular phones they used to communicate with their underlings in the patios and their organizations outside.

Gómez, who was destitute at the time, also earned money in the wing, making enough to help his struggling family outside.

“I earned their trust and affection, and they trusted me to prepare their food and clean their bedrooms. I was like a domestic help,” he said.

However, there are some prisoners whose power was more ephemeral, the ones Gómez referred to as “the extraditables.” Extradition was reintroduced in Colombia in 1997, after years of wrangling in the wake of Escobar’s death. The speed and quantity of extradition proceedings has increased progressively since then and many underworld bosses now expect to spend a matter of months in the Colombian prison system before departing to the United States.

“They extradited a lot of people from La Picota,” said Gómez, “There were rounds of them. Some would go, and then more would arrive.”

Extradition altered the power dynamic in the prisons, especially as it related to the drug traffickers. From the moment they arrived, the clock was ticking for the extraditables. This sapped them of important social capital, helping open the door for other prison leaders to take command.

**The Maximum Security Model**

As the loss of control of Colombia’s prisons to Caciques and powerful maximum security inmates mirrored the Colombian state’s slippery grip on much of the country, so did the solution the government employed.

In 1999, the Colombian president announced a new deal for a multi-pronged US aid package. The program, which would come to be known as Plan Colombia, would see $10 billion of largely military aid transferred to Colombia over the following 16 years.

Plan Colombia included funding for the prison system, and in 2000, Colombia’s Ministry of Justice, the US Embassy and the US Federal Bureau of Prisons launched “The Program for the Improvement of the Colombian Prison System (pdf).”

According to the policy document, the aim was “to consolidate strategies aimed at controlling illicit actions committed from the interior of the prisons by persons that belong to groups on the margin of the law and that are related to the [narcotics] traffic and crimes against humanity.”
The program included funding and logistical support for the construction of a series of new prisons and maximum security wings in existing prisons based on US facilities, as well as training for prison staff.

The push for the “New Penitentiary Culture” the program was supposed to usher in continued after direct US involvement ended through new prisons and wings built as part of Colombia’s National Order Prison Establishments (Establecimientos de Reclusión del Orden Nacional – ERON) program, which was based on similar designs and philosophy.

The new facilities followed the security first logic of the US prison system and introduced a raft of new security features and measures. The crown jewel of the new system was Cómbita in Boyacá (pictured), which was built to house the country’s most dangerous criminals and included three rings of perimeter security, four rings of internal security and technology such as motion sensors, high resolution security cameras, x-ray scanners, and electronic locks.

However, the US-style harsh security regimes have proven highly controversial with human rights groups, who claim they have led to prisoner abuse and represent the abandonment of ideals of preparing prisoners to return to society.

“It is undeniable that there has been a certain reduction in violence, but at what cost?” said Alexandra González from prisoners’ rights group the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (Fundación Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos – FCSPP). “The prisons have lost the aim of re-socialization and have become prisons that punish inmates through security measures.”

The first new facility built with US designs and staffed by US trained guards has become one of Colombia’s most notorious prisons. Human rights groups that have entered the facility in the northeastern city of Valledupar, colloquially known as La Tramacúa, have condemned the prison for its hellish conditions, rampant abuse of prisoners and denial of even the most basic prisoners’ rights.
By 2014, La Tramacúa was the subject to a ruling by the Constitutional Court ordering the closure of the prison within 12 months if it did not “overcome the massive violation of human rights” going on within its walls. However, campaigners say the prison has yet to comply with the ruling, and the prison remains open.

The impact has also been patchy as it has left Colombia’s system as a hodgepodge of different security regimes, some of which function well, many of which do not, says architect Oliverio Caldas, who helped design two of the ERON facilities. When Caldas visited one of the facilities he worked on years later, he discovered these stark contrasts are sometimes even evident within the same facility.

The old part of the prison continued to function with the prisoners self-governing, without uniforms and handling money and an impressive quantity of other things,” he said. “In the new part, they were in uniforms and did not handle money. It was like they were two completely different regimes.”

In addition, any security success the program has had has been undermined by two curses of the Colombian prison system that it has proven incapable of overcoming: overcrowding and corruption.

Despite the new prisons, overcrowding has only got worse since the start of the program. According to Colombia’s Ombudsman’s Office (Defensoría del Pueblo), in 2003, the standard prison system was at 130 percent of its capacity, with 58,977 prisoners in a system built to hold 45,308. By 2014, this had risen to 153 percent, with 117,018 prisoners in a system built for 76,553.

While such overcrowding exists, some level of prisoner control is all but inevitable no matter what the security measures, argues the FCSPP’s González.

“In some way [the authorities] have promoted this logic of prisoners’ self-organization in the sense that without it, the penitentiary system would have been flooded decades ago because it is impossible for five guards to control 1,000 inmates,” she said.

While overcrowding made many of the new facilities ungovernable, widespread corruption ensured that in wings with no such problems, the security aims of the prison plan still often fell well short.

Even the supposed fortress of Cómbita has not been immune. A recent surprise raid by the police and INPEC in the maximum security sector busted an extortion ring operating from within the prison and seized cellular phones, tablets, acrylic keys for the doors, weapons, marijuana, and cocaine.
As Jose Crisanto Gómez witnessed, the maximum security wings that were a central part of the new prison plans became the biggest hubs of corruption as the wealthy inmates made for lucrative business opportunities for the guards.

“The corruption inside prisons through INPEC itself is incredible. It’s huge. The extent of it has never come out publicly,” he said.

**Evolving Underworld, Evolving Prisons**

After the peaks of violence seen at the turn of the century, there were some improvements in Colombia’s prisons, especially as it related to inmate security. By 2003, the spectacular battles that had raged in Colombia’s prisons were increasingly rare. Prosecutor Carlos Villamil attributes this to government intervention.

“A lot of the inmates were transferred to different prisons and after that things got better,” he said.

However, guerrilla prisoners claimed they were transferred more than the paramilitaries and accused the prison authorities of openly conspiring with the paramilitaries against them, a claim later seconded by demobilized paramilitary commanders.

“Those responsible for three massacres that have claimed over 50 lives in patios 4 and 5 of La Modelo are allowed to stay in the prison,” reads a letter sent by a guerrilla prisoner to the INPEC director general in May 2000. “While in the case of the FARC and the ELN, they are trying to send them to other prisons in order to eliminate their physical presence.”

For Alexandra González, the military strength of the paramilitaries and the breaking up of concentrations of guerrillas meant the violence dissipated, not because the state had reclaimed the prisons, but because the paramilitaries had essentially won the war.

“The FARC became a much smaller group that still generated resistance, but it was no longer an armed resistance,” González said. “It was a more a logic of survival than trying to confront the group that had seized power.”
With the FARC a weakened force, in 2002 a new external process began that would also alter the dynamic for the paramilitaries and ultimately usher in a new era for both the prisons and the underworld: the AUC negotiated their demobilization (pictured).

Under the terms of the agreement struck between the AUC and the government, paramilitary leaders were to serve five to eight-year prison sentences, with the top commanders to be secluded in a special detention center. Then President Álvaro Uribe promised it would be no easy ride for the paramilitaries “in contrast with the country’s experiences with La Catedral.” However, his words proved shallow.

Even after the leaders were transferred to normal prisons when the government claimed it had caught wind of escape plans, it rapidly became clear that not only were AUC leaders living privileged lives inside the prisons, they were also continuing to direct the criminal activities of networks of paramilitaries that had rearmed or never truly demobilized following the accord.

Within the prisons, AUC leaders maintained armed guards, offices, communications equipment and in some cases an entire support network in the surrounding area outside. They operated with impunity thanks to what was labelled their “parallel payroll” for prison officials and even more troublingly thanks to alleged top level political support. Recordings obtained by Colombian media showed how even the directors of the prisons that held the AUC warlords despaired over their helplessness in confronting the paramilitaries.

“It is getting worse every day. They change the orders every day,” said the director of Itagüí prison in a phone conversation with a colleague in 2007. “If I say no to something, then straight away I will get a call from the [INPEC] director general, the commissioner [for peace], a minister; or if not them, then the president.”

However, in May 2008, the government took a sudden and unexpected decision that would prove a watershed moment in the evolution of Colombian organized crime and the prisons: it extradited 14 of the AUC’s top leaders to the United States, accusing them of breaking the terms of their agreement with the government and continuing to operate from prison.

The rearmed paramilitary networks were suddenly cut adrift from their leadership and to some extent their paramilitary roots. Former mid-level AUC commanders stepped into the vacuum, triggering the evolution of the newest mutation in the Colombian underworld -- paramilitary-criminal hybrids known as the BACRIM, a play on the Spanish for “criminal bands.”
The criminal reigns of many of the leaders of the BACRIM have been short and numerous important figures from their ranks have passed through the prison system. As with their predecessors, many have enjoyed the comforts of maximum security wings, from where they have continued to direct violence on the outside and have even brokered criminal pacts with imprisoned rivals, according to media investigations.

