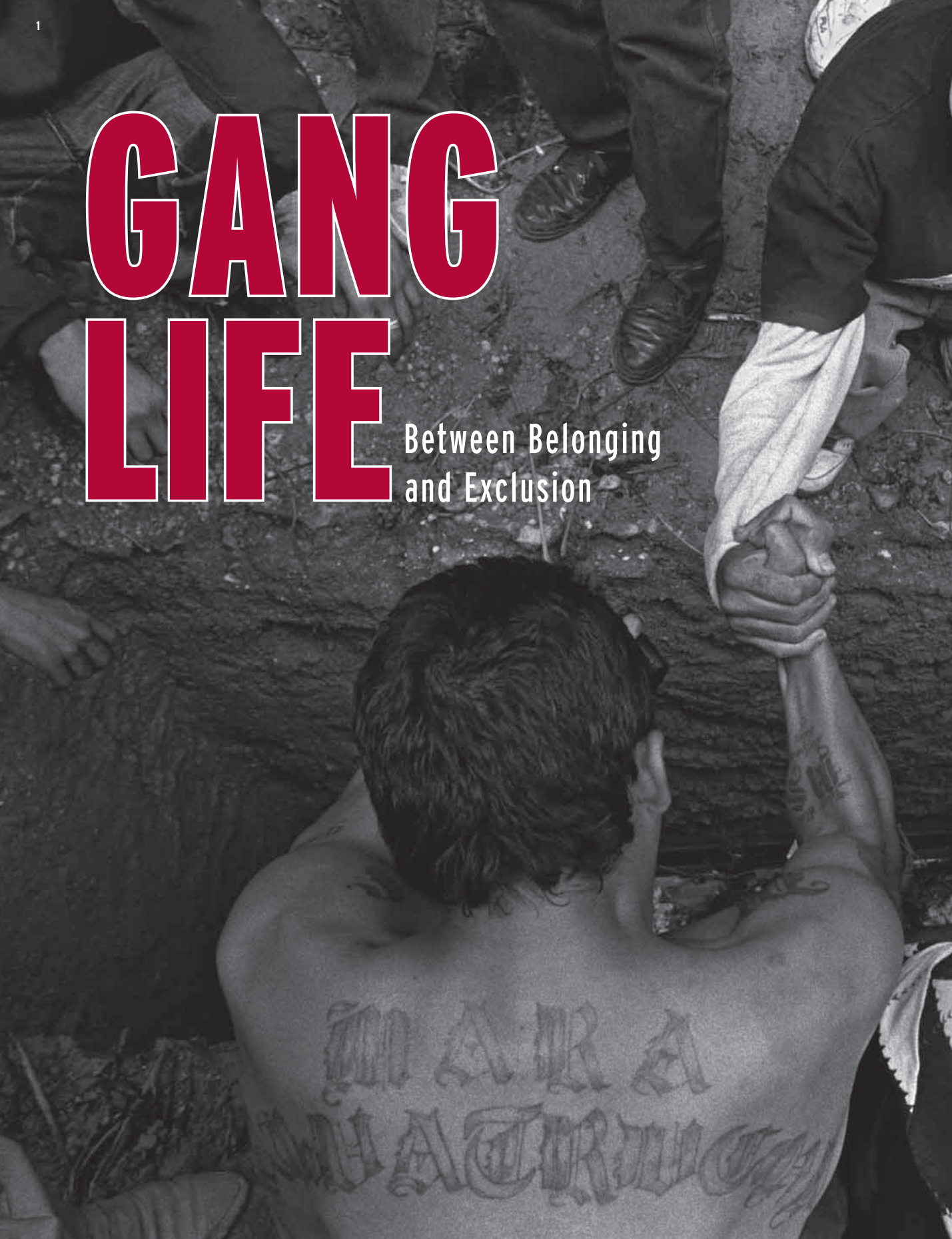


GANG LIFE

Between Belonging
and Exclusion





Hands are clasped in a vow of revenge. Fists pound into a new recruit. Fingers curl to form symbolic gestures. Tattoos tell stories of belonging, rank, criminal activity, loss, and punishment. Graffiti murals proclaim categorical control of turf.

All speak of the bond between gang members—a social cohesion that can provide a desperately sought-after sense of kinship. Yet the price is often high, ranging from insecurity, discrimination, and incarceration to trauma, injury, and death.

