Central American police perception of street gang characteristics

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This article examines the characteristics of Central American street gangs perceived as successful from the perspective of police officers working in high concentration gang areas. About 126 officers from seven Central American countries prioritised a list of characteristics adopted from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Sleipnir matrix. Results suggest some regional commonalities but also significant local variation in numerous characteristics. Gangs were perceived to share many success traits, including a propensity to use violence, foster strong group cohesion, and engage in intelligence gathering. Equally, however, gangs are a product of their local socioeconomic and political structures and significant variance was found between countries, specifically with regard to group cohesion, discipline and gang exploitation of corruption to further group aims. These (statistically significant) local differences have implications for the creation of national anti-gang policies and the research is the first to explore police officer perception of gang characteristics in this way.

Keywords: police; gangs; Central America; perception

It has been argued that the growth of street gangs in Central America increasingly pose a significant threat to the stability and security of the Americas (Nagle 2008) and specifically a 'clear and present danger to the governments in the Central American region' (Farah and Lum 2013, p. 5). In the 1980s and 1990s, a perfect storm across many Latin American countries of political instability and attempts by the emerging democracies to reform their police forces while recovering from decades of civil war, created a fertile environment for street gangs. The evolution of violence in the region has been characterised as a shift from the rural 'political' violence of the revolutionary 1980s to 'social' violence associated with emergent democracy movements (Rodgers 2009). Many of the *Maras* grew from youth dissent movements that emerged to protest the brutal policies of the dictatorships that ran many countries in the region in the 1970s and 1980s (Levenson 2013). Subsequent urban decay, social abandonment, unemployment, neoliberal economies (Zilberg 2011), and a lack of community and identity drove the gangs across much of Central America to turn inwards and they began to victimise their own communities in 'slum wars', where the poor prey on the poor in heavily urbanised and socioeconomically segregated areas (Rodgers 2009).

This rapid evolution of street gang behaviour and unchecked rise in crime across Latin America fueled a distrust of the police and calls for greater police accountability

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(Frühling 2007); however, the new post-conflict police forces of the 1990s were more focused on redressing the excesses of human rights violations and police corruption of the past (Neild 2003). As such they were – and remain – wholly unprepared for the rapid and pervasive growth of street gangs and organised crime syndicates. Lacking political and legal backing and unable to draw on community support, the police in Central America have, to date, been largely unable to quell the growth of gangs in poor urban communities nor develop sufficient knowledge or capacity to disrupt or dismantle their criminal infrastructures.

Central America has been a productive academic topic with regard to the narcotics trade, violence and conflict, post-colonialism, the legal system and post-conflict human rights.[1] The police themselves have been a recurring theme in the literature; however, with the exception of legal and human rights critiques of zero-tolerance mass arrest strategies, the topic of *policing* in Latin America and the law enforcement response to entrenched gang and violence problems has received little scholarly attention (Deas 2012). Ethnographers have documented numerous police tactics that have exacerbated and entrenched gang culture rather than disrupting it. As a result, the police now appear to be rarely consulted on anti-gang strategies and the tactics employed on the ground are more often determined by local political forces, the timing of democratic elections, and the focus of external support mechanisms, in particular the funding priorities of the US Government. Thus, while the US Congress has appropriated significant funds for anti-gang programmes since 2008 (Seelke 2013), the deployed approaches are often broad-brush in nature and rarely tailored for the specific circumstances of individual countries.

The mass arrest and incarceration policies of *La Mano Dura* ('iron fist') and subsequent *Super Mano Dura* in El Salvador, and *Cero Tolerancia* ('zero tolerance') in Honduras were partly inspired by the zero-tolerance policies of Police Commissioner Bill Bratton and Mayor Rudy Giuliani in New York City (Rodgers 2009, Zilberg 2011). These strategies stand as examples of 'policy transfer' (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, Jones and Newburn 2002), a style of wholesale policy transference that does not appear to question the efficacy of exporting to Latin America policing strategies that originate in functioning democracies with well-funded and relatively effective criminal justice systems. Rather than transfer tools and techniques for adapting knowledge from the wider policing community so as to integrate and infuse a hybrid policy with an understanding of the desperate socioeconomic conditions and recent political histories that created the gangs in the first place, anti-crime strategies in Central America are as likely to be complete solutions that originate from outside the region, and are initiated by organisations that are not the police.

By contrast to the often uniform approach of policing, street gangs are a response to, and continually adjust with, the local conditions in each country and even within regions of each country. In essence they are products of their local environment and have established themselves as both dominant criminal organisations and, increasingly, political forces (Economist 2012). Even within a dynamic environment, 'these groups have emerged and continue to thrive amidst societal conditions shaped by state policies, extranational political influence, and global economic restructuring' (Benson *et al.* 2011, p. 140). This is evident with not just the larger organised gangs such as *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Calle 18* (18th Street gang, also referred to as *Barrio18*, or *M-18)* but also the smaller neighbourhood and community groups – as can be found in Belize. In fact, the very notion of community in El Salvador has become 'unstable and contested' with a sense that the gangs have a role in defining the communal scope and subsuming the traditional role of family within the community (Zilberg 2011, p. 191). This level of

adaptation is often first identifiable at the local level, though local police are rarely consulted regarding their opinion and have not been the subject of academic inquiry. The perspectives of anti-gang police officers regarding the characteristics of the gangs in various countries, and how they remain successful, could therefore be of value in a couple of ways. First, police officers may have insight into specific characteristics that could provide the foundation for an intervention programme, or they may have intuition unavailable to policy-makers more distant from the subject of study. Second, an understanding of how they perceive gangs operate could provide awareness into police willingness to adopt certain strategies. For example, if police officers perceive gang cohesion as fundamental to their ongoing success, they might more enthusiastically implement a community-based strategy designed to reduce gang unity.

This article describes a survey of 126 selected and vetted police officers from known high gang concentration areas in seven countries (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama) and reports on the officers' perspective of the particular street gang characteristics that they believe explain the success of the gangs in their local jurisdiction. While the veracity of the officers' judgments cannot be determined, the surveys do provide a first step for scholars and policy-makers to appreciate the perspective of officers in gang areas, as a precursor to future policy endeavours or to estimate the correlations between police and community perceptions. The next section of this article reviews the relationship between the growth of street gangs in Central America and the policing policy response. This is followed by a description of the data and methods, the results of the survey as viewed through tables and a specific regression technique, followed by a discussion of the policy implications. The findings illustrate not just areas of commonality across the Central American sphere, but also reveal important local variation from the regional perspective that is illuminating at a national level, variance that may have significant policy implications for enforcement practices in each country as well as funding priorities and direction.

