After mugging a person, the pandilleros throw the victim's shoes onto telephone wires as a gesture of triumph, Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, Managua, November 2009. © Dennis Rodgers

Turning Points

GANG EVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA

3

INTRODUCTION

Gangs are widely considered to be among the most important security threats in post-cold war Central America, to the extent that they have been characterized as a 'new urban insurgency' aiming 'to depose or control the governments of targeted countries' (Manwaring, 2005, p. 2). As a result, policy-makers and the general public see them as a danger that has the potential to extend beyond the region, in particular to the United States and Canada. At the same time, however, branding gangs a 'national security threat' or a 'new urban insurgency' can significantly distort our understanding of the phenomenon (Hagedorn, 2008, p. xxx). The topic of gangs is often sensationalized, whether in media reports, academic studies, or policy documents, and the overwhelming majority of available information on Central American gangs is arguably flawed, with official statistics particularly inconsistent 'due to institutional weaknesses, deficient data collection, and the discretionary if not political use of crime data' (Wolf, 2012, p. 68).

Central American gangs are furthermore often considered generically, when it is critical to distinguish between the very different phenomena of *pandillas* and *maras*. The former are localized, home-grown gangs, while the latter are a hybrid social form with transnational roots.[1] Pandillas were initially present throughout the Central American region in the post-cold war period but have been largely supplanted by maras in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; today, they are only significantly present in Nicaragua.[2] Most of what has been written about gangs in Central America is actually about maras, but pandillas arguably constitute a globally more representative type of gang. Yet the dynamics of the latter remain poorly understood, especially with regard to the long-term logic of their violence.

This chapter draws on in-depth primary research to offer a comparative analysis of the post-cold war evolutionary trajectories of the pandillas associated with two specific *barrios* (neighbourhoods) in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua: Elías Blanco and Luis Fanor Hernández.[3] It focuses on shifting patterns of small arms use by gang members, exploring the different types of weapons employed at different points in time, the changing nature of the underground arms market, the rise and fall of armed actors, and the evolving relationship that gangs have with their local communities. The key findings of this chapter are:

- The spread and shape of Nicaraguan pandillas in the post-cold war period is linked to the aftermath of the 1980s Contra war, including in particular the demobilization of conscripted youths. Gangs, however, subsequently institutionalized on the basis of processes of local territorialization, and their development has not been linear or progressive.
- Gangs in different urban neighbourhoods can develop unique evolutionary dynamics that affect their use of firearms and resulting violence levels. These change over time due to both internal and external factors.
- Internally, one or two individuals can make a crucial difference to the way a gang evolves in Nicaragua, as well as how violent it becomes, particularly with regard to the acquisition of specialized knowledge about gun use.

- Externally, the changing availability of weapons and ammunition and the presence of other armed actors fundamentally influence the use of firearms by gang members, whose weapons acquisition tends to be more opportunistic than systematic.
- Gun use by pandilla members has not evolved in a linear manner; the use of firearms increased steadily during the 1990s, then declined during the following decade, before picking up again from around 2010.
- Manufactured firearms were more common in the 1990s than in the following decade, when home-made weapons became more widespread, to the extent that they are now the principal type of firearm associated with gangs.

This chapter is based principally on 30 in-depth interviews conducted with current and former gang members in barrios Elías Blanco and Luis Fanor Hernández in June–September 2012.[4] It also draws on ongoing, long-term, and regularly repeated longitudinal ethnographic research carried out by the authors since the late 1990s.[5]

The first section of the chapter provides a brief overview of violence in contemporary Nicaragua, situating gangs within it. The following section offers some background on barrios Elías Blanco and Luis Fanor Hernández before examining the respective evolutionary trajectories of the gangs in the two neighbourhoods during the past 25 years. It reviews the similarities and differences in their developmental paths, tracing the factors that pushed one type of transformation over another, as well as the way that these have had diverse consequences, whether in relation to the gang, other armed actors, or local communities. The next section considers the evolution of gang members' use of firearms, including the different types of weapon used by gang members at different points in time, how they were obtained, and the way they learned to use them. The concluding section offers a brief synthesis of findings and relates the local dynamics explored in the two neighbourhoods to the broader national context.

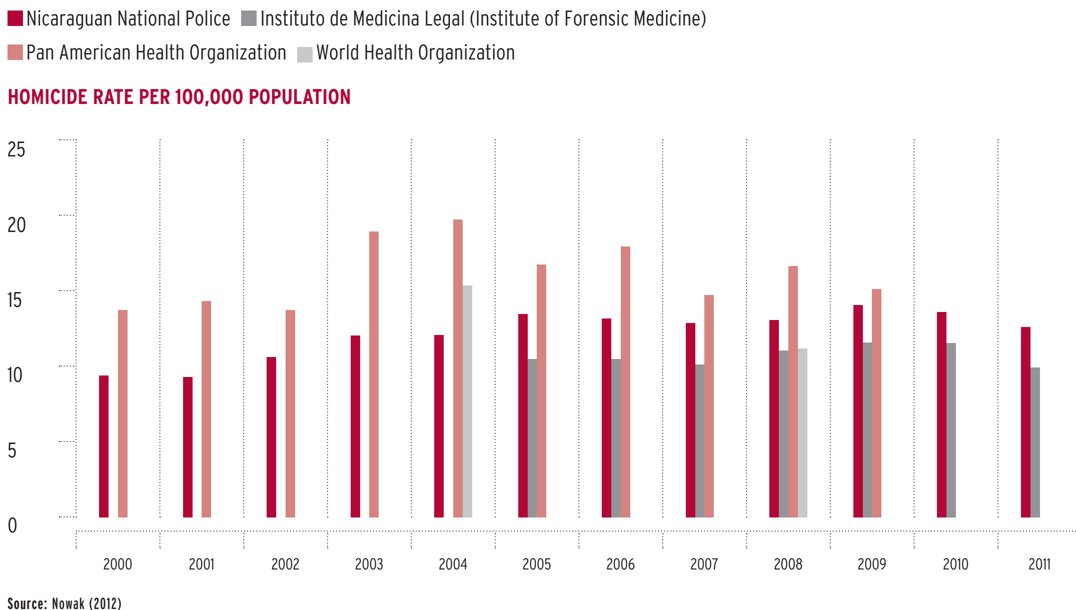
Nicaragua has long been linked to violence, enduring 'a continuous rite of blood'.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NICARAGUAN GANG VIOLENCE

Nicaragua has long been associated with violence, to the extent that the novelist Salman Rushdie famously described the country as having endured 'a continuous rite of blood' (Rushdie, 1987, p. 18). It is notorious for having suffered the longest-running dictatorship in modern Latin American history, that of the Somoza dynasty, which was finally overthrown after 45 years of bitter struggle in 1979 by the Sandinista revolution. Although the new revolutionary regime promulgated a range of social programmes that benefitted the majority of the country's population for the first time in Nicaraguan history, the revolution was soon overshadowed by a bitter civil war against the US-sponsored 'Contras'.[6] This conflict had a devastating effect on the country's economy, destroying and disrupting communication and economic infrastructure, and terrorizing and demoralizing the population, particularly in the countryside. More than 30,000 people—almost 1 per cent of the country's population—were killed, and the war was a primary reason for the Sandinista revolutionary regime's electoral defeat in February 1990 (Walker, 2003, p. 56).