Through the lenses of more than 20 photographers, this photo essay offers an intimate glimpse into the daily realities of current and former gang members around the globe. Having gained the trust—or acquiescence—of their subjects, the photographers capture what usually remains hidden from view: clandestine deals, initiation beatings, target practice, a sniper on night patrol, a drug dealer watching the street, communal meals, crackdowns in prison.

These pages open to reveal the grave of a murdered Mara Salvatrucha leader in El Salvador; huddled together, the surviving members commit themselves to a reprisal (Photo 1). While not all gangs are inherently violent, gang activities often fuel cycles of violence; indeed, the very initiation of a new gang member often involves brutal 'jumping in' (Photos 2, 3). Once integrated, gang members may hone their firearms skills (Photos 4, 5) and 'pack heat' to defend turf, intimidate rivals, or commit revenge killings (Photos 7-11).

From the Philippines to Guatemala and Spain, gang members express their social cohesion through hand signs and gestures, clothing, tattoos, graffiti, and communal activities (Photos 6, 12-17). In Papua New Guinea just as in New York, gangs will attempt to secure and defend 'safehouses', where they can meet, sleep, keep their guns, and even provide shelter or security to outsiders who are willing to pay a fee (Photos 18, 19).

Yet risks are ever-present: research shows that most gang violence targets gang members. Gunshot wounds regularly leave gang members traumatized, scarred, injured, paralysed, or dead (Photos 20-27). In addition to being targeted by rivals, gang members are also pursued by law enforcement (Photos 28, 29) and sometimes by lynch mobs (Photo 35). Even when incarcerated, gang members often continue to rely on their structures and to run their activities, though some turn to religion (Photos 30-33).

Adjusting to a post-gang life after prison can be especially daunting, as gang members may sense a loss of social belonging and be discriminated against in the job market. While successful reintegration efforts include skills training and tattoo removal, some former gang members find themselves homeless and isolated (Photos 34, 36-38). ▣

1 At a funeral, gang members make a pact of revenge over the grave of a slain Mara Salvatrucha leader. San Salvador, El Salvador, 1996.

© Donna DeCesare



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- 2 Mara 18 members assault a new recruit during an initiation in the outskirts of the village of San Lucas, near Antigua Guatemala. Sacatepequez, Guatemala, 2002. © Donna DeCesare
- 3 An initiate is 'jumped in' to the Playboys Gang by way of a beating while someone counts to 13. The pledge is expected to fight back against at least three members. Los Angeles, 1992. © Robert Yager
- 4 Mara Salvatrucha members engage in target practice. Los Angeles County, California, 1994. © Donna DeCesare



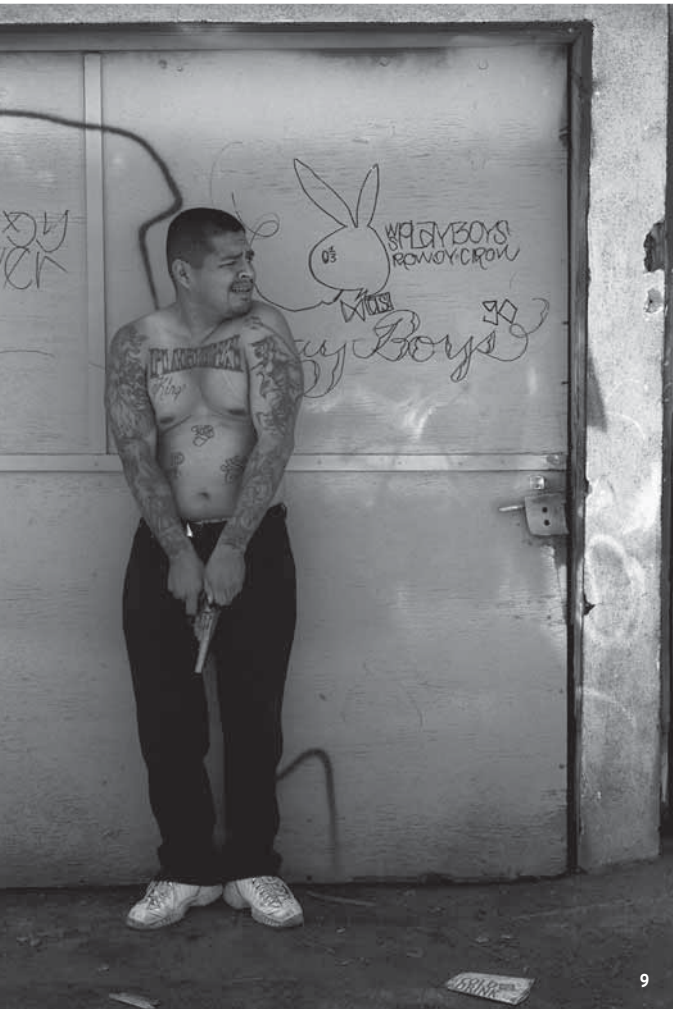
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5 Gang members check their aim at a shooting range in downtown Los Angeles, 2001. © Robert Yager