Policing and the growth of the Central American street gang

The street gangs have their origins in the Central American crisis and civil wars that plagued the region in the 1970s and 1980s. War, trauma, and decades of state sanctioned violence created a reality in poor and rural communities where viciousness became normalised. Levenson traces the history of the Guatemalan *maras* from the late 1970s when the groups were no more than young people engaged in social protest, to the mid-1990s by which time the gangs had become 'victimisers' (Levenson 2013, p. 4). The social movements of the turbulent 1970s and 1980s long forgotten, in the absence of effective social welfare systems or legal infrastructure, the gangs diminished to the shantytowns and neighbourhoods where violence and an early death were expected. After riots in Los Angeles in 1992, prosecutors began to charge juveniles as adults and sent hundreds of young Latin Americans – generally young men who had fled to the US from Guatemala and El Salvador to escape the violence – to prison (Nagle 2008). A subsequent 1996 law that enabled US authorities to deport non-citizens to their country of origin post-sentence (if the sentence was for at least a year) saw tens of thousands of young people deported to a country with which they had no familiarity (Farah and Lum 2013). For protection, these individuals replicated their gang behaviours from the USA across much of Central America.

The gangs have grown to be dominant and intimidating social institutions in low income communities, providing both a source of social capital, cultural and economic support for gang members and their families in areas chronically ravaged by social and economic problems, as well as a cause of increased injury and risk of death (Winton 2005). Gang-related violence infiltrates public spaces and public utilities such as schools and marketplaces, and has spread to the mechanisms of public transport as well. Mass incarceration, often with little pretext of due process, has resulted in large numbers of youth being imprisoned in inhumane conditions. The growth of gangs within the correctional system has thus been a response to these conditions and an attempt to improve the quality of life of incarcerated inmates (Levenson 2013).

Compounding these problems is a naivety and inexperience with democratic models of policing. Some countries have relatively new civil police forces unprepared for complex gang investigations and interdiction. Both El Salvador and Guatemala established entirely new civilian police forces in the 1990s, bringing together members of the government and the recent armed opposition; and a new civil police force was established in Panama after the US invasion of 1989 (Frühling 2009). With little insight into the mechanisms of gang formation and activities, naive operations, such as the zero-tolerance policies of *La Mano Dura* exacerbated many of the early negative outcomes (Ungar 2011). Gangs cemented their positions in the community and in the prison system, police forces were seen as indiscriminant and unfair, and the failings of the criminal justice system were laid bare. These neighbourhoods became vulnerable to the influence of drug gangs who found the disenfranchised youth organisations to be a cheap and expendable workforce. In El Salvador and Guatemala the rising violence and lack of faith in the government to stem the socioeconomic conditions responsible for many of the problems, fueled the growth of private security and by the turn of the twenty-first century the number of private security employees far outstripped the number of officers in the national police (Dickins de Giron 2011, Zilberg 2011).

Beyond local gang activity, there is also the transnational and geopolitical reality that Central America sits at a strategic location between the cocaine producing countries of South America and the world's largest market for that product, the United States. As Farah (2012) points out, while the region has always been of interest to transnational organised crime syndicates, a few countries (for example Guatemala and Honduras) have increased in importance as a result of drug interdiction efforts throughout the Caribbean during the 1990s. The exact nature of the relationship between the street gangs (known as *pandillas* or *maras*) and the transnational criminal organisations shipping narcotics to the USA is unclear and the subject of some debate. Dudley (2010) contends that the relationship between the drug trafficking organisations (DTO) and the gangs is well developed in El Salvador and to some degree in Honduras, but rare in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, or Panama. This is, however, a dynamic criminal environment and police officers from these countries offer a divergent view. Discussion with participants during a number of training sessions suggests that Honduran street gangs have, in the last couple of years, been forming relationships and alliances with DTOs from a variety of countries, including Mexico. They have especially taken advantage of a weak law enforcement presence along the unguarded northern coast of the Honduras. By contrast, conversations with officers from various parts of El Salvador suggest that, contrary to much of the media speculation, Salvadorian gangs have not, to date, formed widespread strategic relationships with drug trafficking organisations. Thus, given both the volatility of the gang/DTO connections, as well as national complexities, we would expect to see

police officers from different countries offer divergent perspectives on the characteristics of successful gangs; especially in relation to their involvement with money laundering, expanded scope of operations across various criminal enterprises, or desire to exercise a monopoly over a particular business – all traits more associated with drug trafficking operations than local gangs (Beittel 2011).

It is also worth noting that, while conditions within policing are considerably different than in developed countries, they also vary significantly from country to country. The 2007 *U.S. Strategy to Combat the Threat of Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico* (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2007) stressed five general strategies: diplomacy, repatriation, law enforcement, capacity building of the criminal justice system in the region and prevention efforts. The law enforcement strategy sought to '*identify* and exploit the vulnerabilities of transnational criminal gangs in order to fully identify their command and control, disrupt their criminal activities and dismantle their criminal infrastructure' (emphasis added). It is unclear if police officers in the region have the knowledge and capacity to clearly articulate and identify the opportunities that gangs take advantage of and the characteristics that fuel their ongoing success. Aside from this untested potential limitation, efforts have been made to adopt policing strategies from the developed world and implement them wholesale in the Central American region. For example, attempts were made by the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights to import community policing and conflict resolution to Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (Neild 2003, Frühling 2007). Notwithstanding valiant attempts to import a policing strategy specifically designed to improve police legitimacy in the face of racial tension in American communities (Walker and Katz 2001), Frühling (2007) noted that the personnel structures, organisational capacities and material resources were quite different across the region, frustrating the success of the projects.