Rather than leading to peace, regime change marked a shift in Nicaragua's geography of violence, the logic of which was well summarized by Eduardo Galeano, who remarked that, 'while the streets of Nicaragua's cities were peaceful during the years of formal conflict, once peace was declared, the country's streets became scenes of war' as a result of a dramatic explosion in urban crime and delinquency (Galeano, 1998, pp. 322–24, authors' translation).[7] According to official Nicaraguan National Police statistics, crime levels rose steadily by an annual average of more than 10 per cent during the 1990s, compared to just under 2 per cent during the 1980s, with the absolute number of crimes almost quadrupling between 1990 and 2000. Crimes against persons—including homicides, rapes, and assaults—increased especially significantly (Cajina, 2000, pp. 185–87).

Figure 3.1 **Inconsistent homicide data for Nicaragua, 2000–11**



Source: Nowak (2012)

While this overall trend of increasing urban crime is undoubtedly accurate, official Nicaraguan crime statistics are problematic. The inefficiency and weakness of Nicaraguan state institutions[8] clearly affects their reporting capacity,[9] and official crime statistics are also manipulated,[10] as successive post-revolutionary governments have sought to project Nicaragua as 'the safest country in Latin America', partly in order to attract foreign investment.[11] All post-1990 governments in Nicaragua, but especially that of Enrique Bolaños (2002–06), also attempted to project successful crime-fighting initiatives as a major element of their government policy; consequently, they have generally preferred to release 'positive'—that is, low—crime statistics.[12] The problem is particularly evident with regard to homicide statistics, as highlighted by the discrepancies between different data sources (see Figure 3.1).

Poor official statistics notwithstanding, ethnographic studies carried out in the past two decades or so confirm crime and delinquency as critical social concerns in urban Nicaragua.[13] Gangs are frequently described as the major source of insecurity in these investigations, and they have also regularly been identified as such in various Nicaraguan opinion polls on the topic. A 1999 survey conducted by the Nicaraguan NGO Ética y Transparencia, for example, found that 50 per cent of respondents identified gangs as the principal threat to their personal security (Cajina, 2000, p. 177). More than a decade later, the 2011 Citizen Security Perception Survey carried out by the Managua-based Institute for Strategic Studies and Public Policy[14] found that almost 60 per cent of respondents considered gangs the most important security threat in Nicaragua (Orozco, 2012, p. 8). More generally, Nicaraguan media regularly carries reports of gangs being involved not only in a range of petty crimes, including theft and mugging, but also in armed robbery and murder.[15]

Gangs before 1990

Gangs (pandillas) are by no means new features of Nicaraguan society. They can be traced back to the country's large-scale urbanization, when Managua grew from some 50,000 inhabitants in 1940 to more than 250,000 in 1963 (Kates et al., 1973, p. 982). These first gangs were little more than spontaneous groups of youths that emerged organically in

urban slums and only lasted as long as the peer group underpinning it stayed together. They were never prominent; indeed, gangs are not mentioned at all in Reinaldo Antonio Téfel's seminal study of urban poverty in Nicaragua (Téfel Vélez, 1976). The number of gangs declined significantly during the 1980s due to universal military service, the age of conscription being 16, and also because of the highly developed grassroots organization that was a hallmark of the Sandinista revolution, which included youth work brigades and extensive local neighbourhood watches.

Pandillas disappeared almost completely from view during the first half of the 1980s, before beginning to re-emerge towards the middle of the decade due to the war-fuelled erosion of the Sandinista welfare state, declining levels of local organization, the decreasing legitimacy of the revolutionary regime, and increasing numbers of youths deserting their military service (Lancaster, 1992, p. 132). These new gangs principally involved groups of young men[16] who had been conscripted together and who joined forces in order to protect their families and friends from the rising crime and insecurity, thereby displaying something of a vigilante ethos.

Gangs from 1990 to 2005

By the mid-1990s, a full-blown gang culture had become institutionalized.

From the early 1990s onwards, gangs began to proliferate exponentially, becoming a ubiquitous feature of poor urban neighbourhoods in all of the country's major cities. By 1999, the Nicaraguan National Police estimated that there were 110 gangs incorporating 8,500 youths in Managua, double the number recorded in 1996, and five times that documented in 1990 (Rodgers, 2006a, p. 273).[17] These figures are undoubtedly underestimates,[18] but they do provide a sense of the growth of the phenomenon in the first decade of the post-revolutionary period.

By the mid-1990s, a full-blown gang culture had become institutionalized. Gang members engaged in a wide range of petty delinquency, while rival gangs collectively fought each other for control over territory, in particular their local neighbourhoods, but also adjacent no-man's lands, roads, and other public spaces. These conflicts principally revolved around protecting local neighbourhood inhabitants from rival gangs; due to their fixed nature and their adherence to processes of regular escalation, they arguably provided a measure of predictability within an otherwise chaotic and highly insecure broader social context. In that sense, this new wave of gangs may be seen as continuing the original vigilante ethos of the first post-war generation, despite gang membership turnover due to gang members 'maturing out' between the ages of 19 and 22 (Rocha, 2000a; Rodgers, 2006a; 2007a).

Pandillas changed radically in nature around the turn of the century, however. In particular, they shifted from displaying solidarity with their local neighbourhood communities and offering localized forms of protection and social order to being much more parochial, predatory, and feared organizations. This shift was largely linked to the spread of cocaine in Nicaragua. The drug began to move through the country in substantial quantities from 1999 onwards,[19] and its consumption in the form of crack rapidly became a major element of gang culture. Although gang members in the early and mid-1990s did consume drugs, cocaine was practically unknown then, and they mainly smoked marijuana or sniffed glue.

Unlike those drugs, however, crack makes its users extremely aggressive, violent, and unpredictable; its consumption thus led to a rise in spontaneous, random attacks by addicted gang members looking to obtain money for their next fix. Contrary to the past, these gang members actively targeted local residents, generating a widespread and tangibly heightened sense of fear in urban neighbourhoods in Managua and other Nicaraguan cities, including Chinandega, Diriamba, and Estelí, starting from around 2000. In other words, crack consumption fundamentally changed the nature of the relationship between gangs and their local communities (Rocha, 2007a).

In some neighbourhoods, gang members integrated into the emergent Nicaraguan drug economy as street dealers, further increasing insecurity in those areas. For the most part, dealers worked independently, selling irregularly on street corners in their neighbourhood and sourcing their crack cocaine from one of a small number of neighbourhoods in the city, where it was being distributed initially by individuals on a rather ad hoc basis (Rodgers, 2010). Distributors were often ex-gang members who drew on their historical links to their local gang to enrol current members as their security apparatus. In these neighbourhoods, gang activities shifted from territorial protection to ensuring the proper functioning of the drug economy, which they achieved by collectively imposing local regimes of terror that went far beyond the more diffuse crack consumption-related violence. In order to reduce the risk of denunciation, these drug-dealing gangs created a climate of chronic fear by repeatedly threatening and committing arbitrary acts of violence against community inhabitants. At the same time, gang wars ceased because these would have impeded potential clients from coming to buy drugs (Rodgers, 2006a; 2007b; Rocha, 2007a).

Gangs from 2005 to the present

From the beginning of the 21st century—but most visibly around 2005—the number of pandillas in Nicaraguan cities began to decline, even disappearing completely in some neighbourhoods (Rocha, 2007a). The trend was attributable partly to the atomizing effect of crack consumption and partly to the emergence of more professional drug-dealing groups, often referred to as *cartelitos* (little cartels). These groups generally involved individuals from several different neighbourhoods, and even different parts of Nicaragua. Cartelitos imposed localized regimes of terror on the local communities in which they based their operations, brutally repressing local gangs to prevent them from becoming challengers.