However, the ever quicker extradition process means their stays in Colombian prisons are transitory, and they are often sent to the United States after a matter of months, limiting their ability to influence life inside and out.

“They charge taxes. They have every type of business with the guards, such as telephones, drugs”

In many of the prison patios, the rule of the Cacique remains in place, and prisoners report it remains largely unchanged.

“The Cacique’s organization doesn’t allow the prisoners’ struggles for rights. They charge taxes. They have every type of business with the guards, such as telephones, drugs, etc. They pay the guards weekly bribes out of the taxes they charge prisoners, and if anyone is not in agreement with this, they beat them indiscriminately,” reads a 2015 letter from guerrilla prisoners in La Picota to a prisoners’ rights group.

If anything, the Caciques’ operations have become even more sophisticated. Overcrowding has made them landlords, and assigning living space has evolved into finely tuned internal criminal estate agency. Meanwhile extortion networks have expanded to include everything from visiting rights to access to medical supplies.

The rules governing the selection of each patio’s Cacique remain largely the same, but the new external dynamic has altered the pool from which they are drawn.

The BACRIM are much less centralized organizations, with local factions operating semi-autonomously and loyal only to the national networks that pay the best. They also maintain fluid alliances with a broad range of criminal structures including street gangs and high-level drug trafficking networks. This fragmentation and regionalization means Caciques often emerge from local criminal structures that may be associated with BACRIM but are not necessarily members themselves.

The BACRIM era has also seen new attempts to reform the prisons, beginning in 2012 with an attempted overhaul of prison administration.
Since 1992, Colombia’s prisons have been overseen by INPEC, which was created as an independent administrative body answering to the Ministry of Justice. However, almost since its inception INPEC has existed in a state of near constant crisis and has had 50 directors in less than 25 years, largely thanks to a series of scandals around corruption and incompetence.

In 2011, the latest INPEC crisis sparked calls to dissolve the organization and start anew. Instead, the government created another body to ease the burden and in 2012 launched the Penitentiary and Prison Services Unit (Unidad de Servicios Penitenciarios y Carcelarios – USPEC) which was placed in charge of infrastructure, administration, and logistics. However, the new body has been riven with problems of its own and in a span of two years, it had had six directors.

The year after the creation of USPEC, the government declared another state of emergency in the prison system, and the search began for new solutions to the crisis. Oliverio Caldas was once again called upon to design new facilities, but this time the focus, in line with the latest international thinking, had shifted from security to developing more humane systems focused on rehabilitation and re-socialization.

The program will see the construction of nine new medium security prisons designed not only to include ample facilities for productive activities such as work and study programs, and for treatment programs such as for substance abuse, but also to be less environmentally aggressive. The change in approach is out of concern for human rights and the result of new, more long term, thinking on security, says Caldas.

“Many prisoners are just people that have made mistakes and if there is no intervention inside the prisons then these people can easily fall prey to any type of [criminal] organization,” he said.

This not only represents a risk inside the prisons but also when inmates leave, filled with resentment at their treatment and corrupted by their time in close proximity to hardened criminals.

“The security approach is different,” he said. “The security focus is not about stopping prisoners escaping or punishing them, but about helping make sure they do not later become a social problem.”

According to Caldas, the key to the success of the new prisons will be proper classification and division of prisoners. The system must be able to identify the estimated 70 percent of inmates that have excellent chances of being rehabilitated -- who will be the target for the new prisons -- the 20 percent that will be more problematic, and the 10 percent of
hardened criminals that should be submitted to maximum security regimes to prevent them corrupting or exploiting the others.

However, Caldas warns, the new facilities can achieve little if deeper structural issues are not resolved.

“With overcrowding and corruption, there is nothing that can be done,” he said.

As Caldas and his colleagues began work on the new prisons, the government also introduced reforms to the penitentiary code with an eye on tackling one of these problems: overcrowding. The law (pdf) allowed for the release of thousands of prisoners held on remand and commuted sentences for prisoners with certain profiles. However, as the period for prisoners to claim these releases comes to an end, overcrowding has only got worse during the process, and the percentage of the prison population that is on remand has actually increased to over a third.

**Prisons and Post-Conflict**

While construction of new facilities continues, once again, events in the world outside look set to leave a more immediate mark.
In late 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC reached a final peace agreement, bringing to a close a war that has raged for over half a century. The guerrillas have now begun to demobilize in a process that will alter the balance of the Colombian underworld, and the repercussions will undoubtedly be felt in the prisons.

Unlike the AUC demobilization, the peace process is not likely to fill the prisons with guerrilla leaders or fighters. As part of the transitional justice deal signed between the FARC and the government there will be a general amnesty for crimes committed as part of the conflict except in the cases of crimes against humanity. Even these, however, will be punished under a special regime that involves “privation of liberty” but not prison sentences, at least for those who fully cooperate and disclose their crimes.

Instead, the biggest change will be the number of inmates leaving the prison and the spaces they leave behind. Over 100 guerrillas have already received pardons, although exactly how many will follow remains unclear. In December 2016, the government said it would consider the cases of 4,500 guerrillas -- a figure that falls well below the 12,000 “political prisoners” claimed by the FARC in the past.

However, even when these prisoners are processed and released, it is unlikely to fundamentally change the prison dynamic on a national level, says the FSCPP’s González.

“Political prisoners only represent about 3 percent of the prison population, and while they have control over some patios, it is not a generalized logic of control inside the prisons,” she said. “So when they leave, it will affect those patios, but I don’t think there will be vacuum on a national level.”

Instead, the release will likely be one of the final acts of an era the system has already largely transitioned, and another step towards removing political violence as a factor in the internal prison dynamic.

However, other changes in the external underworld and security policies currently underway could have more impact. Currently, there is only one BACRIM remaining that has a true national reach -- the Urabeños -- and there are growing indications the group is positioning itself to fill the criminal vacuum set to be left by the FARC. The Colombian government has made tackling the Urabeños a security priority and launched an assault against the group, including starting Colombia’s biggest manhunt since that of Pablo Escobar in an attempt to capture leader Dairo Antonio Úsuga, alias “Otoniel,” the group’s leader.

While there is little to suggest the Urabeños currently dominate prisons on a national scale, the security crackdown is seeing an ever growing number of Urabeños prisoners
enter the system, and it could eventually reach a tipping point, warns González.

“There has always been a prisoner with his people that generates control,” said González. “They have been guerrillas or paramilitaries, and soon those doing it will be the criminals of Otoniel.”

The dangers became evident in 2014, when the director of Valledupar’s judicial prison was arrested and accused of working with Urabeños inmates to plan murders, threats, and extortion of prison staff and of allowing the Urabeños to operate freely inside the prison and coordinate actions with their associates on the outside. She was released after term limits to hold her expired when the case got caught in a judicial backlog, and she has since been reinstated at the same prison even as prosecutors continue to pursue the case against her.

As the new Colombian underworld takes shape both inside and outside the prisons, the system itself stumbles from crisis to crisis, the latest coming in May 2015, when over half of the country’s prisons were declared to be in a state of emergency over healthcare.

“As long as we have overcrowding, and we don’t have adequate operational administration, then the prisons will be an incredible breeding ground for all forms of violence as well as for actors that generate all types of criminal industries,” said Oliverio Caldas.

As Colombia’s conflict decreases in intensity and its armed groups and criminal networks become ever more fractured, it is these simple but deep-rooted structural issues that remain the biggest obstacles to breaking the ties between organized crime and the prison system.
5. El Salvador Prisons and the Battle for the MS13’s Soul

Written by Steven Dudley and Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson
Thursday, 16 February 2017

El Salvador’s prison system is the headquarters of the country’s largest gangs. It is also where one of these gangs, the MS13, is fighting amongst itself for control of the organization.
Salvadoran authorities believe the plan to kill Walter Antonio Carrillo Alfaro, alias “El Chory,” was hatched inside the Zacatecoluca jail sometime in late 2015. Chory -- a mid-level leader of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) -- was defying the group’s leaders. Therefore, they determined, he had to die.

The death sentence for Chory was part of a battle for the gang’s top positions. Chory had organized meetings to judge the MS13’s maximum commanders, the so-called “historical leadership” or “ranfla histórica,” who Chory and some of his fellow mid-level commanders believed were using the gang for their own financial gain, especially during an ill-fated truce the ranfla had negotiated with rival gangs and the government in the years prior.

The ranfla histórica had been disrespectful to the “barrio” -- the gang’s nebulous term for its core ethos -- Chory had said publicly from his jail cell in the municipality of Izalco on the other side of the country. It appeared that members of the ranfla had taken large sums of money from the country’s political parties -- Chory believed it was as much as $25 million -- as part of a quid pro quo to help the parties during the elections.

The ranfla histórica in Zacatecoluca was livid. Chory (pictured) and his cohorts looked ready to expose their hypocrisy during the truce. But they also threatened to tear apart the country’s largest, most formidable street gang. The MS13 had become a national security threat in El Salvador and part of the US government’s short-list of the region’s most dangerous and ambitious criminal groups. Chory endangered the ranfla’s hold on the group, and their dreams of taking the gang to the next criminal level.