In a field visit to one police station in Honduras, a short drive from the capital, this author found there were no computers, no water supply and no communications with police headquarters. When a murder or other serious crime was discovered, officers had to drive 20 minutes down the hill until they reached the nearest location with cell phone reception, from where they used their personal phone to call headquarters. In contrast, a visit to police headquarters in the city of Mixco, Guatemala revealed computerised incident and crime recording systems, modern radio communications and a sophisticated public space CCTV camera surveillance system. It may be that officers in the latter department are more able to wield technology to gain a more nuanced perspective of the scope and range of gang operations, influencing their observations on successful gang characteristics. The criminal intelligence centre for the Guatemalan national civil police – the CRADIC – has a sophisticated wiretap capacity that could have two related outcomes. It will inform the police of successful gang behaviours of which their Honduran colleagues are unaware, as well as initiate counter-intelligence responses from successful street gangs. These are among the characteristics of gangs explored in more detail below. The next section of the article describes a survey instrument completed by 126 police officers from across the region, and then explains the analytical approach adopted.

Data and methods

US funding for anti-gang programmes in Central America is led by the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), who in January 2008 dispatched a Regional Gang Advisor to El Salvador to coordinate the Central American

gang prevention programmes (Seelke 2013). As part of this programme, the author had the opportunity to conduct intelligence-led policing training focused on anti-gang strategies for police officers from numerous countries three times in 2011 and 2012. In the process of providing training, there was a chance to gather more information regarding the experiences of the officers selected and vetted (by US authorities) to receive the training. Three groups totaling 132 officers were surveyed in August 2011, July 2012, and October 2012. Officers from all Central American countries participated in the training: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama.[2] The survey was administered on the first day of training prior to any significant instruction that could have skewed the survey results. The survey was used internally within the course later on as a discussion point and foundation for class exercises.

A Q-Sort methodology was employed. Shinebourne (2009) argues that the Q-Sort approach is particularly well suited to researching subjective experiences, beliefs and perspectives. Fundamentally, the approach is designed to reveal subjective opinion. Subjects are presented with statements or characteristics and are asked to rate them according to a particular criteria under examination. There is no 'right' answer, and instead respondent perspectives are revealed via the priorities and choices they make. In the research conducted here, respondents were asked to identify and prioritise the characteristics that contribute to the success of street gangs in their jurisdiction. The police officers were asked to order the items within a matrix design (Figure 1). The distribution of the response matrix was structured by six levels of relative importance, where only one gang success characteristic could be ranked as the most important by a respondent. This is shown in the top row of Figure 1, where the example characteristic choice is *violence*. The figure is completed as if by a single respondent (with choices that matched the overall characteristics for all respondents).

Each respondent was allowed to choose two characteristics at the second level and three at the third level of importance (the third row of the figure). The reverse coding scheme took place across the lower half of the matrix until the respondent was entering just one item as least important to gang success, in the single space at the bottom (shown by the *diversification* characteristic in the figure).

The distribution required of the respondents resulted in a quasi-normal distribution with a number of advantages for this research (Ward 2009). First, it forces respondents to make priority decisions and avoids the option of allowing respondents to simply rank

Figure 1. Example response matrix for 12 responses structured for a quasi-normal distribution.
Note: This demonstration Q-Sort matrix is filled in with the pattern of characteristics resulting from the mean scores for the entire sample.

every characteristic as important or very important, as might occur with a Likert-type questionnaire. It also means that the individual and cumulative results have a mean of zero, with an equal number of responses above and below a mean score, with non-skewed tails at each end of the distribution. Cross (2005) argues that the Q-Sort therefore ensures variability in the resulting scores and may reduce the possibility of response bias.

Twelve gang success characteristics were presented to the respondents. They were adopted from the Sleipnir organised crime groups' capability matrix developed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The purpose of Sleipnir is to measure the relative threats posed by organised crime groups (Tusikov and Fahlman 2009, RCMP 2010). Sleipnir is designed as an exploratory analysis technique designed to allow analysts to explore issues beyond what is immediately apparent and to explicitly develop an understanding of the underlying conditions and driving forces for crime (Heldon 2004, 2009). It was developed to give management a rank order of organised crime groups based on a relatively objective, expert-based analysis that incorporates the judgments of intelligence analysts from across Canada. The attribute list was designed to represent the most important qualities of organised crime groups and gangs that were successful and resilient to both competition and interdiction by law enforcement. Sleipnir was originally designed by the RCMP with 19 characteristics, but later versions were refined to the list of 12 that are employed in this research (RCMP 2011). The research and development of the current Sleipnir version included a comprehensive statistical analysis of Sleipnir profiles in several Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) National Threat Assessments. In alphabetical order, the characteristics are: cohesion, collaboration, corruption, discipline, diversification, infiltration, insulation, intelligence use, money laundering, monopoly, scope and violence (the reader is referred to Appendix 1 of this paper where formalised descriptions of each characteristic from the RCMP can be found).

In the results section that follows, data are recoded to create equal differences between scores. Mean population ranks are examined for the characteristics, and then a mean score for crime group characteristic by country is displayed as a radar diagram. Within country and between country differences are examined, and certain characteristics with apparently meaningful differences are examined using a seemingly unrelated regression model (Cameron and Trivedi 2010).

Results

From the officer surveys from the seven countries included in this research (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama), four surveys were excluded by listwise deletion because officers mistakenly filled in the same characteristic more than once in the survey. This results in a total number of 126 surveys available for analysis, distributed as follows: Belize (17), Costa Rica (10), El Salvador (25), Guatemala (16), Honduras (32), Nicaragua (6) and Panama (20).

The 126 viable responses were coded to create equal differences between scores in the following manner: the most important characteristic was coded 2.5, items in the second row coded 1.5, the third row coded 0.5, the fourth −0.5, the fifth −1.5, and the least important characteristic was coded −2.5. Mean and standard deviations are shown in Table 1, alongside the rank of the characteristic. Across all 126 respondents, violence was the highest ranked characteristic, followed by cohesion and intelligence use. The characteristics estimated as least important in gang success and resilience were insulation, scope and diversification.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation for organised crime group characteristics.