This violence reached a peak around 2009–10, after which it eased up significantly as many cartelitos either fell apart due to internecine fighting or were taken over by rivals. Those that remained began to reduce their involvement in local drug dealing and refocused on drug trafficking, largely in the hopes of making much higher profits. Instead of dominating local communities, cartelito members began to minimize their visibility,

Former gang member showing his tattoo and the scar of a machete wound, Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, Managua, July 2007. © Dennis Rodgers

which led to improvements in local security in the urban neighbourhoods where they had previously operated. While drug dealing continues to be widespread in Nicaraguan cities, it has become much smaller in scale, disorganized, and more individualized, although those engaging in it are often gang members or ex-gang members.

Changes in urban policing in Nicaragua, 1990–2012

Changing forms of urban policing also transformed the panorama of Nicaraguan gang violence, particularly in Managua. During the early and mid-1990s, the police rarely entered poor urban neighbourhoods, largely in view of the fact that the violence there remained localized and tended not to spill over into richer areas, but also because gangs frequently out-gunned the police (Hernández, 2001). From the late 1990s until about 2005, however, the drug business led gang violence to spread throughout the city.

To contain this growth, the police began to implement what might be termed 'spectacular' policing, entering poor neighbourhoods in an arbitrary and intimidating manner, heavily armed and wearing riot gear, and more often than not specifically targeting youths (Rodgers, 2006b).[20] This approach led to a decline in gangs in some neighbourhoods, but increasing engagement with drug dealers in others. The police were initially confrontational but rapidly became accommodating, with some cartelitos even paying corrupt police officers to bust rival drug-dealing groups as they jostled for market domination.[21]

Gangs feature in poor neighbourhoods, but not as much as previously.

Predominant patterns of policing changed again around 2005, partly as a result of the institutionalization of corruption between some cartelitos and the police. In Managua, policing became more indirect in response to the conclusion of a range of urban infrastructural developments that isolated poor neighbourhoods; police now principally patrolled roads surrounding slums and poor neighbourhoods—rather than the poor areas themselves.[22]

Dynamics changed again as the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party co-opted gangs in a number of poor neighbourhoods from November 2008 onwards, actively hiring gang members to disrupt opposition marches and paint slogans around the city (Rocha, 2008, p. 28). The characteristic patrolling pattern in poor urban neighbourhoods consequently became rather desultory and non-interventionist perambulations by very lightly armed two-officer teams on a single motorcycle two or three times per day, except for Sundays. While this approach proved ineffective in terms of containing or managing violence, it permitted significant information gathering about local gangs to facilitate recruitment by FSLN activists.[23] A similar pattern pertains to the handful of new police substations set up in neighbourhoods that have been particularly notorious for their gang activity.

The emergence of new actors?

Gangs continue to be a feature of many poor urban neighbourhoods in present-day Nicaragua, but not to the same degree as during the 1990s and the early years of the following decade. Yet, as detailed in the next section, there is evidence that a new generation of territorial gangs is emerging, as well as new armed actors. Media reports and recent high-profile drug-trafficking cases suggest that the cartelitos' monopoly over trafficking routes in Nicaragua are coming to an end, not least because Colombian and Mexican cartels may be encroaching upon them.[24]

In 2010, Nicaragua saw the first drug cartel execution-style killings, which were widely blamed on Mexican contract killers (Quintero, 2010a; 2010b). Towards the end of 2011 the Nicaraguan government deployed 1,000 soldiers into the Nicaraguan countryside (Stone, 2011). The troops were ostensibly meant to deal with gangs—even though gangs are a fundamentally urban phenomenon; their more likely goal was to address the increasing territorialization of drug-trafficking groups, which reportedly control large swathes of the Nicaraguan countryside in the northern Caribbean

region (Romero, 2010). How this development might affect the potential re-emergence of gangs and the broader political economy of violence in Nicaragua remains to be seen.

COMPARING DIVERGENT GANG TRAJECTORIES

Barrios Elías Blanco (EB) and Luis Fanor Hernández (LFH) are both poor settlements located in south-east Managua. EB is part of a conglomerate of purpose-built low-income neighbourhoods, the first of which—Barrio de Pescadores—was constructed in 1963 to provide housing for a group of flood-displaced lakeside slum dwellers. A few years earlier, migrants from rural areas had established LFH as an illegal squatter community, one of many such informal settlements that mushroomed on the edge of Managua at that time. In view of its inhabitants' extreme poverty, the settlement came to be known as *La Sobrevivencia* (Survival),[25] but during the 1980s it benefitted from a Sandinista state housing development project and was renamed LFH.[26] EB continues to be very poor, but socio-economic conditions in LFH have improved significantly, albeit unequally, for reasons detailed below. In 2005, EB had a population of some 2,100, while LFH had approximately 3,000 inhabitants.[27]

EB and LFH have both long been notorious for their high levels of insecurity—and especially their gang activity. Taxi drivers will typically refuse to enter LFH, particularly at night, while EB is located in an area that the Nicaraguan National Police considers among the most dangerous in Managua due to its high concentration of pandillas.[28] Gangs in these two neighbourhoods, however, have experienced markedly different evolutionary trajectories over the past two decades. Although these may appear similar at first glance—given that both can be broken down into five distinct phases (see Table 3.1)—contextual differences between the two neighbourhoods led the gangs to develop in distinct ways, with critical consequences for their practices of violence as well as their broader social environment.

Table 3.1 **Pandilla evolutionary phases in two urban neighbourhoods**

Phase	Elías Blanco	Luis Fanor Hernández	Predominant form of violence associated with the pandillas
Pre-institutional	1990–92	1989–92	Vigilantism; drunken fighting at bars; some individual crime and delinquency
Golden era	1993–99	1993–98	Gang warfare; both individual and group crime and delinquency
Atomization (EB) vs. drug dealing (LFH)	2000–04	1999–2005	EB: drug-fuelled individual crime and delinquency; personal vendettas LFH: collective violence to support local drug economy; drug-fuelled individual crime and delinquency; personal vendettas
Pacification	2005–09	2006–11	Low levels of individual crime and delinquency (mainly drug-fuelled); diminishing personal vendettas
Revival	2010–present	2012–present	Increasing individual crime and delinquency; renewed collective forms of gang violence, including gang warfare

Even if the gangs in the two neighbourhoods experienced similar initial phases—regardless of the small differences in timing—they underwent distinct third phases, with the EB gang going through a process of 'atomization' while the LFH gang delved into 'drug dealing'. The fourth phase—'pacification'—is common to the two gangs but underpinned by different actors in the two neighbourhoods; similarly, the current 'revival' is happening for different reasons in the two barrios. That said, the predominant forms of violence associated with the different evolutionary phases also reveal significant similarities between the gangs of each neighbourhood.

The pre-institutional phase

The first of the five evolutionary phases is called 'pre-institutional' because the gangs that emerged then did not display any structural continuity or autonomy, even if some gang members moved on to the next phase of gang development on an individual basis. During this initial period, gangs in EB and LFH generally came together more or less organically but often lasted only for a year or two. Their membership drew on particular peer and social groups rather than a spatially defined youth population. The first such gang emerged in EB in 1990 and remained active until 1992. Its members hailed from EB but also from other neighbourhoods in the vicinity. A similar type of gang emerged in LFH in 1989 and lasted until 1992.