6 A schoolgirl jogs past graffiti on her way home in La Línea, a shantytown of Guatemala City controlled by the Mara Salvatrucha, October 2006. © Angela Catlin



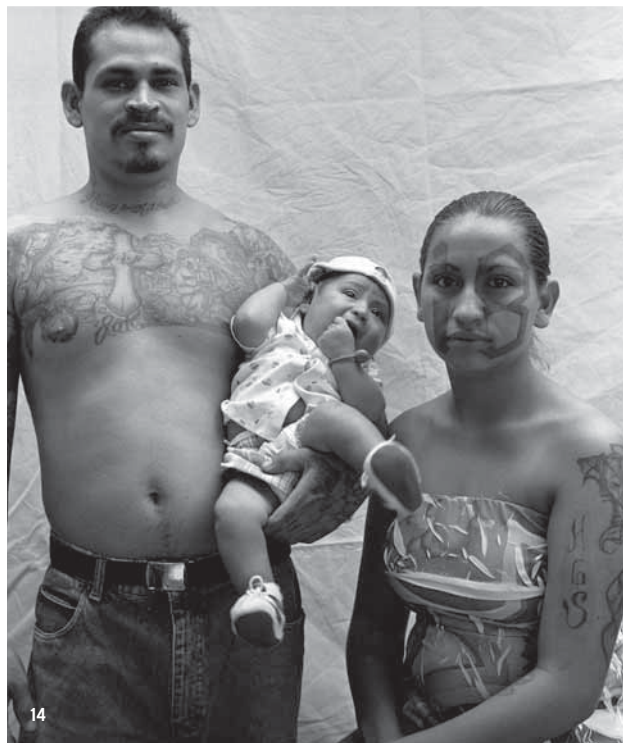
- 7 A member of the Bloods—who is also a drug dealer and a rapper—looks out the window to check his turf in Harlem, New York, July 2007. Soon after this photo was taken, he was arrested for being involved in a shootout with rival drug dealers. © Scott Houston
- 8 A gang member calls his cohorts by blowing into the barrel of his 9 mm pistol in the violent Petare neighbourhood of Caracas, Venezuela, October 2006. © Fabio Cuttica/Eyevine
- 9 A Playboys Gang member readies himself with a revolver. Los Angeles, 2002. © Robert Yager
- 10 A gang member prepares for the night ahead by slipping a handgun under his belt and getting a shotgun ready. Los Angeles, 2001. © Robert Yager





12 Mara 18 members charged with homicide make their gang's signs at a police station in San Salvador, El Salvador, July 2006. © Luis Romero/AP Photo

13 Gang members of a slum along the R-10 road in Manila display their arsenal. © Peter Ginter/Science Faction/Corbis



- 14 This family portrait captures Mara 18 members and their baby at home in La Campanera, eastern San Salvador, El Salvador, February 2006. The young woman's face was tattooed after she failed to commit a revenge murder of another female gang member in the MS-13 gang. The photographer, Christian Poveda, was shot and killed on 2 September 2009 near San Salvador. He had been directing a documentary on the daily lives of gang members in La Campanera. In February 2010, police announced that Poveda had been killed 'by consensus' of the Mara 18 after three meetings of gang members ('Salvadoran Gang Member Who Appeared in Documentary Arrested,' Latin American Herald Tribune, 12 March 2010). © Christian Poveda/Agence VU
- 15 Three Ecuadorian members of the Almighty Latin King Nation pose in Madrid, making the shape of a crown—the gang's symbol—with their fingers. Some joined the gang after arriving in Spain as immigrants and experiencing social exclusion among their peers. Madrid, 2004. (ECUADOR)
© Lorena Ros/Panos Pictures