Characteristic	Mean	Standard deviation	Rank
Violence	1.429	1.612	1
Cohesion	0.976	1.961	2
Intelligence use	0.722	1.440	3
Corruption	0.714	1.901	4
Discipline	0.254	1.806	5
Infiltration	−0.095	1.607	6
Money laundering	−0.103	1.738	7
Collaboration	−0.302	1.621	8
Monopoly	−0.349	1.660	9
Insulation	−0.976	1.582	10
Scope	−1.024	1.359	11
Diversification	−1.246	1.282	12

When individual countries are explored, national differences start to emerge. A number of factors are evident from the mean score table for crime group characteristic by country (Table 2). A number of characteristics had mean scores below zero for all or most group mean scores. The list of entirely sub-zero group mean scores comprised *diversification* and *scope*, while *infiltration*, *insulation* and *monopoly* each had only one country ranking these characteristics above a group mean of zero. *Collaboration* was a characteristic that only just made it above a mean score of zero in the case of three countries (Belize, Nicaragua and Guatemala). *Money laundering* was in the middle of the pack, though ranked as the second most important characteristic by officers from Costa Rica. Group *discipline* had a wide variation in mean score, as did *cohesion* and *corruption*.

At the other end of the scale, *corruption* ranked positively in all countries (except El Salvador), and fourth highest overall. The highest scores were reserved for group *violence*, *cohesion* and *corruption*, all of which ranked positively across all countries. *Violence* – first overall – ranked as the most significant factor in Honduras and Panama, and second in Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize. *Cohesion* ranked second overall, but also had the greatest variance (Table 1). Intelligence use ranked third overall, though only achieved a ranking of third highest characteristic for Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. These relationships are shown graphically in Figure 2.[3] In the radar diagram at Figure 2, the variance in country mean scores is more apparent. For example, cohesion, corruption and discipline all have a substantial range. Other characteristics (such as intelligence use, scope and diversification) are uniformly ranked with low mean scores.

Visual inspection of Figure 2 and the standard deviation scores in Table 1 indicated that three characteristics had not only high mean scores overall but also considerable apparent variance: cohesion, corruption and discipline. In order to determine if the nations at the extremes of these measures were significantly different from the median country on each ranking, they were examined collectively. As the highest ranked item overall, violence was also included.

The question of within-country variance was examined by calculating the intraclass correlation (ICC), as well as conducting a likelihood ratio test to explore whether there existed any significant between country variance. The chi-square results and associated *p* values from the likelihood ratio tests in Table 3 indicate that there is little between

Table 2. Mean score for crime group characteristic by country.

|	Cohesion	Collaboration	Corruption	Discipline	Diversification	Infiltration	Insulation	Intelligence	Money Laundering	Monopoly	Scope	Violence
Belize	0.56	0.09	1.38	−0.44	−0.85	−0.03	0.15	0.09	−0.74	−0.38	−1.03	1.21
Costa Rica	0.80	−0.90	1.40	−0.60	−1.30	0.40	−0.10	0.40	0.90	−0.60	−0.70	0.30
El Salvador	0.70	−0.50	−0.38	1.34	−0.42	−0.26	−0.90	0.54	−0.50	−0.22	−0.42	1.02
Guatemala	1.31	0.06	0.63	0.31	−1.25	−0.25	−1.25	0.81	−0.31	−0.81	−0.38	1.13
Honduras	0.31	−0.25	0.72	0.13	−0.88	−0.09	−0.78	0.63	0.09	−0.44	−0.88	1.44
Nicaragua	2.33	0.33	0.00	0.83	−0.67	−0.50	−0.83	0.67	−0.83	−0.50	−0.83	0.00
Panama	0.65	−0.15	0.55	−0.40	−1.10	0.00	−1.10	0.35	0.25	0.50	−0.95	1.40
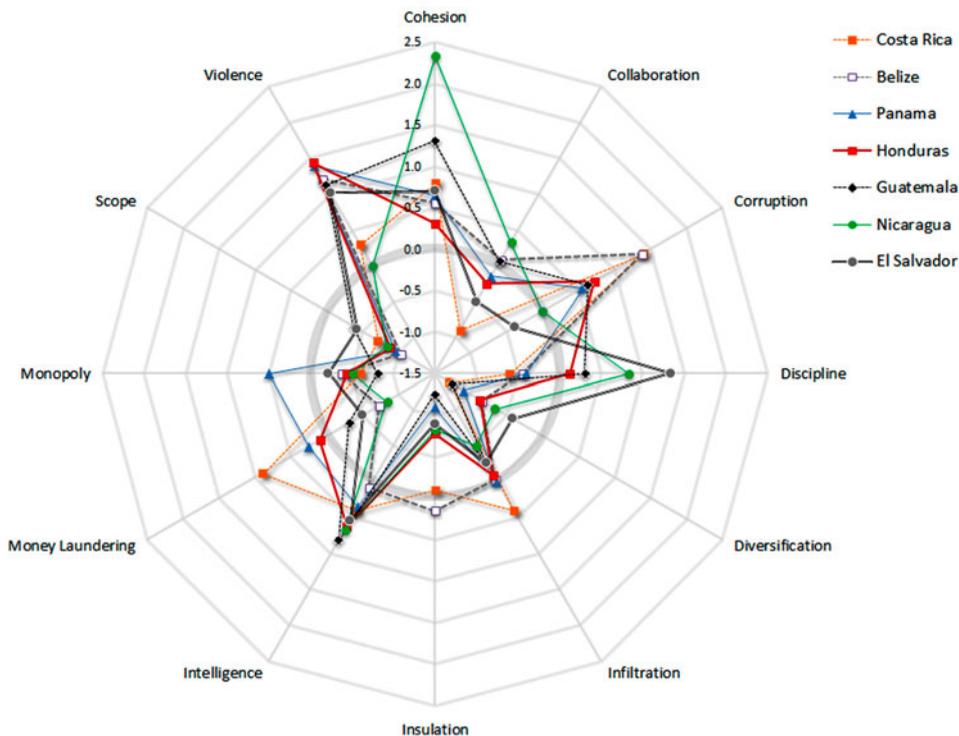
Figure 2. Radar diagram showing mean scores for 12 characteristics across 7 countries. Note: A thicker grey band indicates the zero mean score. Inside this band are values less than zero on mean characteristic score.

country variation with the *cohesion* and *violence* outcomes. As a group, the seven countries demonstrate significant rater agreement across these characteristics. The ICC indicates the fraction of the variance in the outcome that arises from between country average differences, and it is quite low for cohesion (1.5%) and violence (2.2%). A traditional linear regression model would, however, be inappropriate for *corruption* and *discipline*, as the significant chi-square values for the likelihood ratio test suggests the need for models that can consider different intercepts (averages) for each country on these outcomes. The ICC for these characteristics is also considerably larger: corruption (11.1%) and discipline (19.4%). Corruption and discipline are, therefore, perceived to make significantly different contributions to street gang success across Central America. And while the findings suggest little variance in the rankings of cohesion and violence, if even one country significantly differs from the rest of the Central American region that finding might provide some policy insight into a specific national gang problem. That possibility is explored using a seemingly unrelated regression analysis.