The leaders knew the prison and the legal system well enough to put their plan to assassinate Chory into motion. And in November 2015, they figured out when one gang member from Zacatecoluca and one from Izalco, where Chory was housed, would appear in the courts in San Salvador for routine hearings at the same time. There, in the court holding area, the prisoner from Zacatecoluca passed a written message to the Izalco prisoner with the order to kill Chory.

Assassinating Chory would not be easy or cost-free. Chory was a well-respected and revered leader from a powerful faction of the MS13 known as the Fulton Locos Salvatruchas. He was 40 years old, and had
earned his gang stripes in Los Angeles before being deported back to El Salvador. In the year prior, he had gotten most of his Fulton faction and more than a dozen other factions to join his mini-rebellion, and in Izalco he had four bodyguards with him at all times.

Chory was also preparing for battle. He had not just organized several meetings to talk about how to upend the ranfla histórica. He had displaced the MS13 leaders in Izalco, and he and several others had organized an attack on one of the ranfla’s car dealerships, burning several vehicles and causing thousands of dollars of damage. At some point, he started calling himself an “MS13 Revolutionary.”

**Divide and Be Conquered**

It was fitting that the power struggle within the MS13 would play out in the Salvadoran prisons. For the last decade, the penitentiary system in El Salvador has been the headquarters of the MS13 and the Barrio 18, the largest gangs in the country. The gangs’ takeover of the prisons resulted from a combination of bad public policy, and the gangs’ increasing organizational skill and guile.

The MS13 and its main rival, the Barrio 18, began arriving in the prisons of El Salvador around the time that the brutal civil war between the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional - FMLN) and the government was coming to an end. In the 1980s, political prisoners, most of them affiliated with the guerrilla group, had run the prisons with mixed results. In a preview of things to come with the MS13, two factions of the FMLN eventually turned on each other.

In 1991, as part of the peace process with the government that would transform the FMLN from a guerrilla movement into a powerful political party, most of the political prisoners were released. That same year, a young MS13 member wrote in a diary from his jail in San Francisco Gotera, the first references to the modern-day street gangs in the prisons. In the diary, the gang member spoke of how the National Guard tortured the prisoners, and of murders of inmates by other inmates.

With the political prisoners gone, traditional prison gangs took over the jails, the most emblematic of which was led by a man named Bruno Ventura, alias “Brother.” Brother did not come from the mafia or a street gang. He was imprisoned for armed assault on an appliance store. But with a dose of charisma and a selective use of violence, Brother and his armed gang, La Raza, took control of the country’s largest jail, La Mariona, and then much of the prison system.
“Bruno could be tough,” a former MS13 prison inmate told InSight Crime. “You couldn't fuck around or go around advertising your gang. They would club you for that, but if you weren't a problem, then Bruno didn't give you any problems. He wanted the prisoners to live in peace.”

At the time, the MS13 and the Barrio 18 were not as strong as they are now. They were small, disorganized cells -- or cliques, as they call them -- and kidnappers and large-scale thieves dominated them inside the prisons. They were looked at like a leper colony; dirty, violent and drug addicts who had no self-control.

During Brother’s reign, inmates knew the limits, and he implemented a very effective system of control and internal punishment. They prohibited drug sales, killings, robberies, as well as assaulting other prisoners and visitors. There were also special rules for gangs: they were not allowed to show their tattoos or paint graffiti. Punishments included appointments with the “psychologist,” the euphemism used by the inmates for a wooden stick with which Bruno and La Raza would discipline anyone who had broken the rules.

But over time, Bruno’s power eroded, in part because the gang population increased. At the end of the war in El Salvador, the US government let Temporary Protected Status, which had allowed Salvadorans to remain in the US during the fighting, expire. The US also changed the laws regarding the deportation of ex-convicts. The two changes opened the door to mass deportations. Soon El Salvador was filled with former prisoners from the United States -- over 81,000 ex-convicts were deported to El Salvador between 1998 and 2014, according to US government statistics -- among them gang members from the MS13 and the Barrio 18, which had grown in the US during that time period.

El Salvador -- and its neighbors Honduras and Guatemala -- absorbed the deportees with great difficulty. In poor neighborhoods, MS13 and Barrio 18 cliques soon emerged. By the late 1990s, they had also become a significant portion of the prison population. The gangs were bitter enemies and clashed constantly inside the jails and juvenile detention centers. Violence among gang affiliated adolescents in youth facilities, most notably at San Francisco Gotera and Ciudad Barrios in 1999, led to the authorities assigning inmates to segregated prisons towards the end of 2000. The Centro de Internamiento de Menores de Tonacatepeque became a facility exclusively for the MS13 and El Espino for the Barrio 18. With this separation, the idea of segregation as an acceptable solution began to take hold and an air of inevitability set in.

The fighting even bothered Brother, who kept the MS13 and Barrio 18 mostly in check by remANDING them to the “psychologist” every time there was a battle, as well
as when more than four of them gathered in any one place for a “meeting.” However, when a judge transferred Brother from La Mariona to the San Francisco Gotera jail in December 2002, chaos ensued.

Like a grenade without a pin, the jail exploded. Shortly after Bruno’s departure, a contingent of prisoners attacked the anti-narcotics police who were doing a sweep, and using homemade knives, they killed them, as well as their drug-sniffing dogs. It was a sign that La Mariona had changed forever. Fighting amongst prisoners also became more intense and frequent.

Eventually, in an act of desperation, the general population asked the director of La Mariona to remove one of the two gangs, and the director put it to a vote. The MS13 lost; the director transferred MS13 members to Ciudad Barrios, a site that had previously housed only minors, thus beginning a de-facto policy of separating the gangs inside the adult penitentiary system.

With the transfer, the prison was divided into two between the Barrio 18 area and that of La Raza, Brother’s former armed wing. Soon, a battle for control erupted. The Barrio 18 were abused daily. They were fed the worst food and placed in the worst part of the jail. The ire of the “Cholos,” as they are referred to throughout the region,
rose with every transgression. La Raza meanwhile, under their new leader José “Viejo” Posada Reyes, were biding time, waiting for their moment to attack the gang.

But the gang also had a plan. The Barrio 18 prisoners had obtained weapons from visitors, among them a grenade. And on August 18, 2004, that grenade exploded, announcing the gang’s frontal assault. On that day, they were hunters more than prisoners, and Posada’s men were not ready. Even though they had far more members, La Raza suffered huge casualties: 24 of the 34 killed were from Posada’s mini-army; dozens more were injured. If Posada himself hadn’t had a pistol, he would have been killed as well.

A few days later, authorities transferred 1,000 prisoners: 400 were classified as Barrio 18 members, and another 600 were classified as “sympathizers.” Some of them were transferred to Apanteos prison, where the fighting would resume three years later when the gang members found several survivors of La Raza. That fighting left 21 more dead. The other group was sent to the Cojutepeque jail.

That is how the gangs -- at the end of their makeshift knives -- won their segregation from the “civilian” prisoners.

There was no vocal opposition to the move to segregate, and the growing strength of the gangs in the prison system and the potential for explosive violence it represented gave authorities all the justification they needed. Quezaltepeque and Ciudad Barrios prisons became exclusively for MS13 prisoners, while Chalatenango and Cojutepeque were designated as Barrio 18 prisons. Sonsonate prison was reserved for “Pesetas,” or retired gang members. In 2006, there was a switch of designation between Chalatenango and Quezaltepeque, while the booming prison population saw sectors of the San Francisco Gotera and Apanteos turned over to the MS13, and the following year the newly constructed Izalco handed to Barrio 18.

Government policy on the outside accelerated gang control on the inside even further. With the adoption of “Mano Dura” in 2004 -- which was eventually annulled by the Constitutional Court -- and later, “Super Mano Dura,” which remained in force, the police had the power to stop, search, and detain suspected gang members for simple things such as a tattoo or an alleged association. The prison population swelled. In 2000, the prisons of El Salvador had 7,754 prisoners; in October 2016, it had 35,879.

The separation of the gangs into their own prisons reduced violence, but it also granted them de-facto control of the penitentiary system. The leaders were safe from their enemies in prison, giving them the time and the space to restore command and control, and establish the rules and regulations within the gang. As Benjamin Lessing wrote in a recent Brookings report (pdf), the move gave the gangs a headquarters from which to recruit, and to expand their influence.
“It puts weakly or un-affiliated first-time offenders under gang custody and tutelage,” Lessing said in reference to the policy of separating the gangs. “Perhaps more importantly, it brings a broad range of street-level actors -- anyone who might be sent to a given gang’s wing if incarcerated -- under that gang’s ‘coercive jurisdiction.’”

They could also increase money-making opportunities, as a way to offset higher legal fees and to fulfill the need to support their families on the outside. The changes resulted in more systematic extortion of bus and taxi cooperatives, propane gas and other distribution services, local shops, as well as a number of other objectives. The impact was immediate and profound. The National Public Security Academy (ANSP) estimated that extortion increased 1,402 percent between 2003 and 2009. This money created a food chain that included gang leaders, their cliques, and their families, as well as police, guards and administrators in the prison system. In other words, because of the segregation in the penitentiaries, the gangs were able to systematize this criminal activity.