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- 16 Melay (centre) bears the pain from Dodong's homemade tattoo gun as he inscribes the name of a murdered gang member on her ankle. Melay and Yangyang (right) belong to Warshock, one of the better-known all-girl gangs in Davao City, Philippines. Hundreds of teenage girls join these groups to escape abuse, but often encounter more physical and sexual violence the longer they stay on the streets. September 2003. (GIRLS) © Ryan Anson
- 17 Gang members living in Davao City's larger squatter settlements enjoy refuge and a warm meal at a drop-in facility that has sought to rebuild a sense of community and self-respect among girls who have been victimized by psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Davao City, Philippines, September 2003. © Ryan Anson
- 18 A 'raskol' member (left) brandishes both a handmade gun and a knife that he uses to patrol the approach to the Kips Kaboni raskols' safehouse in the ramshackle settlement of Kaugere, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. August 2004. © Torsten Blackwood/AFP/Getty Images



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19 Two members of the Bloods show off guns in their safehouse in Brooklyn, New York, 2007. © Boogie

20 Netto, in the wheelchair, was shot in a gang shooting and is paralysed for life. He remains a member of the Marianna Maravilla Diablos. East Los Angeles, 1993. © Joseph Rodriguez/Gallery Stock

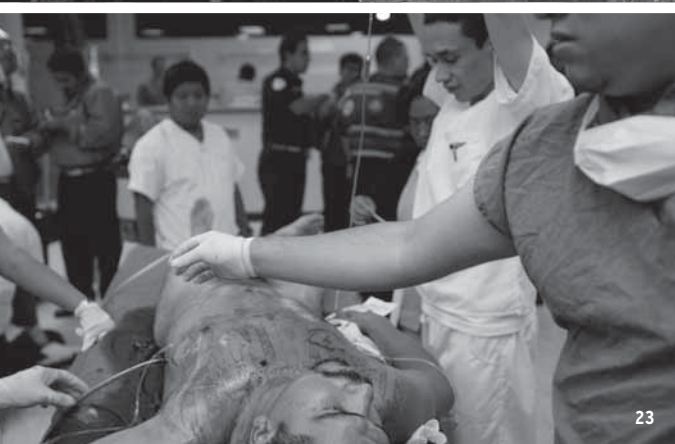
21 'Porky' describes his gang experience: 'I got my brain washing from my friend, Jaime, who used to bother me every day on my way from junior high school. I have put in work for five years. They shot my mom in the face and I have been shot at 10 times—got hit in the head, legs, back—by the time I was 16 years old. I have seen so much, I became old before my time. I am respected by all my homeboys, wanted by many and hated by others, but respected by all.' Porky's parents are veteranos (veteran gang members) from the previous generation of Maravilla, a gang that started in Mexico in the 1920s. East Los Angeles, 1993. © Joseph Rodriguez/Gallery Stock



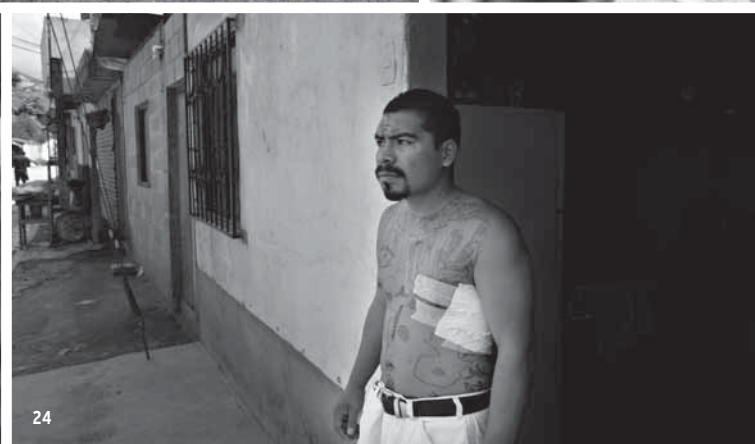
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22 The victim of a drive-by shooting is carried to safety by his peers in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, 1993. He was shot five times by a rival with an automatic weapon and survived. The week of the shooting was supposed to mark the start of a gang truce among many Latino gangs in East Los Angeles.