Seemingly unrelated regression model

Under normal circumstances, it would be tempting to use a routine statistical measure, such as ANOVA. There are two problems with this. First, while the coefficient estimates from a seemingly unrelated regression tend to match that of an ANOVA analysis, the error estimates from ANOVA are unreliable because the ranking that each officer gives a characteristic is not unrelated to the ranking they give other characteristics. For example, by rating violence at the

Table 3. Coefficients and intraclass correlations (ICC).

	LR-test (χ^2)	*P*	ICC
Cohesion	0.16	0.342	0.0152
Corruption	6.84*	0.004	0.1114
Discipline	16.71*	0.001	0.1949
Violence	0.35	0.276	0.02223

Asterisk (*) indicates statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

highest position, the officer is unable to rate any other characteristic into that location on the Q-Sort matrix. Seemingly unrelated regression produces estimates that are both unbiased and more efficient than estimating separate regression equations (Zellner 1962, Wooldridge 2002, Cameron and Trivedi 2010). Second, because ANOVA essentially runs four unrelated tests, it would be necessary to correct for the experimentwise error rate and would necessitate adjusting the conventional alpha level using a Bonferroni-type measure (Aickin and Gensler 1996, Abdi 2007). The outcome from a seemingly unrelated regression is a set of slope characteristics for each studied variable, and because the outcomes are analysed as a system, the conventional alpha level ($p < .05$) can be used. The seemingly unrelated regression model was estimated using the statistical package Stata version 13.

Dichotomous dummy variables were created for each country except the reference country. The choice of reference country was determined as the median nation based on mean score for the particular characteristic under examination. Therefore, the regression model for *cohesion* had dummy variables for all countries except El Salvador (the reference country), the reference for the *corruption* and *violence* models was Guatemala, and the reference for the *discipline* model was Honduras. In this way, the countries at the extremes are examined with reference to the middle country on the scale for that characteristic. The regression coefficients, standard errors, z-score and p value are shown in Table 4.

The model results in Table 4 show that the mean score on cohesion is 1.633 greater for Nicaragua than the mean score for El Salvador and statistically significant at the 95% level. With regard to corruption, the mean score for El Salvador is greater than one below than that of the median country, Guatemala – the reference group, and that this difference is statistically significant to the 95% level. The discipline analysis shows that El Salvador's discipline score is over 1.5 greater than the reference nation representing the median of the characteristic, Honduras. This result is statistically significant. It is also worth noting that the Nicaraguan score on discipline is also significantly greater than that for Honduras, at an exploratory level. Finally, the Nicaraguan score on violence is overall more than one unit lower than that of the reference category (Guatemala), a result that is just outside the normally accepted significance level but still significant at an exploratory level. These results confirm that there are significant national differences between countries based on various gang success characteristics. Furthermore, it is clear that these differences are complex and play out in different ways depending on the gang characteristic under examination.

Discussion

Before considering the policy implications, there are a number of limiting factors with this study that should not be overlooked. This is a sample of convenience rather than a random

sample of police officers from across the region; however, this disadvantage may be offset by some positive benefits. The officers in question are recognised by the USA and local authorities as being anti-gang officers working in high gang concentration areas. Furthermore, they all passed a positive vetting procedure that significantly improves the likelihood that their responses will not be influenced by personal involvement with corruption.

That being said, as Zilberg (2011, p. 13) notes it is not the role of social science to 'uncritically reproduce state discourse' or accept the perceived truisms of the time. Each of the officers surveyed come from countries and even local police stations with distinctly variable relationships with local gangs and communities. It may be the case in some of the

Table 4. A seemingly unrelated regression for four characteristics.

	b	*SE*	*z*	*P*
Cohesion[a]				
Belize	−0.141	0.472	−0.299	0.765
Costa Rica	0.100	0.561	0.178	0.859
Guatemala	0.613	0.480	1.275	0.202
Honduras	−0.387	0.401	−0.967	0.333
Panama	−0.050	0.450	−0.111	0.912
Nicaragua	1.633	0.682	2.394	0.017*
Intercept	0.700	0.300		
Corruption[b]				
Belize	0.757	0.470	1.613	0.107
Costa Rica	0.775	0.543	1.426	0.154
El Salvador	−1.005	0.432	−2.329	0.020*
Honduras	0.094	0.413	0.227	0.820
Panama	−0.075	0.452	−0.166	0.868
Nicaragua	−0.625	0.645	−0.968	0.333
Intercept	0.625	0.337		
Discipline[c]				
Belize	−0.566	0.353	−1.604	0.109
Costa Rica	−0.725	0.426	−1.702	0.089[†]
El Salvador	1.215	0.314	3.870	0.001*
Guatemala	0.188	0.360	0.521	0.603
Panama	−0.525	0.335	−1.566	0.117
Nicaragua	0.708	0.523	1.354	0.176
Intercept	0.125	0.208		
Violence[d]				
Belize	0.081	0.419	0.193	0.847
Costa Rica	−0.825	0.485	−1.701	0.089[†]
El Salvador	−0.105	0.385	−0.273	0.785
Honduras	0.312	0.368	0.849	0.396
Panama	0.275	0.403	0.682	0.495
Nicaragua	−1.125	0.576	−1.954	0.051[†]
Intercept	1.125	0.301		

Note: asterisk symbol (*) indicates statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ level. Dagger (†) symbol indicates significant at an exploratory level. Reference countries shown in italics under each portion of the SUR analysis.
[a]Reference country: El Salvador.
[b]Reference country: Guatemala.
[c]Reference country: Honduras.
[d]Reference country: Guatemala.

sites that the officers have little understanding of the dynamics that make the gangs successful as entities that persevere within the community. That being said, police officers at the local level are increasingly searching beyond broadly-applied enforcement policies that have been shown to fail, preferring to consider community-based strategies that could address the chronic socioeconomic weaknesses that gangs exploit in ways that do not necessarily employ the criminal justice system excessively. Their views as to what enable gangs to proliferate are therefore of some relevance, not the least of which as a starting point for greater clarity around police perceptions of gangs. If Central American gangs are indeed entities with characteristics that transcend national boundaries, the low intraclass correlation coefficients on some of the characteristics suggest that, in at least some cases, the officers in different countries perceive these commonalities with some degree of reliability. A corollary of this would suggest that when they report significant differences in particular countries, these divergences from the mean view may be worth the attention.