With mass incarceration, the prisons became central to gang members’ lives and their ethos. By 2015, of all the prisoners in the Salvadoran penitentiaries, a third were gang members, according to a study by the University of Central America “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA) and the Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) (pdf). From now on, gangs, and not political prisoners or petty criminals, would control the prison system in El Salvador.
Organizing from the Inside-out

The prisons serve the gang members in various ways. For the leaders of the gang, the prisons are a place from which they can continue their criminal operations, be relatively safe from attack, and expand their own financial portfolio via new contacts and opportunities. For the rank and file, going to jail is a rite of passage and a means of moving up the gang ladder. The shared suffering that comes from being inside the prisons provides cohesion and solidarity. It also provides a point of departure for contact with the outside, community and religious groups, who rightfully see and regularly denounce the deplorable conditions inside the jails.

InSight Crime researchers could not enter the jails during this research project due to government restrictions, but Martínez spent several months in 2011 in Ciudad Barrios where the MS13 holds sway as part of a study he published with Luis Enrique Amaya in the Francisco Gavidia University’s yearly investigative series (pdf); InSight Crime visited the Cojutepeque prison in 2012, where the Barrio 18 was in control. (See video) It has since been closed. The prisons have many shared problems. In both the Cojutepeque and the Ciudad Barrios prisons, the prisoners sleep in small rooms where they string hammocks and other makeshift bedding one above the other. Cells made for 10 have as many as 50 prisoners. And there are problems with ventilation and light. One former prisoner said several other inmates went crazy due to the tight confines and the lack of light.

Health care services are nearly non-existent, and gang members are often sent to public hospitals in the last stages of dehydration, anemia or delirium. They receive food almost exclusively from outside of the prison. They spend most of their time in dirt-covered recreational areas where they play sports or just mingle. There is a small arts and craft room in each facility but neither jail had job training programs or regular contact with psychologists.
Our observations coincide with what experts have written about the conditions in the jails. After visiting prisons in 2010, the Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) chronicled (pdf), among other things, how inadequate waste disposal led to disease; how the inmates were forced to use their hands to eat; how lighting and ventilation were inadequate. A 2011 State Department report (pdf) and a recent report by El Salvador’s Human Rights Ombudsman echoed these findings.

Gang leaders have turned these deplorable conditions into an advantage, using them to exert control over the other gang members. Survival requires discipline and a clear chain of command. Inside the prisons, for example, the MS13 has set up a strict hierarchy, according to a recent Attorney General’s Office indictment of the group. Each prison has a ranfla, a council made up of 15 gang leaders referred to as “ranfleros.” Below the “ranfleros” are lieutenants, which the gangs call “corredores.” Each of the “corredores”
is part of a program, which control a number of cells, or cliques (“clicas”). In total, the MS13 has 48 programs and 249 cliques, according to the Attorney General’s Office indictment. The cliques also have corredores, who are responsible for their individual clique. Below them are members (“homeboys”), and below them, lookouts (“chequos”).

The gangs have also clear rules. Any transgression can be met with severe punishment, which the MS13 refers to as “descuento,” “corte” or “pateada.” According to Martínez and Amaya, the three most typical transgressions that lead to punishment are: 1) “disrespecting” the gang, an amorphous terminology that allows for various interpretations regarding the gang’s central purpose and guidelines; 2) disrespecting a wife, a girlfriend or a visitor; 3) stealing from a fellow gang member or thieving from the gang for one’s personal use or gratification.

The strict hierarchy and discipline system allow for the ranfla to control the flow of information and resources coming from the outside, which gives them incredible power over their membership on the inside. These resources, Martínez and Amaya say, are both legal and illegal. Among the legal resources are things as simple as water, food, clothes, money and visitation rights. While water takes on outsized importance because of the altitude at Ciudad Barrios, the visits are important in every prison. In addition to being emotional lifelines for these prisoners, visits are key ways to move contraband and money. They are also status symbols, and they can help with communication to the outside world.

Among the illegal goods are drugs, liquor, weapons, and telephones, Martínez and Amaya write. Of these, cellular phones might be the most important. They are both currency to be traded and sold, and critical tools that facilitate criminal activities inside and outside of the prison system.

The phones are also a key way of communicating amongst the gang, which helps keep some sense of cohesion in the group. The gangs have regular conference calls between the ranfleros and corredores in the prisons and with the leaders on the outside. These meetings help shore up divisions, provide internal discipline and determine strategies; they also help divvy up resources, and are the last word on whether many homicides go forward or not. In short, telephones are the glue that holds this sometimes shaky hierarchy together. Nearly every major, and many minor, decisions have to go through the leadership structures in the jail. This wouldn’t be possible without telephones.

As in other parts of the region, the gang’s control over the whole organization from inside the penitentiary system stems from the inevitability of jail for this population. There is, quite simply, no escape from the prison system. Sooner or later, everyone in the gang or people they know will pass through the various parts of the system, be it the juvenile detention centers, the temporary holding facilities or the jails themselves.
And if they have committed any transgressions, these gang members will face the consequences most clearly in jail.

Fleeing the gang does little to alleviate these possible consequences. The gangs have regional reach and an increasingly sophisticated intelligence-gathering system that encourages members to police their own. Gang members can also seek retribution via a family member or other close connections on the inside or the outside. Whether they are free or in jail, gang members are trapped into following the ranflas’ orders from the prisons.

Within the MS13, there is also a hierarchy of prisons. Martínez and Amaya say that in 2011, the highest level ranfleros were in the Zacatecoluca prison. “Zacatraz,” as it is popularly known, is the maximum security prison where there is much more control over the contact between inmates, and there is near constant supervision at recess times and during visits. San Francisco Gotera held a considerable number of high level members as well, while Ciudad Barrios, the so-called “Home of the A,” corralled members from every clique in the country.

After the government made Zacatraz the main holding facility for the ranfleros, the game changed. With less access to telephones and visitors, and increased vigilance by the authorities, ranflas held in Zacatraz began to lose control of their middle managers and their younger and more active recruits on the streets. In addition, they did not like the rules, especially around visits with their family and conjugal time with their wives and lovers. With time, the money also slowed to a trickle, and the ranflas’ power over the rest of the organization began to slip.

The conditions in Zacatraz, as well as the fact that the major gang leaders also had shared confines, led to talks between the ranflas of the MS13 and the Barrio 18, who became desperate to get out of the maximum security jail. Soon they brought in parts of civil society, churches and eventually representatives of the government. Their discourse was largely political and social in nature. The talks centered on lowering the violence between the gangs, which had reached epidemic proportions, improving conditions in the prisons, and providing the homeboys with more educational and economic opportunities. In this way, the truce was born.

The Truce

Peace processes, truces and other negotiations with criminal organizations frequently begin in jails. There is a practical reason for this: criminal leaders are often in jail. The nature of confinement also lends itself to dialogue and reconciliation. The impetus from the criminal side can be noble and practical. Criminal leaders get older and from jail often gain a perspective they did not have on the street. They also have families,
and, whether they are in jail or not, they very often want to have regular contact with that family. But negotiations can also be nefarious, a form of subterfuge, a bald-faced effort to gain more power or to expand their criminal activities.

The gang truce in El Salvador combined both the nefarious and the noble. It was more violence interruption than actual truce -- an intricate scheme involving the security ministry, police, prison officials, mediators, parts of the Catholic Church and the Organization of American States (OAS), which was designed to break the chains of retribution that have played out for years between the gangs. Some of this tit-for-tat is related to controlling territory where the MS13 and the Barrio 18 factions can sell drugs and extort money. But much of it is simply inertia, a product of decades of fighting, which has become an integral part of the gangs’ ethos since at least the early 1990s.

## El Salvador's Prison System

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRISON POPULATION TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including pre-trial detainees / remand prisoners</td>
<td>36,834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRISON POPULATION RATE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per 100,000 of national population</td>
<td>568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE-TRIAL DETAINERS / REMAND PRISONERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FEMALE PRISONERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JUVENILES / MINORS / YOUNG PRISONERS INCL.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Responsibility of Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (INSA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FOREIGN PRISONERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS / INSTITUTIONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official capacity</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OCCUPANCY LEVEL</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on official capacity</td>
<td>10,035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>310.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)

For a time, the truce did interrupt violence. Homicide rates dropped precipitously when the government moved fourteen gang leaders from Zacatecoluca prison to other prisons in March 2012, marking the beginning of the truce. There, the gang leaders could reaffirm their control over mid-level leaders who had asserted themselves while the ranfla histórica was in Zacatraz. The order went out to the street as well: homicides were to stop, or at least be greatly curtailed, and the ranfla was back in power. Negotiating the murder rate would become the gangs’ macabre leverage in their negotiations with government representatives, which were led by an ex-guerrilla named Raúl Mijango and the Salvadoran Catholic Bishop Fabio Colindres.
What else the gang leaders got in return is still something of a mystery, and it has become a point of contention amongst the gangs and a criminal case for the current government. In May, the Attorney General’s Office arrested several officials that facilitated talks, prison transfers and other logistical elements of the negotiations, arguing they illegally moved prisoners, opened their doors for illegal meetings and illegally paid money to the negotiators and benefits to the gang leaders. The most prominent official to be ensnared in the case is current Defense Minister David Munguia Payes, who, as the then-Minister of Security and Justice, was the architect of the truce along with Mijango. The Attorney General’s Office says that as much as $2 million of government funds were used unlawfully, part of it going to gang leaders for fast food, cable television, video games and exotic dancers for the gangs.