© Joseph Rodriguez/Gallery Stock

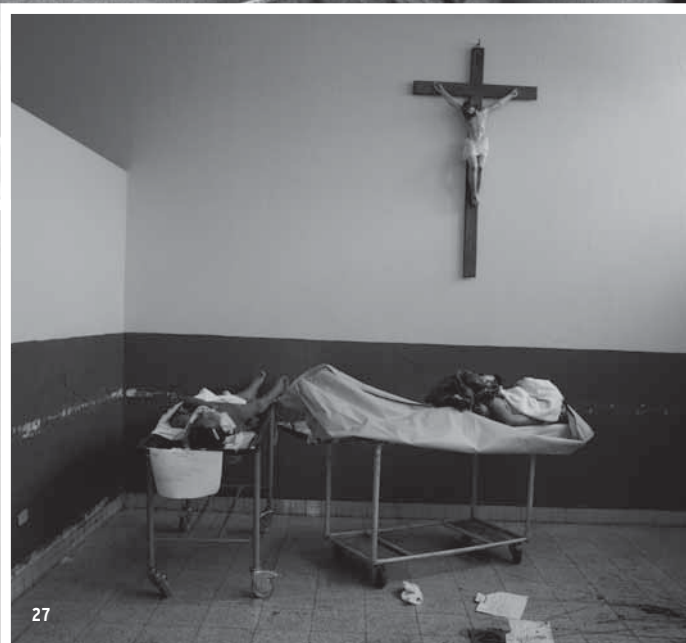
23 Surgeons fight to save the life of 'Lucifer', a former gang member who was shot twice in the chest, allegedly by police, in Guatemala City in 2006. Born and raised in Los Angeles, he joined the local Mara 18 when he was only 10 years old and was sentenced to life without parole by the time he was 15. After serving part of his sentence, he was released amid police corruption charges and returned to his parents' country of origin, Guatemala. © Angela Catlin

24 Four days after narrowly surviving surgery to remove two bullets from his chest, Lucifer is back home recovering. Guatemala City, 2006.

© Angela Catlin



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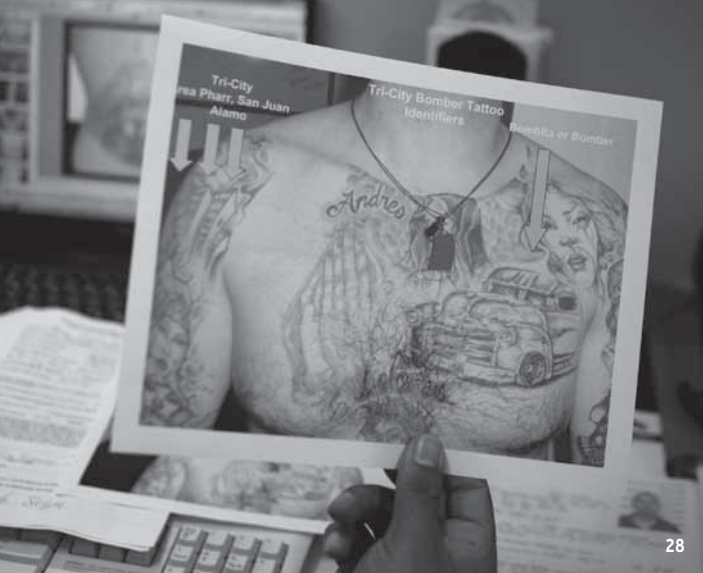
25 A member of the Latin Kings reveals the scar left from an operation he underwent after being shot in the back. Brooklyn, New York, 2004.

© Boogie

26 Jimmy 'El Pinto' Lopez, a member of the San Pas 13 gang, rides in his wheelchair, pushed by his best friend. Now 43, he has been in a wheelchair since he was 16, when he was shot in the back on his way to church. Jacona, Michoacán, México, 2006. © Carlos Alvarez Montero

27 Monday morning at the city morgue, after a weekend of gang violence. Two bodies await post-mortem under a cross. Guatemala City, 2006.

© Angela Catlin



28 A member of the Hidalgo County Gang Enforcement Unit holds a picture showing tattoos that identify gang members called 'Tri-City Bombers', referring to three cities in Hidalgo County, Texas, in April 2009. © Jessica Rinaldi/Reuters/Corbis

29 Salvadoran police arrest an alleged member of the Mara 18 during an anti-gang operation in the city of Zaragoza, 12 km south of San Salvador, in the early hours of 4 September 2009. National civil police arrested more than 30 members of the gang in an offensive deployed in different parts of El Salvador. © Luis Galdamez/Reuters/Corbis

30 Police control members of the Mara Salvatrucha after a prison riot on 26 March 2007 in the maximum-security jail of 'El Infiernito' (Little Hell), in the Escuintla department, 70 km south from Guatemala City. At least three inmates were killed and seven wounded during a clash between these gang members and other inmates. (PRISON) © AFP/Getty