During this period, many of the gang members in EB and LFH were demobilized Sandinista Popular Army conscripts.[29] These individuals systematically identified three basic reasons for joining a gang. First, the change of regime in 1990 had led to an abrupt reduction of their social status as conscripts, whereas 'defending the nation' had previously

Pandilleros simulating a fight, Barrio Carlos Fonseca Amador, Managua, September 2002. © José Luis Rocha

been held very high in their communities; becoming gang members thus offered a means of reaffirmation vis-à-vis a wider society that seemed to be forgetting them rapidly. Second, becoming gang members was a way for them to recapture some of the adrenaline-charged energy of war, while also reconstituting a comradeship and solidarity reminiscent of their wartime experience as conscripts. But perhaps most importantly, these young men saw becoming gang members as a natural continuation of their previous role as soldiers. The early 1990s were highly uncertain times, marked by political polarization, violence, and spiralling insecurity, and these youths felt they could better 'serve' their families and friends by joining a gang than attempting to 'protect' them as individuals (Rodgers, 2006a, pp. 283–84).

Pre-institutional gangs tended to be relatively small, generally comprising no more than a dozen members. Most were between 18 and 22 years old, although the LFH gang also involved a few younger members who took on mascot-like roles. Most of the violence of these first gangs, whether in EB or LFH, was vigilante in nature and involved beating up individuals who had robbed, attacked, or threatened the friends or family of gang members. This brutality occurred principally in the gangs' local neighbourhoods, but they also rapidly began to fight other gangs at popular local nightclubs and bars on Friday and Saturday nights, for reasons unrelated to their vigilante ethos but rather tied to drinking and macho posturing. These fights generally only involved fists but could also escalate to include knives and broken bottles; firearms were used occasionally, although their role in such brawls often became mythologized. Many gang members also began to engage in crime and delinquency on an individual basis or in small groups of two or three, but they generally tended to do so outside their neighbourhood, to avoid being recognized.

The golden era[30]

By the mid-1990s, a persistent and full-blown territorial gang culture had developed in both EB and LFH, significantly changing predominant patterns of gang violence. In particular, gangs became exclusively associated with a specific urban neighbourhood and began to engage regularly in forms of gang warfare that aimed to extend or defend their territory. Although this activity often had highly deleterious consequences for residents, it generally involved an ordered, predictable logic. The first battle of a gang war typically featured fighting with fists and stones, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks, then to knives and broken bottles, and eventually to home-made mortars, guns, and AK-47s.

Gangs provided an 'early warning system' that was recognized and appreciated by local inhabitants.

Although the rate of escalation varied, the sequence did not—that is, gangs did not begin their wars with firearms (Rodgers, 2006a, p. 276). The fixed nature of gang warfare acted as a restraining mechanism, with each stage of the escalation process calling for greater but definite intensity of action, while always remaining under the actors' control. It also provided an 'early warning system' for local neighbourhood inhabitants, thereby offering them a means of circumscribing what Hannah Arendt called the 'all-pervading unpredictability' of violence (Arendt, 1969, p. 5).

This function was widely recognized and appreciated by local inhabitants, who frequently talked approvingly about their local gang. They often provided assistance to gang members, for example by hiding them if the police chased them into the neighbourhood because of their delinquent activities. Gang members returned the favour by going out of their way to protect residents of their local neighbourhood, especially if they were threatened by outsiders. They also frequently provided free bodyguard services and generally watched out for people's property. Gang members in LFH declared that the motivation behind such practices was that they wanted to show their 'love' (*querer* in the Nicaraguan vernacular) for their local neighbourhood. As a gang member named Miguel claimed, 'We show our love for the neighbourhood by fighting other gangs.'[31] One of his peers, Julio, concurred:

> *You show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other gangs [. . .]. You look after the neighbourhood in that way, you help them, keep them safe.*[32]

As Zygmunt Bauman has contended, 'in an ever more insecure and uncertain world the withdrawal into the safe haven of territoriality is an intense temptation' (Bauman, 1998, p. 117). He argues that 'the defence of the territory—the 'safe home'—becomes the pass-key to all doors which one feels must be locked to stave off the [. . .] threat to spiritual and material comfort' (p. 117). This 'pass-key' was critical to underpinning gang culture institutionally, as it moved from being based on peer groups to being based on territory. Gangs thus developed a certain structural autonomy, which was subsequently consolidated through conflict, independent of individual membership. As a result, the gangs of the golden era were also larger and more organized than their predecessors. In EB, the gang mobilized between 40 and 80 gang members, while the LFH gang had about 100 members. The overwhelming majority of members were new recruits, although a small number of individuals remained from the previous phase in both neighbourhoods, often as leaders.

Atomization vs. drug dealing

The spread of crack cocaine fundamentally changed the nature of the gangs.

Gang dynamics in both EB and LFH changed dramatically around 1999–2000. In both cases, the spread of crack cocaine fundamentally changed the nature of the gangs, which shifted from displaying a sense of social solidarity with the local community to becoming more exclusive and predatory organizations. This was partly due to the fact that gang members became crack consumers, many to the point of full-blown addiction. Users became aggressive and unpredictable, and regularly attacked, stole from, burgled, and threatened local neighbourhood inhabitants in order to secure their next fix. This behaviour significantly increased insecurity in both EB and LFH, leading to a breakdown of the gangs' relationships with their respective local communities. In LFH, levels of insecurity deteriorated even further as the gang become involved in drug dealing.

Although drug dealing became a feature of many neighbourhoods in Managua after 2000, it was generally a small-scale business that a few individual gang members carried out in an ad hoc manner. This was the case in EB, for example. In contrast, LFH was one of a small number of neighbourhoods through which cocaine arrived into the city (from Nicaragua's Caribbean coast) and from which it was then distributed.[33] The trade's impact on the way LFH gang members became involved in drug dealing was significant. In particular—and in contrast to EB—they did so as part of a highly organized drug economy that not only integrated them as individual street dealers, but also collectively, as a security infrastructure. The gang as a group enforced contracts and guarded drug shipments whenever they entered or left the neighbourhood; more generally, gang members engaged in a campaign of terror to intimidate local inhabitants, not only to prevent denunciations, but also to ensure that drug dealing could occur unimpeded. In doing so, the gang violently underpinned a process of localized capital accumulation that enabled a small group of drug dealers to flourish in an otherwise impoverished environment with few economic opportunities, while also generating significant insecurity for local neighbourhood inhabitants (Rodgers, 2007c; 2009; 2010).

The changing patterns of gang violence in EB and LFH also affected the gangs structurally; for one, their membership became older. In the 1990s, gang members in both neighbourhoods had been as young as 7 but rarely older than 22; by the beginning of the next decade, however, their age range had risen to 16–25, although it should be noted that the majority had been gang members in the previous phase. In part, this trend towards older gang membership reflected the growing role of crack consumption, as younger consumers suffered more from the drug's effects and

were therefore unable to 'keep up' with the gang. In the case of LFH, the trend also took hold since it was functionally necessary to be of a certain size and strength to be an effective street dealer.

The EB and LFH gangs also reduced significantly in size, to about 15–20 members. In EB, this downsizing was principally a consequence of crack consumption, which is generally a solitary activity. From around 2000 onwards, gang members began to hang out less and less together as a group and internecine fights became increasingly common. These clashes were often organized around individual vendettas, or *traidos,* which stood in stark contrast to the collective conflicts of the 1990s (Rocha, 2005). In LFH, the gang's reduction in size also occurred mainly for functional reasons, even though many who had been gang members in the mid- and late 1990s also said that they left the gang because they no longer identified with its new predatory ethos (Rodgers, 2007b). The fact that the LFH gang became the security apparatus of the emergent drug trade meant that it needed to be a well-coordinated and tight-knit group, which its previous incarnation as a fluid group of approximately 100 members would not have been able to be. This difference was critical, which is why this phase of the EB gang's evolutionary development is called 'atomization' and that of the LFH gang 'drug dealing'.