Just how much the ranfla directly benefited from the truce is not known. Stories vary from flat screen television sets for their families to up to $30,000 per month for their participation. No evidence has emerged to establish the latter figure, but several people that worked with the truce said that money was deposited into the top gang leaders’ accounts. This money, according to these sources, did not trickle down to the mid-level leaders, much less to the rank and file, who at some point began wondering what they were getting from the high-level talks and prison transfers of their leaders.

The ranfla histórica also used the truce to reorganize its forces. Inside the jail system, there was a clear hierarchy that flowed from wherever the ranfla negotiating the truce was housed downward to the other jails. Outside, the MS13 created four major blocs from east to west, and grouped the programs and cliques under those umbrellas as means of facilitating communication to the ranfla histórica. The reorganization seemed to obey a business or war mentality. Indeed, the blocs made the MS13 look more like their guerrilla forbearers in FMLN than a group of street thugs.

With the truce, the ranfla histórica reasserted itself. The MS13 leaders from Zacatecoluca were moved to Ciudad Barrios and to make room for them, other leaders were transferred to San Francisco Gotera prison. It was a clear message to the mid-level leaders that ranfla was in charge again. Three flat screens arrived in Ciudad Barrios, so the MS13 members still housed there could watch everything from cartoons to the Spanish Soccer League. The ranfla in Ciudad Barrios also flaunted the power that came with the truce by regularly ordering food from Pollo Campero from their handlers and having it delivered to the prison. Parties followed, sometimes with prostitutes who pole-danced for the gangs.

The contrast within the penal system was stark. San Francisco Gotera became like an attic where the gang sent its dissidents and hoped that distance and isolation would drown out their rising voices. Ciudad Barrios, meanwhile, was like the presidential...
palace, where important meetings and diplomatic gatherings happened. In Ciudad Barrios, gang members received Miguel Insulza, the Secretary General of the OAS, and they had mass administered by Luigi Pezzuto, the Vatican’s representative in El Salvador. In San Francisco Gotera, the MS13 had to settle for a few new television sets and PlayStations, which would later be confiscated and destroyed by the police. On one side of the country, a gang celebrated its triumph, and on the other side, a gang waited for its moment.

**Disrespecting the Barrio**

The rumblings began not long after the initial movement of prisoners between Zacatecoluca, Ciudad Barrios and San Francisco Gotera. Meetings followed. Walter Antonio Carrillo Alfaro, the Fulton leader who would go on to be a key insurgent within the MS13, was in San Francisco Gotera and participated in those meetings.

Known as “El Chory,” a bastardized version of “Shorty,” Carrillo Alfaro was an old school gangbanger. He entered the MS13 as a 14-year old kid in the 1990s in Los Angeles, and had dedicated his life to the gang.

More recently, Chory was a leader in the Fulton Locos Salvatrucha, a “high class” clique in the MS13. In contrast to many other cells that came from downtown Los Angeles, the Fulton was formed in the San Fernando Valley, and they have a different past than the other cliques. Whereas the others were made up of poor kids, the Fulton was part of the original “Low Riders,” who later became small time drug traffickers and collected quotas from other petty dealers. They never went through the “Stoner” or Satan-worshipping period that the other, less evolved cliques went through when the gang first got its start in the 1980s.

The discussions that Chory took part in revolved around whether the ranfla histórica was disrespecting the “barrio.” Barrio, roughly translated, means neighborhood. However, for the gang, it is so much more. It is its core ethos, the means around which it organizes itself and its members. Barrio is about giving yourself to the gang. There is nothing that is above the barrio, because the barrio is the gang. When the ranfla started benefiting directly from the truce without including the rest of the gang, they were disrespecting the barrio. And when the ranfla started to use the gang for their own, personal business interests, they were disrespecting the barrio.

The ranfla histórica dealt with this discontent harshly, reportedly reprimanding more than a few mid-level MS13 members. Ironically, their argument was the same: these mid-level leaders were disrespecting the barrio. Over time, however, the ranfla’s ability to keep their mid-level leaders in line waned. And when the truce unraveled at the end of 2013, it became impossible. The result has been nothing short of catastrophic for a
country still struggling with a legacy of internal conflict. Violence surged to make El Salvador the most homicidal nation on the planet that is not at war.

This is, in part, because that violence began to happen on multiple levels and in multiple settings, including in the country’s jails. There was fighting between and amongst the gangs. And there was fighting between the security forces and the gangs. El Salvador began to look like a country at war again. Between January 2015 and August 2016, 90 members of the police were killed; and 24 members of the armed forces, El Faro reported. During the same period, the police killed 694 suspected gang members, El Faro said, and have a virtual green light to shoot to kill at the slightest provocation.

The violence took its toll on the MS13. The frontline soldiers and mid-level commanders in the MS13 absorbed the brunt of rivals’ and police efforts to unseat them from their territory, and the ranfla’s “disrespect” of the barrio became that much more real for those on the street. Those rank and file are mostly Salvadorans who have never stepped foot in the United States and have to live with the $15 per day they get for food. Their disdain for the leadership stems, in part, from their belief that they are treated like second-class citizens, who have to cross a much higher threshold than their forebears in order to gain status in the gang, including a blood-filled initiation period.

By and large, the ranfla histórica of the MS13 in El Salvador come from the United States. And many of them simply stepped into their role as leaders due in large part to their deportee status. The most prominent among them is Borromeo Enrique Henríquez Solórzano, alias “El Diablito de Hollywood.” (pictured) Hollywood is a reference to his program, but Diablito is the presumed leader of the entire MS13 in El Salvador. The ranfla histórica is often referred to as “Diablito,” the “Little Devil,” and his 12 apostles.

El Diablito’s rivalries both inside and outside of the gang, as well as his ambitious criminal and political agenda, have stretched the gang to its breaking point, Salvadoran and US authorities say. He has been connected to attempts to increase the MS13’s footprint in the international drug market, as well as some of the ranfla’s car dealerships, the proceeds from which go to the individual gang leaders. El Diablito also negotiated deals with political parties in the country to receive cash for votes, investigators say. That money purportedly was shared amongst the leaders, not the rank and file, another affront to the barrio.

The bloody war in the streets, the one-sided split of the spoils from the truce and the haphazard application of the rules of the barrio moved leaders like Chory to hold more meetings. The rebellion was taking hold.
'If you abide in my word, you are my true disciples'

Chory would not have normally been in Izalco. For years, the prison was reserved for the Barrio 18. When the Barrio 18 split in 2009, Izalco was divided between the Revolutionaries and the Sureños factions of the gang. Chory, along with dozens of his fellow MS13 members were transferred there in 2015, in part of an effort to reverse the course of action taken in the early 2000s to divide the gangs into their own penitentiaries. It was an implicit recognition that the strategy of separating the gangs had failed.

Chory’s transfer allowed him to spread his rebellion, which had gained momentum following the end of the truce and the tremendous spike in violence. The ranfla histórica was also transferred back to Zacatraz in January 2015, where its efforts to flex its muscles showed just how fragile its hold on the MS13 was. When several prominent ranfla histórica members like El Diablito tried to organize a hunger strike to force another truce on the government, their cohorts at Zacatraz refused to participate, according to law enforcement sources. Some leaders who had remained in Zacatraz even stopped talking to those who had negotiated the truce. Threats were lobbed, and authorities isolated several ranfla leaders, including El Diablito.

The insurrection was hitting its stride. When other ranfleros who had supported the truce were transferred to Izalco in early 2015, Chory called a meeting, according to a Salvadoran intelligence report obtained by InSight Crime, during which he ousted the leaders for not following the rebels’ mantra: “the gang does not sell itself or surrender.”

Chory and other leaders also mobilized several cliques and programs, among them the Sancocos, one of the most storied programs in El Salvador, to join the rebellion. Messages known as “wilas” (or “kites”) were passed, and the group began openly calling for “judgement” of the ranfla in Zacatecoluca for disrespecting the barrio. Some of them were also calling for a united front with the other rival gangs, a re-imagining of the gang frontiers that stemmed from the various gangs’ shared origins in Los Angeles and their allegiance to a powerful prison gang in the United States called the Mexican Mafia.