Second, the survey technique was limited by available time; hence, the use of the Q-Sort methodology. With more time available to them, the researchers involved in the RCMP Sleipnir research were able to employ exhaustive pairwise comparison and it may be that the two techniques produce potentially dissimilar results due to methodological differences (Ratcliffe *et al*. 2014). Anecdotal question-and-answer sessions with individuals and groups following the administration of each Q-Sort survey appeared to confirm the veracity of the responses reported here, though it is recognised that more extensive follow-up research with focus groups would be one mechanism to resolve this issue.

The focus here is on identifying the characteristics that allow gangs to be successful, from the perspective of anti-gang police officers working in severely gang-blighted areas. It is therefore concentrated on the negative outcomes of gang behaviour. It has been noted that some in academia believe that organised crime groups can infuse local economies with wealth and even provide a rule of law where government is unable (Tusikov 2012). Numerous Latin American commentators have noted some merits of gang cohesion – often a response to violence (for example Cruz 2011) – and its ability to provide a modicum of security for incarcerated members and their families. Those modest tangential benefits are not disputed; however, the purpose of this article is not to reconfirm the existing literature but rather to examine gang features from a police perspective, and quantify the variance in select characteristics at the national level as a starting point to better understanding the dynamic nature of gang characteristics from the enforcement perspective.

A final limitation is the lopsided nature of the national responses within the survey, and especially the limited number of Nicaraguan officers who were available to participate. The decision was made to include them so that it was possible to discuss the complete suite of Central American countries; however, this limited number is recognised as a limitation, albeit one that is outside the control of the researcher.

These limitations notwithstanding, there are still findings of value. It is not surprising that violence ranks as the most important perceived characteristic for nearly every country (except Costa Rica): violence is just as strongly linked to gangs in Western countries (Taniguchi *et al*. 2011). Violence is integral to the recruitment and retention of personnel in many gangs (Nagle 2008), and the threat of violence is inherent to the successful exploitation of extortion as a criminal enterprise (Farah and Lum 2013). It has been an endemic component to life in the region for at least 30 years (Rodgers 2009). In El Salvador, it has been argued that the indiscriminant arrest policies of *La Mano Dura* drove street gangs to adopt more violent postures in response (Farina *et al*. 2010). From a

practical perspective, violence is also one of the central characteristics that Central American police officers are likely to encounter on a frequent basis in their professional lives. Group cohesion ranks second overall, described as strong bonds fostered at both individual to individual, and individual to organisation levels in order to create criminal solidarity and common protection. Until the recent crackdown on tattoos in some countries, these bonds were formed through shared rites and acts of loyalty, demonstrated with tattoos, and manifest in an increased propensity towards group violence (Pynchon and Borum 1999).

A surprise (to this author) was the third place overall ranking given to the counter-intelligence and counter-surveillance capabilities of organised criminals (intelligence use); however, on discussing this with the gang officers after the surveys were administered, numerous stories unfolded of police officers being followed home, gang members using complex sign language to communicate into prisons from outside the facilities, and gang members documenting the details of unmarked police cars. Farah and Lum (2013) even report on attempts by MS-13 members to learn almost extinct regional indigenous languages with the aim of using the dialect as a code to evade telephone surveillance by law enforcement. Like violence, this is a characteristic of gang behaviour that is likely to be encountered by police officers in their professional roles. It may be that the unique position of these gang-focused officers provides insight into gang counter-intelligence activities not necessarily visible through other research means.

The fourth ranked item overall – corruption – relates to the abilities of gangs to corrupt local public officials through the practices of illicit influence, exploitation or blackmail. Brands (2011) argues that one of Guatemala's three types of organised crime element are the *poderes ocultos*, or hidden powers, comprised of Guatemala's elite (businessmen, military officers, politicians, and law enforcement officials) who use their influence to benefit from corruption and illegal activities, as well as to avoid prosecution. These traits are evident in other countries.

National differences parse out and inform the aggregate survey items, by focusing on discontinuity with regional responses. Violence is nearly universal across the region and ranked the highest factor overall; however, the Nicaraguan officers collectively ranked it at zero on their group scale and substantially lower than the region's median score. Their perspective provides an interesting counterpoint to the largely constant national perspectives (as evidenced by the small intraclass correlation on the violence outcome). Rather than violence directed against targets outside the group, the Nicaraguan officers perceived gang cohesion as the key determinant of gang success with strong bonds driving a fierce intragroup loyalty. This characteristic scored 2.33 on a maximum possible of 2.5. While Nicaragua has a significant number of gang members it does not have the large numbers of *MS-13* or *Calle 18* members that are seen in El Salvador, Honduras or Guatemala. Opinions differ as to the cause of this difference. It has been proposed that this is because Nicaragua has had a lower deportation rate from the United States (Seelke 2013), but it may also be that 'the steep transformation of street gangs into *maras* in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras but not in Nicaragua is largely due to the types of responses wielded by the states' (Cruz 2011, pp. 138–139).

The impact of the large gangs that are largely absent in Nicaragua had more predictable effects on the countries they do occupy. For example, the dominance of *MS-13* and *Calle 18* members within El Salvador was evident in the statistically significant importance of *discipline* within the gangs there. This is subtly different than the cohesion that is more evident in Nicaragua and relevant if a concerted attempt is to be made to

resist the growth of the gangs. If the gang truce between *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Calle 18* (18th Street gang) – still in effect at the time of writing and credited with a substantial reduction in homicides – continues, it would be interesting to examine if future surveys of officers in El Salvador see a change in their low ranking of *collaboration*.