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31 Bible in hand, this inmate prays by a religious mural in Quezaltepeque prison, which only admits members of the Mara Salvatrucha in order to prevent fights with other gangs. El Salvador, San Salvador, April 2005. (PRISON) © Piet den Blanken/Hollandse Hoogte

32 Mara Salvatrucha members make gang signs in their wing at the maximum-security prison in Zacatecoluca, El Salvador, 2009. (PRISON) © Donna DeCesare

33 Imprisoned members of the MS-13 gang rest inside the Chelatenango prison in El Salvador in May 2007. MS-13 originated in the Salvadoran immigrant community of Los Angeles in the 1980s, yet the US policy of deporting foreign convicts effectively exported gang violence to Central America.

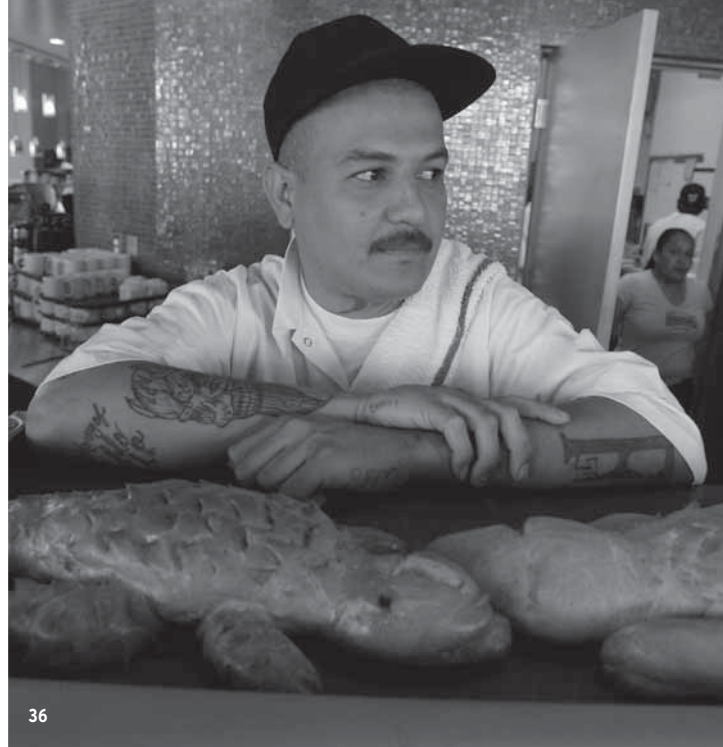
(GANG VIOLENCE; PRISON) © Moises Saman/Panos Pictures



34 Omar, who was a high-ranking member of the 28s numbers gang in prison, is known as 'Chappies' (slang for prison tattoos). A fellow gang member would be able to read his criminal life story in his tattoos, as well as his position in the gang hierarchy. He was a 'king' in prison, where he served a 15-year sentence for stabbing a man during a fight; now he sleeps in a tunnel, has not integrated back into society, and struggles to get work because of his tattoos. Asked whether he regrets the tattooing, he says no, adding that they have become an intrinsic part of his identity. In prison he received 30 days' solitary confinement with minimal food rations (salt-free for its weakening effect) for tattooing his face. Such intense facial tattooing is popular because of its dehumanizing effect, and as a clear rejection of authority. The scorpion on his upper arm shows membership of the 'Cape Town Scorpions' while the hand on his neck depicts the 28s' salute. Central Cape Town, South Africa, 2007. (PRISON) © Araminta de Clermont



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- 35 Exasperated by the crimes committed by maras, the population of San Juan Sacatepequez has just lynched and burned a young man alleged to be the head of a gang and to have robbed and extorted money from neighbourhood storekeepers. © Jérôme Sessini/Corbis
- 36 Alfredo Hernandez, a one-time gang member, waits for customers at the Homeboy Industries bakery and cafe in Los Angeles, March 2008. The Homeboy businesses offer job training for former gang members. © J. Emilio Flores/The New York Times/Redux
- 37 A father rests with his children in Guatemala City, 2001. He is in the process of leaving a gang, but with tattoos, work is hard to find. © Donna DeCesare
- 38 An Italian missionary removes a tattoo on the back of a member of the Mara Salvatrucha at a community health centre in San Salvador, El Salvador, August 2003. At the centre, former gang members ask for forgiveness for their crimes and have their tattoos removed to avoid being targeted during government crackdowns on gang violence. © Victor Ruiz Caballero/AP Photo