In July 2015, Chory and his cohorts declared themselves a new ranfla. According to an Attorney General’s Office indictment against several members of the gang, he also started referring to himself as an “MS Revolutionary.” During the same month, authorities intercepted a wila coming from Izalco to the gang members on the street. The message was from some mid-level leaders of the gang like Chory and called for more meetings, this time amongst those on the streets, where they called for an overthrow of the historic leadership. At its apex, as many as 13 other programs eventually pledged
their support to the Fulton and Chory, according to an Attorney General's Office investigation of the gang.

By then, the ranfla histórica in Zacatecoluca knew what was happening with Chory and other mid-level MS13 leaders and sought to deal with it. The leadership is still very powerful. It has the loyalty of the majority of the cliques and, even from jail, is feared by the majority of the gang members. They sent their own messages to the mid-level leaders. Some of them were conciliatory. Others were menacing. One message went from Diablito directly to Chory, allegedly via an evangelical pastor who thought he was facilitating a possible reopening of talks for a truce. The message was for Chory to consult the biblical passage John 8:31: “If you abide in my word, you are my true disciples.”

The Diablito had spoken, and with his word came that of the historic leadership, but Chory did not heed the warning. The insurrection continued, and in November, the fatal wila, calling for the attack on Chory in Izalco, was passed between prisoners at the courthouse and landed in Izalco. In addition to Chory, the wila called for the disciplining of some 70 other members of the Fulton program. Salvadoran intelligence also said it called for more direct attacks on security forces and their relatives as a means to force another truce.

But Chory and cohorts would not be cowed. In December, he and several others conspired to have their soldiers on the street burn several cars at a dealership controlled by El Diablito’s top lieutenant, Marvin Adilly Quintanilla Ramos, alias “Piwa.” Piwa is a young gang member from a small clique called the Criminal Gangster in Ilopango, in the department of San Salvador. In a relatively short time period, he had risen to become El Diablito’s top lieutenant in the street.

Like El Diablito, Piwa is a cunning operator who, in addition to helping the ranfla, was building his own political and economic empire from his government post in the city hall of Ilopango. Indeed, Piwa is at the center of the political storm about what ranfleros had received in return for their assistance during presidential elections and thereafter. Piwa, the Attorney General’s Office indictment of him and numerous others says, was getting $400 per month from the Ilopango mayor’s office.

Piwa’s duplicity is illustrative of why many distrust the gangs: at the same time he was receiving this salary from the government, he was also allegedly collecting money from each of the cliques to buy weapons from Mexico; and he was facilitating the training
of two members of each clique to be part of the Special Shock Unit (“Grupo Elites de Choque”) of the gang, according to the Attorney General’s Office indictment.

Piwa, the indictment says, was also the one who gave the “green light” to kill Chory “for coming up with the idea of purging the historic leadership of the MS and for saying the leaders had taken money for the truce for themselves,” the indictment says.

That plan had to rely on speed and overwhelming force. And so at 1 pm on January 6, 2016, armed with machetes and makeshift knives, the ambushing party took Chory and his bodyguards by surprise. Prison authorities said it took but a few minutes to corral and then hack Chory and two of his bodyguards to death. One bodyguard survived, but with serious injuries.

**The End of the MS Revolutionaries?**

After Chory and his two bodyguards were killed, prison officials put Izalco and several other jails on lockdown and isolated as many as 80 imprisoned members of the Fulton from their counterparts. But another message had been sent: the ranfla histórica still had the power and the reach to kill highly respected leaders like Chory. Several other members of the Fulton later paid Piwa over $40,000 for the cars they had destroyed on his lot, the Attorney General’s Office indictment says.

But the retributions had already begun. On January 25, Chory’s girlfriend was killed. On January 28, Marvín Osmín Roble, another Fulton, was killed in Ciudad Barrios prison.

Inside and outside of the prisons, several remaining members of the rebellion were also killed or disciplined, the Attorney General’s Office indictment says. Corredores who had supported the rebellion were demoted. El Diablito’s orders were clear: “Remove all those who were close to or had something to do with the possible attack,” he told one of his operators.

Recriminations and conspiring against the Fulton program have continued for months. But it’s not the clear the rebellion has completely ended. Several videos about the gangs’ talks with political leaders from the two major parties have since revived questions about the quid pro quo between the gang leaders and the politicians, and possible payments that were never shared with the gang’s mid-level leaders and rank and file members. The government is also pushing ahead with cases against MS13 leaders such as Piwa.
Meanwhile, there is still unrest in Fulton. “That is not over. Chory was a monster, but he was our monster,” a member of the Fulton told InSight Crime.

On January 22, just a little over a year after Chory’s assassination, three members of Fulton killed Juan Carlos Hernández, a leader of the Hollywood clique and a prisoner in Zacatecoluca, with some makeshift knives, a sign that the battles will most likely continue, and the front lines will remain the same: in El Salvador’s prisons.

*Steven Dudley is co-director of InSight Crime. Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson is a Salvador-based anthropologist. James Bargent also assisted in this investigation. Top photo by Manu Brabo, Associated Press.*
6. Venezuela Prisons: ‘Pranes’ and ‘Revolutionary’ Criminality

September 2017
Written by Venezuela Investigative Unit

AP image / Fernando Llano
In May 2011, a 26-year-old prison gang leader held 4,000 members of the Venezuelan security forces, backed by tanks and helicopters, at bay for weeks. Humiliated nationally and internationally, it pushed President Hugo Chávez into a different and disastrous approach to the prison system.

Home to more than 4,700 prisoners in 2011, Rodeo was one of Venezuela’s biggest jails. The disturbances in May that year began as a fight between rival gangs in the jail. There was a coup executed by the gang leaders or “pranes” of Rodeo II against a pran in the neighboring building of Rodeo I. A change of “carro,” or “car,” as the criminal governance structure in the prisons is called. But this was not some punch up with prison shanks and clubs. This was a battle with fully and semiautomatic weapons.

The prison authorities called for backup. Three thousand members of the Bolivarian National Guard, 400 paratroopers and a contingent of military police were deployed to the baking heat of Miranda state, just 40 kilometers east of Caracas. On June 17, the soldiers attacked. A battle ensued. Four prisoners were killed and several soldiers were wounded. The military managed to take control of Rodeo I, the installation closest to the main road. The prison building by this stage had come to resemble something out of downtown Aleppo.

Inside Rodeo I authorities found 20 semiautomatic pistols, seven assault rifles, five shotguns, eight grenades, 5,000 rounds, 45 kilograms of cocaine and 12 kilograms of marijuana.

Rodeo II, the block behind Rodeo I that was home to more than 1,200 prisoners, proved a far tougher target. Here the inmates were better organized under their pran, a man named Yorvis Valentín López Cortez, alias “Oriente,” aged just 26. The authorities were wary of an all-out assault. By then the media had descended and cameras covered far too many angles of the battleground.

On June 21, negotiations began with the prisoners in Rodeo II. Oriente spoke for the prisoners, while the government sent an evangelical pastor and former second hand car
salesman, José Argenis Sánchez, accompanied by Ronald Gregorio García Tesara, alias “Satan,” a member of “La Piedrita,” one the state-sponsored gangs that acted as political shock troops for the Chavista regime. It was assumed that this “good cop, bad cop” combo would bring the prisoners to their senses. Electricity and water had been cut off to the prison. The heat was unbearable. After two days of talks, all the authorities managed to extract from the prisoners were four swollen and rotting corpses. It was not clear exactly what the prisoners wanted, but there was no mistaking their tone.

“They are tricking us with evangelical leaders we do not know. We are not going to speak to people who do not inspire trust. This is a war and we are going to fight,” Oriente shouted.¹

It took the government 27 days to re-establish control of Rodeo. Official figures put the death toll at 23, with 70 wounded. The reality was likely far higher. The prison was only taken after Oriente escaped, somehow managing to slip through the ring of steel around the prison. The rumors were that the then interior and justice minister and now Vice President Tareck El Aissami, made a deal to let Oriente leave in exchange for an end to the standoff. There were allegations that the National Guard pulled backed on orders from on high.² Oriente was later recaptured, only to escape from another prison


in December 2016.³

**Power to the Prisoners**

Embarrassed by the chaos and media frenzy, Chávez announced a full investigation and overhaul of the prison system. Two prison officials, among them the governor of Rodeo II, were arrested, along with a National Guard captain responsible for prison security. It was discovered that the arsenal of weapons in the hands of inmates were smuggled through after paying “tolls” to officials. As with everything that entered the prison, a system of taxes had been levied: $2,300 for an assault rifle, $70 for a pistol and $45 for a grenade.⁴

Vice President Elías Jaua pledged to take action against the pran system.

“We are going to get to the bottom of this. The revolution will not be blackmailed by these mafias. We are going to recover the full presence of the government in the prisons of the country,” he insisted.⁵

Except the government actually did the complete opposite.

On July 26, 2011, the Ministry of Popular Power for the Penitentiary Service (Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Servicio Penitenciario) was established. The first minister was a politician, a sitting representative of the National Assembly. Iris Varela had little experience with prisons, but she had the key credential that the president demanded. She was a Chavista loyalist and firebrand grass roots politician known as “Comandante Fosforito,” or “Commander Phosphorous.”