With regard to corruption, illicit Guatemalan organisations have repeatedly infiltrated government agencies and undermined law enforcement efforts (Brands 2011), but notably the officers from Honduras, Belize and Costa Rica all gave corruption a higher rank in their assessments. Of potentially greater interest with regard to corruption is the low score given to this characteristic in El Salvador (statistically different from the median country at the 95% level). It appears that the perception of local officers is that public officials are not a source of strength for the gangs in the country. Again, however, this may change if the Salvadorian gang truce continues and the participants are rewarded with greater political influence in return for their contribution to reducing the staggeringly high level of homicide within the country. While it does not necessarily flow that greater gang involvement in politics will inevitably flow into increased corruption, it should be remembered that this research examined the perspectives of police officers in countries known to have higher levels of political corruption than more industrialised nations. Corruption did score highly in Belize. Although Belize does not share the *MS-13* or *Barrio18* issues of their neighbours, they do have smaller 'nascent' gangs with names familiar to US gang investigators, such as the Bloods (Cohen 2006). They generally have limited scope or access to wider transnational organisational capabilities such as money laundering, and instead limit their activities to violence and local drug dealing.

Policy implications

This article has demonstrated that across the Central American region, police officers perceive that successful gangs engage in violence, demonstrate strong group cohesion, engage in the use of intelligence gathering to defend themselves against law enforcement and rival groups, and in some cases corrupt the local political system. Equally, however, there are nuanced local conditions. Even when statistical tests indicate that a uniform average would by statistically viable across the nations for the cohesion and violence characteristic, one country stood out as significantly different from the median nation; Nicaragua for its officers' high rating on cohesion, and Costa Rica and Nicaragua for their lower-than-median rating for violence (at an exploratory level). In some countries the corruption by gangs of local political figures is not as significant as in others, and the relative importance of group discipline, cohesion and even violence is highly variable.[4] This would all suggest that, while there are some regional factors to ponder, there are also significant local variations that must be considered into the future.

Policing these variable gang and violence issues would be perplexing enough for police services in robust Westernised democracies with significant budgets, but in the nascent democratic societies of Latin America – some emerging from decades of civil war – the challenges are overwhelming. Judicial reforms are carried out with little regard for the practical realities and capabilities of the police services expected to carry out the tasks of enforcement and evidence gathering, and Central American judicial systems are perceived to be significantly weighted in favour of the accused (Eijkman 2006, Deas 2012). The police are viewed with suspicion at best by the legal system, and not surprisingly this leaves police officers with the impression that the legal system does not

regard the local police perspective as informative in designing anti-gang strategies. Even within what has been described as a 'neoliberal securityscape' (Zilberg 2011, p. 10) that should in theory value the police, they are rarely perceived to have the capacity to make a positive contribution to public safety. Police reform has largely been the domain of lawyers comfortable with reforming the organisations of policing and less inclined to provide direction in crime-fighting strategy. As noted by Neild (2003, p. 278) 'Human rights groups know what the police should not be doing, but have few insights into alternative models of policing that can improve crime prevention and law enforcement and respect for rights'. The few studies of policing in Central America have shown scant curiosity for institutional detail or the everyday aspects of the policing role (Deas 2012); yet, these are likely to be key factors in any programme implementation.

In the absence of locally-directed, evidence-based anti-gang strategies, well-meaning support from overseas has tended to promote boilerplate solutions, often plucked wholesale from Western countries with scant regard for the distinction of local conditions within the gangs or the criminal justice system. Regionwide initiatives can give the perception that the donor has a strategic perspective, though as Seelke (2013, p. 14) notes, 'Country and regional youth violence prevention programmes have received significant support from a variety of international donors, but Central American governments have tended not to take an active role in ensuring that donor funds are well-coordinated and strategically invested'.[5]

It may be that if police officers do not perceive that violence prevention campaigns are addressing the salient factors that contribute to the ongoing success of gangs, they will not support or implement their part of the programme as enthusiastically as they otherwise might. Moreover, notwithstanding questions about the veracity of the officers' views, programmes that are implemented without considering the police are perhaps missing an opportunity to include a significant stakeholder in the development of improved security.

There is increasing evidence that countries across the region are trying to develop individualised strategies to address gang violence, not least of which are the gang truces negotiated in Belize and El Salvador.[6] Some of these attempted solutions are internally funded, and therefore, those governments have greater flexibility to administer their own funds, not a luxury they possess with external monies. Since 2008, the US has pushed around $500 million to the region under the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), and fortunately the funds are increasingly personalised to the particular challenges being experienced in the countries. For example, the US Regional Gang Advisor to El Salvador has been able to offer tailored training courses, technical assistance and direct equipment to vetted police and intelligence units, and establish a number of model precincts in Guatemala (Coban, Mixco, and Villanueva) and El Salvador (Lourdes and Santa Ana). The author's visits to a number of these cities confirms the backing provided, support that is customised to the perceived needs of the local police (as articulated by the officers) and reflective of the policing environment on the ground (Meyer and Seelke 2013). Many of the strategies currently being piloted recognise the limitations of the criminal justice system and consequences of previous policies (Cruz 2011), and instead are more community-based, reflective of the long-term role of the gangs in the neighbourhood. At the grassroots level, there appears to be an increasing willingness to seek collaborative strategies that are pragmatic and not enforcement focused.