Pacification

Starting in 2005, the gang's atomization in EB gave way to a process of 'pacification', whereby the pandilla was increasingly controlled and regulated. This shift reflected generally changing forms of policing in Managua, and more specifically an increased police presence in EB due to the establishment of a police substation in a nearby neighbourhood. The pacification was also spurred by a rise in NGO and civil society interventions. The Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (Centre for the Prevention of Violence), for instance, developed a series of initiatives. It arranged for regular visits by psychologists to gang member families; organized workshops for gang members on practical issues, such as how to seek and secure employment; and created an association of gang member 'peace leaders', whose aim was to retain the social dynamism of the gang but move it towards more positive forms of collective action (Bellanger, 2006).[34]

Gang members restricted themselves to petty and generally individualized criminality.

These interventions significantly reduced gang violence in EB between 2005 and 2009, and gang members restricted themselves to petty and generally individualized criminality. But NGO initiatives came to an abrupt end when international funding to Nicaragua suffered significant cuts following government-imposed restrictions on its distribution. By the end of 2009, most NGOs and civil society organizations had ceased operating in EB. Combined with a decreasing law enforcement presence due to further changes in police patrolling patterns, these cuts brought an end to the process of gang pacification in the neighbourhood.

The LFH gang underwent a pacification phase starting in 2006. Although it may seem similar to that experienced by the EB gang, this phase actually occurred for very different reasons, and in a distinct manner. In EB, external actors—namely the police, NGOs, and civil society organizations—were the key factors in the gang's pacification. In contrast, the LFH process was associated with an internal actor that emerged from the local drug trade.

Drug sales had initially been organized in an informal manner around a single individual known as el Indio Viejo (the Old Indian). He had been a member of the first neighbourhood gang and had originally drawn on a network of both former and current gang members in order to run his drug dealing business (Rodgers, 2010). Over time he began to professionalize and became more selective in picking his partners. By 2005, he was leading a shadowy group involving both youths and adults, not all of whom had gang experience and not all of whom came from LFH, although their main base remained in the neighbourhood. This group was locally referred to as the *cartelito*, or 'little cartel'.

In response to the gang members' increasing crack consumption, concomitant unreliability, and amateur nature, the cartelito rapidly began to develop its own security infrastructure. In doing so, it clashed with the LFH gang. The pandilla was no match for the cartelito, which was both better armed and more professional (members of the cartelito did not consume the drugs they sold, for example). The pandilla also grew weaker as a number of its older members retired, and two other members quit to join the cartelito. In 2006, after a series of violent confrontations that led several gang members to be critically injured and one killed, the pandilla effectively ceased to exist as a collective unit. Although youths still hung out individually in the neighbourhood streets and consumed crack, local inhabitants generally identified them as *chavalos vagos* (delinquent youths) rather than *pandilleros* (gang members). Personal conflicts, or traidos, persisted between individuals and were the principal vectors of violence associated with former gang members, beyond minor individualized crime and delinquency.

After breaking up the gang, the cartelito sought to consolidate its domination of LFH and to expand its operations beyond the neighbourhood. Paradoxically, levels of post-cold war insecurity in LFH reached their peak in 2007–10, when the pandilla was no longer operating. During this period, armed individuals associated with the cartelito randomly patrolled the neighbourhood on motorbikes, arbitrarily intimidating local residents—'to train us', as one inhabitant called Doña Yolanda put it.[35] In particular, they violently prevented local youths from congregating on street corners to keep them from coalescing into a gang that might eventually challenge the cartelito. As it professionalized, the cartelito also fought against equivalent organizations in Managua and beyond, largely to secure an increased share in the drug market. Shoot-outs in and around the neighbourhood became common occurrences, although the cartelito sometimes employed the police as a proxy, particularly against other drug-dealing groups.

Current teen gangs are involved in a variety of petty criminal activity.

Revival

By 2009 the LFH cartelito had begun to reduce its involvement in local drug-dealing activities, refocusing instead on drug trafficking, partly because it was much more lucrative. Moreover, law enforcement personnel had arrested el Indio Viejo, who subsequently blamed the visibility of drug dealing for his arrest and decided to change tactics following his release. As a consequence, local violence dynamics underwent a major transformation. The cartelito no longer sought territorial control in order to manage sales, but generally avoided attracting attention, using the neighbourhood only as a residence and transit point. Nevertheless, el Indio Viejo was arrested again in 2011, along with a number of other members of the cartelito. A rival whose group had developed close links to certain members of the Nicaraguan government was reportedly able to supersede the bribes that el Indio Viejo had regularly paid the police to be left alone. What remained of the cartelito subsequently reorganized in a much reduced manner around his number two, who was also an ex-gang member from the first post-war generation and was known as 'Pac-Man' (due to his voracious appetite).

These developments radically improved the local security situation in LFH. Around 2010, a group of 4–6 youths who had previously been pandilla members, and who were all crack addicts, emerged as the main source of local violence. They would sit together at a nearby pedestrian bridge, waiting to mug passers-by; they generally did not bother local inhabitants and were mostly active at night. In mid-2012, however, about a dozen 14–15-year-olds came together as a new gang, hence the label 'revival' for this phase. They hang out together as a group on LFH street corners, effectively occupying the sociological vacuum left by the cartelito's withdrawal (and the prior disappearance of the earlier pandilla). These teens are involved in a variety of petty criminal activities, although they sometimes act collectively. In July 2012, for example, this new gang attacked the gang in a nearby neighbourhood. Although they

were repelled with several members injured, two of them critically, this instance of collective violence by the group signalled the beginning of a new cycle of gang warfare.

EB witnessed a similar gang revival phase, although it started earlier, around the beginning of 2010. On the one hand, it coincided with the decline in NGO and civil society organization interventions in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, it also followed a process of politicization of the local pandilla that had begun in 2008 and whereby the ruling FSLN party regularly hired both active and retired EB gang members—whom they provided with ammunition, transportation, and immunity—to disrupt opposition marches 'spontaneously' (Rocha, 2008). As a result, a new generation of EB gang members, along with some previous members, began to hang out together as a group, and were regularly contracted by the FSLN. Although this process of instrumental politicization is not solely responsible for the revival, it played an important role in connecting individuals who had been gang members from about 2005 to 2010 with a new generation of 14–16-year-old youths; by providing a common group activity, it also helped the gang reoccupy the sociological space from which it had withdrawn during the pacification phase.

GANGS AND GUNS

Although not all gangs are necessarily associated with gun violence, it is often claimed that the widespread availability of firearms increases the likelihood of their use by gang members (Yablonsky, 1997, p. 5). In many ways, this connection is not surprising; as Hannah Arendt famously pointed out, violence 'always needs *implements*' (Arendt, 1969, p. 4). That said, the evolutionary trajectories of the pandillas in EB and LFH display distinct shifts and fluctuations in their levels of violence and use of firearms. In general terms, gun use by gang members increased steadily during the 1990s, but then declined in EB during the following decade and in LFH from about 2005; by about 2008, something of a revival had begun, marked by a critical change in the types of firearm used. At first glance this trend would seem to correspond closely to that of the EB and LFH gangs' institutional evolutions, but closer analysis reveals that it was less determined by the gangs' institutionalization than by a mixture of general and specific contextual factors, including the gangs' changing practices of violence; the variable availability of different types of firearm; the intervention of other violent actors; and evolving knowledge about firearm use.