The new ministry was billed as a continuation of the policy laid out in Chávez’s 1999 Constitution. Article 272 of the Constitution dealt specifically with prisons. It opens: “The state will guarantee a prison system that assures the rehabilitation of the inmates and respect for their human rights.”

Carlos Nieto, a lawyer who heads the NGO Prison Observatory “A Window to


Liberty” (Una Ventana a la Libertad),\(^6\) had helped draw up the relevant section of the Constitution.

“We could not believe it when we laid out what we wanted to put in the Constitution,” Nieto told InSight Crime over a coffee in Caracas. “The government just kept saying yes, include it. Of course, we had no idea then that none of it would ever be implemented.”

President Chávez reiterated this vision of prisons as rehabilitation centers when the new ministry was announced, saying, “Prisons must become a center for the formation of the new man, who leaves transformed, trained for life and for love.”\(^7\)

However, Varela faced a Herculean task. Prison infrastructure was crumbling. Overcrowding was at epidemic levels. Guards and administrators were poorly paid and vulnerable to criminal interests and intimidation. And criminality and corruption, as was illustrated in the Rodeo riot, were rampant.

There is no reliable data now on the prison population. The last trustworthy figures we could find date back to 2015, when there were 49,644 prisoners (46,883 men and

\(^6\) http://unaventanaalalibertad.org/

2,761 women) packed into 35 prisons built for 19,000 inmates; 63 percent of those incarcerated had yet to be sentenced.

Added to these numbers, there are estimated to be another 33,000 people being held in police cells built to hold 5,000. The conditions in the police cells are even worse than the prisons. The facilities were designed to be temporary holding cells, to keep prisoners overnight until they could appear before a judge. But they are so crowded that prisoners have to take turns to sleep on the floor. The police have no resources to feed them. Even worse, the guards charge the relatives of prisoners a fee to let food in.\(^8\) Hundreds more prisoners, especially those detained in political protests, are held in the emblematic building of the Helicoide, the headquarters of the feared secret police, the Bolivarian Service of National Intelligence (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional - SEBIN). Many wait, in prison or a police cell, for over two years until they are sentenced.\(^9\) Or found not guilty.

---


The Venezuela prison system is also one of the most violent in the world, with 6,472 murders registered between 1999 when Chávez took office and 2014. In the first half of 2015 the Venezuelan Prison Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones - OVP) counted 109 dead and 16,417 injured.

Varela was faced with an almost impossible task. She was instructed that there were to be no more prison riots, that homicides within the prison system needed to come down, and that no more bad news should be generated in the media. Faced with this multitude of challenges and limited resources, Varela adopted a new policy to fulfill her mission. She simply befriended the most important pranes and started making deals with them. What they wanted, and got, was power within prison walls. They achieved control of everything that happened inside. In return, nothing was to spill over the walls and into the media. It was a Pax Mafiosa that would have profound consequences.

---

### Venezuela's Prison System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRISON POPULATION TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>49,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including pre-trial detainees / remand prisoners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRISON POPULATION RATE</strong></td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per 100,000 of national population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE-TRIAL DETAINES / REMAND PRISONERS</strong></td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FEMALE PRISONERS</strong></td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JUVENILES / MINORS / YOUNG PRISONERS INCL.</strong></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td>Responsibility of Instituto Nacional del Menor (INAM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FOREIGN PRISONERS</strong></td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS / INSTITUTIONS</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OFFICIAL CAPACITY OF PRISON SYSTEM</strong></td>
<td>19,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OCCUPANCY LEVEL</strong></td>
<td>269.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on official capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)
Wilmito and the Rise of the Pranes

The word pran is believed to come from a Spanish acronym drawn from the words, “Preso Rematado Asesino Nato.” The literal translation would be something like “natural-born double killer prisoner.”

One of the pioneering pranes, who helped establish the criminal structures in the prisons was Wilmer José Brizuela, alias “Wilmito.” A local boxing champion with nine children from six different women, Wilmito was a habitual criminal who was first convicted of kidnapping. He was, in many ways, more at home behind bars than on the outside. When Alfredo Meza, a journalist who best chronicled Wilmito’s life, visited him in the Vista Hermosa, prison in Ciudad Bolívar, in December 2013, Wilmito had an AR-15 assault rifle propped against the wall in his cell, alongside a 9 mm pistol.

It was in Vista Hermosa that Wilmito had started his life as a pran, running a section of the prison before deciding to systematically eliminate his rivals. Between 2005 and 2006, he took over one section at a time, eventually becoming the master of the jail. Over time, more structure formed. The lieutenants became known as “luceros.” If strong enough, a lucero could inherit the throne when the head pran left or was killed. The pranes also set up collection services, social committees, and security wings. Wilmito, for example, never moved through the prison without bodyguards, each of whom carried an assault rifle.

There was an attempt to dethrone Wilmito in Vista Hermosa in 2009. He was shot in the shoulder, but was able to collect his assault rifle from his room and kill four of the seven mutineers. By then his Vista Hermosa “carro,” or informal governing structure,
was generating more than $3 million in annual profits.\textsuperscript{14}

Wilmito’s rise in jail earned him national fame and popularized the notion of a pran. Even President Chávez mentioned him once in his weekly program “Aló Presidente,” poking fun at the then-governor of the state of Bolívar, Francisco Rangel Gómez: “This Wilmito has more authority than you.”

The power of the pranes was growing.

For Humberto Prado, the director of the Venezuelan Prisons Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones – OVP), a turning point came in 2008, when Tareck El Aissami became minister of interior and justice. El Aissami made changes to the visiting hours for the penitentiary system, which opened the prisons to more goods and services, and created a thriving economy behind bars.

“Tareck El Aissami was the one who recognized the figure of the pran. He gave the authorization for families to spend nights in the prisons,” Prado explained to InSight Crime. “Visiting days used to be just twice a week -- Wednesday for conjugal visits, Sunday for families. That changed. Before there was a visit with a bag of food and some clean clothes for the inmate. That changed to full suitcases, lines of visitors, women coming to stay with the family.”

For Carlos Nieto of the Window of Liberty NGO, the arrival of the families was just part of the problem. It was not just wives and children. Prostitutes and party goers, along with drugs and alcohol, began to flow more freely.

“And so they began to put together parties that started on Fridays and finished Monday,” he said. “Parties where there was alcohol, drugs, music, where all that was done was sex, partying, alcohol and drugs. So it’s a Molotov cocktail, from which nothing good could come.” \textsuperscript{15}

Visits were the key to the pranes power. They were the means by which pranes could exert their will and expand their criminal economy. At the root of the pran system was the extortion charged within the prison, much of it related to the visits. Every prisoner had to pay a fee called “la causa,” or “the cause,” to the pran every week. Failure to pay led to punishment beatings and even death. If a prisoner wanted a nice cell, he paid more causa; if he wanted a nice flat-screen TV, he had to pay even more.

\textsuperscript{15} InSight Crime interview with Carlos Nieto, Caracas, 6 July, 2017.
To this day, everything that goes into the prison has a tax and can cost up to 10 times its value on the outside. Therefore the more inmates a prison has, the more visitors, the richer and more powerful the pranes. All businesses in the prison, the restaurants, shops, barbers, also pay the pran. In the most populous prison of Tocorón in Aragua, with some 7,000 inmates, the causa is estimated to be worth more than $2 million a month. With millions of dollars the criminal structures grew in size, power and sophistication.

So Varela’s decision to hand the jails to the prisoners was just another strengthening of the criminal system. The pranes became political actors, an extension of the Chávez revolution. It was not unlike the bargain the Chavistas had struck with pro-government colectivos and criminal groups inside poor neighborhoods. Only in the case of the pranes, the government had no jurisdiction.

“The government decided to essentially do nothing, and deliver the jails to the prisoners.” Roberto Briceño León, Director of the Venezuela Observatory of Violence (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia – OVV) told InSight Crime. “The police and the National Guard now have to ask permission to enter.”

Wilmito appeared again in the news on February 17, 2017 when he suffered another assassination attempt, not in prison where he was supposed to be serving a 14-year sentence for murder, but on a beach on the island of Margarita. He was there vacationing with his family, carrying a “get out of jail free card” signed by Varela herself.

He had been wandering free since December 2016. Such was the scandal generated by the incident that he was not sent back to his “home” prison of Vista Hermosa, but rather to another infamous prison, that of Tocorón, in the state of Aragua. There he did not enjoy the same status or protection afforded him in Vista Hermosa. In the early hours of April 1, Wilmito was shot dead in his cell. He had just celebrated his 35 birthday.


(A letter from Venezuela prison director Iris Varela authorizing the temporary release of the pran "Wilmito")
Conejo and the Exportation of the Pran System

If visits were the key to a pran’s power, then holding a huge party was the ultimate manifestation of that power. In that regard, no one could compete with San Antonio, a prison on Margarita Island. Boasting four swimming pools, a disco and even a cock-fighting ring, this penitentiary was run by another of Varela’s favorite pranes, Teófilo Rodríguez, alias “El Conejo” (The Rabbit).