Extrapolating beyond the results, given the variance in the perspective of the police officers, it would appear there may be limitations to any broad-brush *policy transfer*

approach and the attempted implementation of ready-made policing strategies, because officers in different countries perceive different characteristics contributing to gang proliferation: even when there was broad international consensus, the respondents from one country would sometimes differ in a significant manner. In this context, the term *policy transfer* refers to the adoption in one location of a notionally 'tried-and-tested' policy or administrative arrangement from another location (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, see also Marsh and Evans 2012), such as the adoption of aspects of zero-tolerance policing in the UK after the experiences of the USA (Jones and Newburn 2002). Karstedt (2001) has noted that the general conceptual frameworks and theories of crime are heavily influenced by Western research and may be uniquely relevant to that environment, leaving other cultures bereft of applicable theories. It may be preferable to promote *analytical localism* as more suitable to the Latin American context and more inclusive of the local police perspective. What I describe here as *analytical localism* takes components of localism – an umbrella term described as the 'devolution of power and/or functions and/or resources away from central control and towards front-line managers, local democratic structures, local institutions and local communities, within an agreed framework of minimum standards' (Evans *et al.* 2013, p. 405) and focuses it towards the capacity to *analyse* local conditions as a precursor to policy selection. Rather than transferring policy to the region, analytical localism suggests transmission of the intellectual processes and analytical tools necessary to better understand a local policing and community context, from which locally-derived crime prevention solutions can flow. Developing the capacity to map crime (Harries 1999, Ratcliffe 2004), coordinate with community members and local government (Wood and Shearing 2007), merge criminal intelligence with crime analysis (Ratcliffe 2008) and consider cost-benefit evaluations, does not in and of itself determine the eventual policing strategy. On the contrary, it would likely increase the chances that the policy will be sensitive to the local structural and cultural context. Indeed, a realistic cost-benefit analysis combined with an appreciation for local enforcement capacity (or lack thereof) has appeared to encourage movement away from the days of *La Mano Dura* (Bruneau 2011).

Conclusion

This article is an attempt to ascertain the characteristics of successful street gangs across Central America from the perspective of police officers from across the region, and as a first look, it has identified some regional commonalities as well as significant local variation in numerous characteristics. Gangs exploit opportunities in their operational domain to survive, generate income and extend influence. Many characteristics of the operating environment are common across Latin America; ineffective government institutions, affluent drug-trafficking organisations and socioeconomic deprivation. As a result, gangs share many successful traits, including a propensity to use violence, foster strong group cohesion, and engage in intelligence gathering. Equally, however, gangs are a product of the local socioeconomic and political structures and as a result significant variance was found between countries, specifically with regard to group cohesion, discipline and their use of corruption to further group aims. These significant local differences have implications for police enthusiasm for, and adoption of, gang reduction policies, and it has been proposed in this article that a programme of analytical localism replaces a tendency for outside funding agencies to engage in wholesale policy transfer to a region often ill-suited to adoption of Western strategies.

Future research, ideally by police departments themselves across Central America, might not only identify different pertinent gang characteristics but also use this information for internal resource allocation decisions to determine local and national priorities. As Deas (2012, pp. 201–202) notes with specific regard to the Central American situation, 'Few, if any, police forces welcome study; few have the capacity to study themselves'. With encouragement, police across the region could learn to develop their own *analytical localism* and forge the capacity to use evidence-based research to not only identify relevant characteristics on which to dismantle successful gangs and improve community safety, but also improve police practice. The police are a group that is central to any strategy that will reduce the negative impacts of gangs in the long-term, and as such, an understanding of this constitution group should have value to policy-makers. Future research may benefit from integrating the police perspective with that of the community such that a more nuanced understanding of within-country variation might emerge. A pragmatic understanding of the different perspectives of the local environment is essential if we are to generate tailored responses to gang problems in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Ethnographers such as Levenson, Zilberg and others have documented the social and political construction and origins of the gangs – and the difficulties of leaving the gang lifestyle, and the reader is referred to their work for more expansive narratives than can be contained within this article (for example O'Neill and Thomas 2011, Zilberg 2011, Brenneman 2012, Levenson 2013).
2. Two participants were guests from Columbia and their responses are excluded from this study.
3. For both Table 2 and Figure 2 readers are reminded of the recoding scheme that changes the available range to −2.5 to +2.5.
4. It should be noted that numerous authors have commented on the exploitation of gangs by politicians, so it should not be necessarily interpreted that any corruption by the part of politicians was engaged in unwillingly.
5. For example, the City of Los Angeles has been engaged by USAID to share best practices in preventing gang violence and promoting youth development with cities in Central America (Seelke 2013). It is currently unclear whether the strategies from Los Angeles will be effective in Central America; indeed quantitative research suggests that the Los Angeles strategies have not even had any measurable effect on crime in Los Angeles (Dunworth *et al.* 2011). But even had the LA strategies been successful in their city of origin, the evidence from the current research would caution that significant local adaptation will be an essential component of any Central American implementation.
6. It should be noted that the officers from El Salvador remain highly sceptical of the gang truce in their country, and generally believe that the long-term effects of the truce will be detrimental to public safety.

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Appendix 1. Sleipnir characteristics and description

Attribute	Definition
Cohesion	Strong bonds are fostered at both individual to individual, and individual to organisation levels in order to create criminal solidarity and common protection. The bonds can be created through such factors as common backgrounds, blood relationships, financial relationships, length of association and geographic origins. They can be instituted through rites of initiation and required criminal acts of loyalty.
Collaboration	The extent of collaborative links between this and other organised crime groups.
Corruption	The corruption of local public officials through the practices of illicit influence, exploitation of weakness and blackmail. Also the ability to place organised criminals or their associates into sensitive positions.
Discipline	The practice of coercing obedience to hold the organisation together. This includes the use of violence, intimidation and other sanctions or forms of coercion on group members and associates.
Diversification	The extent to which the illicit activities of the group are diversified.
Infiltration	The efforts to gain a foothold within legitimate private organisations and businesses to further criminal activities. This control or influence may be used for: money laundering, establishing a pretense of propriety, facilitating, protecting and concealing criminal enterprises, and/or for intelligence gathering.
Insulation	The efforts to protect the main figures in the group from prosecution through the use of: subordinates, fronts, corruption and/or other means.
Intelligence use	The intelligence/counter-intelligence and counter-surveillance capabilities of organised criminals. Used to defend themselves against law enforcement and rival groups, and to identify new targets.
Money laundering	The process of legitimising cash or other assets obtained through illegal activities. Effective money laundering conceals the criminal origins and ownership of the funds, creates a legitimate explanation for the proceeds of crime and creates wealth over time.
Monopoly	Control over one or more specific criminal activities within a geographic area of operations, with no tolerance for competition. This does not prevent partnerships of profitable convenience between or among organisations. Violence, intimidation and/or informing on competitors are common methods used to establish or maintain monopoly.
Scope	The geographic sphere of operations and influence of the organised crime group.
Violence	The use of violence, and intimidation through explicit or implicit threats of violence, against targets outside the group to further any organisational objective.

Source: RCMP (2010).