'Violence always needs *implements*.'
—Hannah Arendt

Patterns of weapon use

Gang members in EB and LFH have used a wide range of weapons over the past 25 years. These have included a variety of manufactured firearms, such as pistols and revolvers (Makarov and Tokarev TT, Smith & Wesson, Taurus, and Glock), shotguns (both break- and pump-action), assault rifles (AK-47s), submachine guns (Thompson and Uzi), and military weapons such as grenades. They have also used home-made weapons—mainly mortars, but also pistols and pump-action shotguns. There are no rules governing firearm ownership in either the EB or the LFH gangs, however. As one LFH pandilla member called Mayuyu put it, 'here any old cat can wander around with a gun'.[36] Gang members' weapons are also generally their individual property, in both EB and LFH.[37]

By all accounts, manufactured firearms were more common in the 1990s than during the following decade, while the opposite trend applies to home-made weapons, which are now the principal type of firearm associated with pandillas. The types of manufactured firearms and military weapons that were more common during the 1990s were Makarov and Tokarev TT pistols as well as AK-47s and grenades, most of which were leftover weapons from the 1980s war

against the Contras. An exception to the general trend is the home-made mortar, which has been a staple gang weapon in Nicaragua since the early 1990s.

The functionality of guns

As an EB gang member called el Revoliático asserted, 'The gang with the most powerful weapons is usually the one that wins.'[38] Indeed, firearms and military weapons such as mortars and grenades constitute the pinnacle of gang members' armoury in Nicaragua. At the same time, it is often claimed that youths 'typically seek guns for the status they confer, rather than as inputs into a crime production function' (Cook et al., 2007, p. F562). In this respect, even if small arms can clearly bestow a certain aura of power to individual gang members in both EB and LFH—while some weapons can increase the collective prestige of an entire gang—gun ownership by gang members in Nicaragua is primarily functional. Gang members in EB and LFH acquired and used firearms first and foremost in order to better carry out criminal and delinquent activities, as is highlighted in Box 3.1, which details the guns acquired by Milton, an LFH gang member who was active in the early and mid-1990s.[39]

Although firearms played a significant role in gang members' individual delinquency in EB and LFH right from the re-emergence of gangs in the early 1990s, they only became a major feature of collective gang warfare during the mid-1990s. This is particularly true of the AK-47, which served as one of the primary firearms of the Sandinista Popular Army in the 1980s; the revolutionary regime also distributed many of these assault rifles among the general population to prepare against a potential US invasion. Following the end of the Contra war, 142,000 small arms were destroyed between 1991 and 1993 in Nicaragua (Small Arms Survey, 2002, p. 74). Many AK-47s were destroyed during that period, but many more remained in circulation and found their way into the hands of gang members. They initially used them mainly in their criminal and delinquent activities during the early 1990s, before expanding their usage to gang warfare during the mid-1990s.[40] In particular, AK-47s often constituted the most common means by which a gang war's escalation process reached its final point of intensification.

Box 3.1 Milton's guns

My first firearm was a Makarov handgun, which I got from a retired policeman in 1991. I'd just started mugging, and he came to find me one day, and said, 'I hear that you're a quick-thinking kind of guy, and I wondered whether you didn't want to rent a gun. It would make your business much easier, you know.' I asked him what he wanted in return, and he told me 50 per cent of whatever I made. I thought about it, and said, 'Sure, let's see how it works out.' So he taught me how to use it–how to take off the security, how to maintain it, oil it, take it apart, and put it together again–and then he'd give it me loaded with ten shots every time I decided to go out on *bisnes*.

It worked well, and so a couple of years later I bought my own gun, from a guy in another barrio, for NIO 300 [USD 50], which was a lot of money at the time. A cousin of mine who lives there put us in touch with each other. It was a .22 revolver. I did all sorts of shit with that one.

One time I went to a party with my mate Lencho, and there was a guy there wearing the new Nike trainers–well, you know, new at the time. Lencho saw them, and said, 'Fuck, I'd love to have those,' and so I said to him, 'No worries, *maje*, I'm going to give them to you as a present.' Lencho was a good mate, always willing to help me whenever I asked him, so I wanted to do him a good turn. I waited until the guy with the shoes left and followed him out, and then I pulled the gun on him in a side street and told him to give me the shoes. He also had 20 dollars on him, which was a bonus, so we were able to go and get completely wasted afterwards [. . .].

I had to sell that gun cheaply when my first son was born, in 1995, because I needed money to buy milk and other stuff for the baby [. . .]. I thought about buying a new one, but Lencho had acquired a TT handgun, which he would lend me no problem, although that was the gun that jammed on me, and because of that I got caught while mugging an old lady and spent a few weeks in jail in 1997.

After that I left the gang, and I went to Costa Rica for a few years and worked picking coffee. When I came back the gang had changed, so I no longer hung out with it, and I set up my food business, which keeps me busy, and for which I don't need a gun.

Source: Dennis Rodgers interview with Milton, LFH, 17 July 2012; authors' translation

Starting around 2000, gang members in both EB and LFH diminished their use of AK-47s as well as surplus 1980s military weapons such as grenades. They stopped using grenades because they were not reusable weapons and their supply was finite. The decline of AK-47s, however, came about because many of them ceased to function, even though the assault rifle is one of the most durable ever made. According to Bismarck, who had been a member of the first LFH gang in the early 1990s, 'They're old weapons, from the [Contra] war, and also gang members today don't know how to care for them, so they break down.'[41] Gang members in EB echoed this sentiment, including with reference to other firearms from the 1980s, such as Makarov pistols. As summarized by El Cofla, an EB gang member: 'The firearms we always avoid using are Makarov pistols, those with the magazines, because they fuck up too much [. . .]. They jam, and the bullet stays inside [. . .]. There's only old Makarovs left.'[42] Milton in LFH also suggested that the decline in the use of AK-47s was due to the fact that many gang members became crack addicts around 2000–02 and sold their AKs to buy drugs because they were weapons for which they could get a good price.[43]

The impact of other armed actors

Between 2000 and 2005, gang members in both EB and LFH continued to employ other firearms, including new ones such as Taurus and Smith & Wesson pistols, as well as break- and pump-action shotguns. Indeed, these were used more often and were much more visible than previously, not only because crack consumption bred more intense violence, but also, in the case of the LFH gang, because of its developing role as the security apparatus of the then emergent drug trade. Local drug dealers, and particularly el Indio Viejo, often sold such guns to LFH gang members.

Nicaraguan gang members have long used home-made weapons.

From about 2005 onwards, however, gang members in EB and LFH began to use firearms much less frequently. In EB, NGO, civil society, and police pacifying interventions generally reduced gang activity. In LFH, another armed entity significantly influenced the gang, namely the cartelito. This critical difference between the EB and LFH gangs was starkly reflected in the evolving political economy of weapons in the two neighbourhoods. AK-47s were the only type of assault rifles ever mentioned by gang members in EB. They were the most common firearm in LFH and, as in EB, became less common around 2000. Starting around 2005, the rise of the cartelito led to the emergence of new firearms. A gang member known as Mayuyu recalled: 'One guy in the cartelito, Mungo, has an Uzi submachine gun, which el Indio Viejo got for him through his Colombian contacts a few years ago.'[44]

Mungo, a former LFH gang member, was one of a small number who joined the cartelito in 2005. He served as one of the cartelito's main 'enforcers' when they violently broke up the LFH gang. Having access to firearms such as Uzis was one reason Mungo and others were able to do so with relative ease. Although most of the LFH gang members were armed with pistols and revolvers at the time, they were no match for Uzis. Between 2006 and 2010, Mungo and other members of the cartelito patrolled the neighbourhood and dispersed any group of youths known to be associated with the gang, generally by shooting to scare them, while also killing one gang member in 2006. After successfully breaking up the pandilla, Mungo and others then systematically confiscated weapons from LFH youths, generally violently. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is around this time that home-made guns, known as *armas hechizas*, began to emerge in significant quantities in LFH. Their use also increased in EB during this period, primarily because these were the only firearms that EB gang members could get their hands on and knew how to use at the time.