Conejo was so named for his buck teeth and passion for Playboy pornography. He adopted the Playboy bunny image as his own and the walls in the common areas of the prison had it painted everywhere. The one exception was the wall where a mural of Conejo and Chávez took pride of place.

Margarita Island, part of the archipelago of Nueva Sparta has long been a favorite holiday spot for Venezuelans. Blazing sunshine and perfect Caribbean beaches, it also became the best prison in which to have to do time. Conejo knew how to throw a party, but his bonhomie camouflaged a keen mind that built a criminal structure inside that prison that projected itself across the island.

The hedonism of the San Antonio prison was publicized across the world when the New York Times visited Conejo and was given the grand tour of the prison. But what was not covered was Conejo criminal activities outside the prison, which included drug trafficking on the island, a crucial stepping stone for cocaine making its way across the Caribbean.

While the criminal structures within the prison were called “carros,” or cars, the criminal structures linked to the pran system which operated outside of the prison walls became

known as “trenes,” or trains. Conejo ran his own train, called “Tren del Pacífico.”

Conejo was not the only pran working outside of prisons. Numerous other pranes ran criminal operations from their jail cells. Nieto, of Window to Liberty, said one of the most notable examples of the criminal structures inside and outside prisons is the “Tren de Aragua.” It is allegedly run from Tocorón prison in Aragua state. “Not only from there do they plan crimes, kidnappings, extortions, robberies, but also drugs are distributed and from there operate the megabandas,” Nieto said.

This criminal structure became one the most powerful in Venezuela while Tareck El Aissami was governor of Aragua, a post he held from 2012 until he took over the vice presidency this year. For Nieto, this is no coincidence. International law enforcement agents feel the same: El Aissami has fostered organized crime structures in every official post he has held.

Other pranes and luceros, who had served their time were leaving and replicating the prison structures outside jail walls. For Luis Cedeño, director of the NGO Paz Activa that studies organized crime in Venezuela, the pran system was instrumental in the establishment of what are known as the “megabandas.” These are criminal syndicates, sometimes hundreds strong, that control the local distribution of drugs, extortion and kidnapping in many parts of the country.

“Many prisoners who had been ‘pranes’ or ‘luceros’ took the criminal knowhow from the prisons and reproduced them outside, creating the megabandas,” said Cedeño in Caracas, clutching a copy of his report on the evolution of the megabandas phenomena.

19 For more information on “Trenes” see InSight Crime’s profile on the “Tren de Llanos” (Train of the Plain) at: http://www.insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/train-of-the-plain
20 InSight Crime interview with Carlos Nieto, Caracas 6 July, 2016.
In both cases, the relationship these criminals forged and maintained with officials of the government was critical to their success, despite government assertions to the contrary. Questioned about a 2011 photo showing her embracing Conejo, Varela scoffed at the implication and threatened the questioner.

“Please, why would you ask that? I am going to sue anyone who defames me in that manner,” she said. “I am a mother, I am the minister of prisons, I have been photographed with 100,000 prisoners in this country.”

Still, as it was with Wilmito, Conejo’s connections to the government could not protect him from every enemy. On January 24, 2016, while on parole, he was murdered outside a nightclub on Margarita Island, cut down in a hail of bullets along with several of his bodyguards. The murder remains unsolved, but talk of a debt owed to drug traffickers seems to be the favorite theory. His funeral was a lavish affair, inside and outside the prison of San Antonio. Inmates gathered on the roof, firing an impressive assortment of firearms to mourn the loss of their leader. Such was the scandal created that Varela closed down the prison soon after.

The Situation Today

High levels of violence. Rampant criminality. Corruption. Venezuela today looks much the same inside and outside of the prisons. The situation has gotten worse after the death of Chávez in 2013. Since Chávez’s handpicked successor President Nicolás Maduro has taken power, inflation is out of control, food has become scarce on supermarket shelves, and the government has established an even harder line on political dissidents.

Yet ironically it seems the pranes run a more efficient government than Maduro. Justice is swift, and while food is scarce on supermarket shelves, the pranes seem able to get all the food they need. Indeed, residents of Aragua state have been known to go the Tocorón prison when they cannot buy food anywhere else. The prison’s passageways look like Aladdin’s cave, with goods piled up against walls, vendors doing a brisk business with inmates and the general public alike.

---


The Pax Mafiosa that Varela established did manage to bring down homicides in the prisons. While there were incidents of prison riots, scandals and violence, she did manage to keep a lid on things in the jails. However, this system gave birth to a new generation of organized crime structures, and the pranes, the trains and megabandas now have reach across the country pushing up criminality and murder. All of this has helped turn Venezuela into one of the most dangerous nations on earth.

In June, the government’s longest serving minister, Iris Varela, resigned to run for a post in the National Constituent Assembly, Maduro’s latest, and to date, successful vehicle to sideline any opposition to his rule. Comandante Fosforito, to no one’s surprise, won a seat. Before she left she had a final word to say about pranes.

“I deny the existence of pranes,” she said. “I do not recognize the existence of such a figure.”

Just says before the elections in July she was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) for “undermining democracy.” She joined numerous other members of the Bolivarian Republic on the OFAC list, including Vice President El Aissami. This was her response, the same she gave to the rule of law, to respect for human rights and to the prisoners placed under her care:


## Prison structures and slang*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achicharrao</td>
<td>A prisoner who receives no visits, who matters to no-one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alta</td>
<td>The highest body in a prison, made up of “luceros” and the “pranes” of different parts of the jail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batanero</td>
<td>Someone who steals within the prison. The punishment is to be stabbed in the hand various times. These scars brand the prisoner as a thief wherever he goes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boca cosida</td>
<td><em>(sewn up mouth)</em> When a prisoner is about to be transferred or wants to protest against anything, he sews up his mouth, declares a hunger strike and refuses to cooperate. This person cannot be attacked by any other prisoner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleta</td>
<td><em>(hide)</em> A hiding place for weapons or money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carro</td>
<td>The government inside the prison, separate from the guards or director. Changes to the “carro” are seen as a coup and result in deaths or injuries. A pran can only be removed when he is killed by another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castigos</td>
<td><em>(punishments)</em> The idea is to produce suffering. Include opening old wounds to promote scarring; to shoot people in their feet and legs; to hang people until they almost pass out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causa</td>
<td><em>(cause)</em> The “causa” is what a prisoner pays to the “pran” and his “carro” to live in certain parts of the prison and enjoy certain privileges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincuenta</td>
<td><em>(50-50)</em> A shot to the stomach, which you have a 50-50 chance of surviving. Employed as a punishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cochinos</td>
<td><em>(pigs)</em> Some prisons have pens with huge pigs. These are used to dispose of human remains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garita</td>
<td>Sentry posts where inmates patrol armed. Anyone who falls asleep on such duty is usually killed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gandules</td>
<td>Inmates who are drug addicts and do not respect the rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luceros</td>
<td>The lieutenants of the pran who make up a “carro.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>A prison rule. To violate a “luz” results in immediate punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mancha</td>
<td>An infraction of a “luz” or rule within the prison. “Mancharla” is to disobey the rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Número</td>
<td>The daily roll-call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacificación</td>
<td>The negotiation between the authorities and a pran to ascertain what he wants in exchange for keeping the peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paria</td>
<td><em>(pariah)</em> An inmate who has no weapons and does not fight, that causes no problems. Once so designated by a pran, he cannot be messed with by other prisoners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pran</td>
<td>The leader of a prison. In some of the bigger jails there is a principal pran and secondary pranes who answer to the first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tela de juicio</td>
<td>A prison trial, carried out in a circle, in front of the “carro” where sentence is passed for any infractions of prison law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varones</td>
<td>Evangelical preachers who have special status and can move with relative freedom throughout the prison helping out inmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visita</td>
<td><em>(The Visit)</em> This is the most sacred part of prison life. No-one can interfere with the Visit, harass the females or disrespect the visitors in any way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This is reproduced with permission from Runrunes. The original can be found at: http://runrun.es/relax/dda/147803/diccionario-de-la-pran-academia-espanola.html*
The InSight Crime Foundation

InSight Crime is a foundation dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime.

InSight Crime’s goal is to deepen understanding on organized crime in the Americas through on-the-ground investigation and analysis from a transnational and policy perspective.

We fulfill this mission by:

• providing high quality and timely analysis of news events linked to organized crime in the region;

• investigating and writing reports on organized crime and its multiple manifestations, including its impact on human rights, governance, drug policy and other social, economic and political issues;

• giving workshops to journalists, academics and non-governmental organizations on how to cover this important issue and keep themselves, their sources and their material safe;

• supporting local investigators through these workshops and by publishing, translating and promoting their work to reach the widest possible audience;

• developing a region-wide network of investigators looking at organized crime;

• presenting in public and closed-door sessions to governments, non-governmental organizations, academics and stakeholders on best practices, strategies and pitfalls in implementing citizen security policy on the ground.

For more information, visit www.insightcrime.org
Or contact: info@insightcrime.org