Home-made weapons

Nicaraguan gang members have long used home-made weapons. This is particularly true of home-made mortars (*morteros caseros*), which were a ubiquitous feature of gang warfare during the golden era, but which are also used at political demonstrations and sometimes fired at New Year's parties. They consist of a metal tube—usually a piece of water

piping—that is sealed at one end and to which two handles are welded (see Figure 3.2). They can shoot either a double powder load, with the first providing the propulsion, and the second exploding a few seconds later, or a single powder load, to propel small stones, nails, bits of glass, or—and this was a particularly popular variant in LFH during the 1990s—cut-up rubber sandals (*chinelas*), the pieces of which would then start melting on expulsion, burning anyone they hit.

Many gang members make their own mortars, paying a local metalwork shop NIO 50–60 (USD 4–5) to allow them to use their soldering tools; others buy their mortars from the La Caimana firework company, where they also purchase the powder loads. The price of a mortar was NIO 150–200 during the mid-1990s, and NIO 250–300 during the following decade (due to exchange rate inflation, both price ranges remained approximately equivalent to USD 15–20).

Figure 3.2 **A home-made mortar being shot**

© Dennis Rodgers

The other home-made firearms used by gang members are shotguns and pistols (see Figure 3.3). Shotguns, or *chimbas*, fire manufactured bullets, generally either .38 or .22 calibre, but also AK-47 7.62×39 mm cartridges and 12- or 16-gauge shotgun shells. These weapons are more complicated to make than mortars. Daimaku, who was a gang member in EB around 2008–10, described how to make a particular type of home-made pistol known as a Xica da Silva:

> *The name comes from a Brazilian soap on TV that was called Xica da Silva, where people used a particular kind of gun, quite long, and since that's the way those we make are, too, that's the name. These guns shoot AK, Makarov, and .38-calibre bullets, but we make them in an artisanal manner [. . .]. What you do is you take two tubes and attach one to the handle, while the other one is hollow. To this one, you then weld two ringlets on the sides, to hold down the slingshot. After that, you get a pin, which you sharpen on a whetstone, to get a very fine point, and you attach it to the slingshot, and then you get the bullet, which you put in the tube. You adjust the pin, you check the slingshot, and then you let go of the pin and it detonates the bullet.*[45]

Figure 3.3 **A home-made shotgun (chimba) and a home-made pistol (Xica da Silva)**

© José Luis Rocha

Compared to manufactured firearms, home-made weapons are quite inaccurate and take more time to reload, which is highly problematic in conflict situations. But perhaps the single biggest issue with home-made guns is that they are prone to malfunction. An LFH gang member called Felix commented:

> *Home-made guns are improvised, makeshift weapons. [They're] dangerous because these guns are not made with any degree of precision, so if the calibre is not appropriate to the size of the piping, then it blows up, and this happens a lot.*[46]

Not surprisingly, perhaps, hand injuries from exploding hand-made guns became very common among gang members in both EB and LFH around 2007–10.[47] Having said this, as Julio, an LFH gang member, noted: 'A home-made gun breaks down a lot, but it's also easier to fix than a real gun'[48]—which was potentially a major advantage over manufactured guns, as gang members could mend defective home-made weapons themselves. Whereas many gang members produced mortars, only a few actually made their own home-made pistols or shotguns from scratch, however, and the rest bought their home-made firearms from, or had them mended by, these or gang members in other neighbourhoods. Charola, who was an LFH gang member, bought his home-made shotgun from another neighbourhood gang member for NIO 350 (USD 21) in 2006, while in EB prices reportedly oscillated between NIO 250 and 500 (USD 10–22) in 2012.

Weapon sources and prices

Prior to the mid-1970s, gang members' access to firearms was limited.

Prior to the mid-1970s, gang members' access to firearms was limited, and so they were rarely used. Gun use increased with the intensification of the FSLN-led insurrection during the second half of the 1970s, although it is unclear whether this increase was due to the greater availability of weapons as a result of the insurrection or the fact that many gang members joined the FSLN (Rocha, 2006b, p. 25). The Contra war of the 1980s, however, had a clear and direct impact on gangs and, more specifically, on their use of firearms. As described above, many of the first-generation gang members in both EB and LFH were youths who had served in the military. Almost all of them brought a range of weapons back with them, including Makarov and Tokarev TT pistols, AK-47s, and grenades. Picapollo, a member of the first gang that emerged in EB in 1990 and who became a leader of the gang in the mid-1990s, recalled in an interview:

> *I stole [two AK-47s] from the battalion I did my military service with, but then everybody was doing it—some guys were even robbing grenades and bazookas! Don't ask me how we got it all out, but we did [. . .]. That's why all the gangs had that kind of shit then.*[49]

The practice extended beyond the gang, and many gang members who had not served in the military also had access to such weapons through relatives who had been conscripted.

The proliferation of such weapons in the early 1990s is one reason why the post-conflict gangs in EB and LFH were more violent than their historical predecessors. But the post-war flood of small arms was a one-off event, with only short-term impacts. While Table 3.2 must be taken as indicative rather than comprehensive, it shows a definite trend away from war weapons after the 1990s, and a gradual turn to newer firearms. This shift was partly due to the fact that older weapons broke down, were lost, or were confiscated.

At the same time, gang members reported that newer weapons were more difficult to obtain. In LFH, this lack of availability coincided with the rise of the cartelito, which actively impeded gang members from obtaining firearms. Having said this, the most common sources of weaponry for gang members, across all epochs but particularly in the 1990s, were other gang members, whether in the same neighbourhood or elsewhere. Most of them had, at least initially,

Table 3.2 **Types, prices, and sources of manufactured firearms in LFH, 1990–2012**

Period	Type of weapon	Price	Source	Status
Early 1990s	.38 Smith & Wesson	Unknown	Private security guard (friend of brother-in-law)	Given to another gang member
	Makarov pistol	Rented for 50% of profits of delinquency	Retired policeman	Policeman took it back
	.22 Smith & Wesson	NIO 300 (USD 50)	Gang member from another barrio (friend of a friend)	Sold for NIO 700 (USD 75) in 1995
	Tokarev TT pistol	Not applicable	Brought back from military service by brother	Broke down and then was lost
	AK-47 assault rifle	Not applicable	Brought back from military service by brother	Sold for USD 350 in 2000
Mid-1990s	Makarov pistol	NIO 800 (USD 90)	Older gang member from neighbourhood	Confiscated by police when caught committing a robbery
	Tokarev TT pistol	Not applicable	Stolen from policeman	Lost during botched mugging
	.22 Smith & Wesson	Unknown	Bought from retired army personnel living in neighbourhood	Sold for NIO 700 (USD 75) in 1995
	AK-47 assault rifle	Not applicable	Brought back from military service by father	Stolen from home

been selling weapons that they or a relative had brought back from the army. Such stockpiles were obviously finite, and the supply gradually dwindled.

Over time, gang members thus turned to different firearms suppliers. They particularly reported that, starting around 2005, private security guards became a major source of both firearms and ammunition. Certainly, private security has boomed in Nicaragua over the past decade and a half. In 1995, the country only had eight private security companies, but the number increased to 56 by 2003 and to 98 by 2009. The number of armed private security guards similarly increased from some 9,000 in 2003 to almost 20,000 in 2009—compared to 9,630 police officers in this same year (Silva, 2003; PNUD, 2011, pp. 55–68). Many gang members in both EB and LFH reported stealing guns from private security guards, including shotguns (*escopetas*), the guards' primary weapons. Several gang members in LFH also described buying both weapons and ammunition from private security guards whom they knew, either because these lived in the neighbourhood or, in one case, because the guard was employed at the gang member's workplace.[50]

Table 3.2 **Cont.**

Period	Type of weapon	Price	Source	Status
Late 1990s-2003	Thompson submachine gun	NIO 3,000 (USD 250)	Unknown	Attempted to sell it to local drug dealer (el Indio Viejo), who refused to buy it
	.22	NIO 2,500 (USD 195)	Gang member in other neighbourhood (friend of a friend)	Unknown
	Taurus Special	NIO 5,000 (USD 360)	Local drug dealer (el Indio Viejo)	Still in possession of gang member
	9 mm Smith & Wesson	NIO 4,500 (USD 320)	Gang member from another barrio (cousin)	Sold for NIO 7,500 (USD 465) in 2004
2004-09	.38	NIO 3,500 (USD 170) in 2009	Unknown	Given to another gang member in another neighbourhood (cousin)
	9 mm Taurus	NIO 7,000 (USD 330)	Gang member from another barrio (friend of a friend)	Still in possession of gang member
	.38 Smith & Wesson	NIO 4,000 (USD 190)	Gang member from another barrio (friend of a friend)	Still in possession of gang member
	Shotgun	Not applicable	Stolen from private security guard	Still in possession of gang member
	.40 Glock	USD 150	Son of an army officer	Still in possession of gang member
2010-present	.38 Taurus	NIO 3,000 (USD 125)	Police officer (brother of a work colleague)	Still in possession of gang member

A number of gang members in both EB and LFH also claimed that corrupt police officers began to resell weapons that they had confiscated from gang members or drug dealers around the beginning of the pacification phase in 2005. With one exception, however, none of the gang members interviewed had actually bought a weapon this way. On the other hand, according to Daimaku in EB, the police and the army became major sources of ammunition around this time:

We buy bullets illegally, we know which bróderes have connections to the police or the army, and we can buy however many we want from them, normally for NIO 2–3 [USD 0.10–0.15] per bullet, whether for an AK-47 or a .22. We also buy [shells] for our shotguns, but these are more expensive, like NIO 10 [USD 0.45] per [shell].[51]

This type of interaction probably reflects the fact that a number of police officers lived in EB and had ties of kinship or friendship to gang members. A gang member known as el Pelón described the situation:

Police officers live here, and they're cool with us. They only ask that we respect them, and if we're fighting with another gang, they don't intervene or call other police officers. They even sell us bullets for our guns, sometimes even giving them to us for free![52]

By all accounts, gang members in EB and LFH found it relatively easy to source ammunition in the 1990s, as there were major stockpiles left over from the war, many of which were not controlled properly. It only took a few informal inquiries in most of Managua's markets to be able to find individuals who were selling all sorts of different calibre bullets and slugs in the mid-1990s. During the late 1990s, however, those with guns began to source their ammunition differently, through connections. Jader, in LFH, explained that he had sourced his ammunition at a local market for a number of years but that, by 2012, he had had to develop a different approach:

Now I buy from the guy who has the billiards hall in the next neighbourhood. He's got the same gun as me, but legally, and so he can buy bullets in proper shops, and he then sells me a case or two on the side whenever I want, but he doesn't sell them cheaply.[53]

Another LFH gang member called Spencer explained that licensed firearms shops would also sell ammunition illegally, but usually at a high mark-up: 'Normally a bullet costs between NIO 3 and 12 [USD 0.15–0.60] legally, but if you buy them illegally, it's at least NIO 20 [USD 0.95] a bullet.'[54]

Price inflation is by no means unusual (ILLICIT MARKET PRICES); 'substantial transaction costs' often exist in underground gun markets, including 'large mark-ups over legal prices, substantial search times, uncertainty about product quality, and [. . .] physical risk[s] associated with exchange' (Cook et al., 2007, p. F561). These costs can vary across different contexts, although neither EB nor LFH witnessed significant price increases or decreases. The prices reported in Table 3.2, however, are higher than those recorded in a study on average underground market prices carried out in 2009 by the Nicaraguan Institute for Strategic Studies and Public Policy. That study finds that a 9 mm automatic pistol cost NIO 2,000–2,500 (USD 95–120), a 12- or 16-gauge shotgun around NIO 4,000 (USD 190), an AK-47 about NIO 4,500–5,000 (USD 215–240), and an Uzi submachine gun roughly NIO 9,000 (USD 430) (Tórrez González, 2010). Having said this, weapon prices fluctuated significantly, even within phases, and were only partly determined by the source of the weapon. Similarly, the resale price clearly varies tremendously.

Knowledge and training

The use of firearms requires some specialized knowledge. The first gang members in EB and LFH either obtained this knowledge directly during their military service or were taught by somebody who had done so, whether gang members or others. Bismarck, who had no military experience, described the learning process: 'We were taught how to use firearms by the gang members who had done their military service [...]. They showed us how to load guns, how to shoot them, how to strip and clean them.'[55] Most of the members of the first LFH gang matured out by 1992, but Bismarck and Milton, who were younger, made the transition to the next gang; as a result, they were critical for the transmission of this specialized knowledge. This was also the case in EB, where a gang member called Picapollo played a similar role.

Although the transmission of this specialized knowledge continued across successive generations of gang members, there was something of a 'Chinese whispers' effect in both EB and LFH as the temporal distance from the generation that had had professional training increased. The fact that the knowledge had been diluted over time became particularly apparent by the late 1990s, with the number of accidents involving manufactured firearms soaring in both EB and LFH.[56]

As Bismarck explained in an interview in 2002, in LFH the accidents were linked to an increasing number of defective weapons, largely due to improper or deficient care. He also confirmed that gang members did not always understand how to use their weapons and thus often unintentionally shot themselves or others. In his words: 'Gang members nowadays don't take proper care of their weapons, so they're breaking down all the time, sometimes even blowing up in their face.' He went on to discuss the case of a young gang member who had recently shot himself in the foot:

> *He had no idea what he was doing. He'd got this pistol, and thought that made him a* poderoso *(big man), but you know, you've got to know how to use a gun to be able to do something with it. He shot himself because he put it in his belt without the security turned on [. . .]. The problem was that he hadn't had proper training, because there's nobody left in the gang who really knows, and so he'd only half understood things, or hadn't been told properly, and that's why he shot himself.*[57]

A critical difference between EB and LFH—and one of the reasons why the gang in the latter was more violent than that in the former after 2000—was that LFH saw a renewal of gang member knowledge about the use of firearms. This was due to a single individual, an ex-gang member from the mid-1990s called Jhon, who had spent five years in the Nicaraguan Army and had been extensively trained in a variety of weapons systems. He had joined the neighbourhood gang in 1994 at the age of 13 but was sent to the Army by his family in 1997 because they could no longer cope with him and hoped that it would educate him. After he returned to the neighbourhood in 2002, Jhon's expertise in weapons became crucial to raising the level of knowledge within the LFH gang about how to use guns safely and with more strategic effect (see Box 3.2). This was the primary reason why the LFH gang became one of the most feared in the district during this period, as it was one of the most effective in its deployment of violence.

Interviews with gang members confirm that, once Jhon retired from the gang in 2004, knowledge acquisition about guns in LFH lost focus once again. Some gang members subsequently reported learning informally from a better-informed peer, while others claimed to have been taught by professional criminals; in both cases, however, training was very informal and often off the cuff.

Box 3.2 **Jhon's military training**

[The Army is] where I learnt to use firearms, the AK-47, the sniper rifle, the RPG–which is a rocket-launcher–all kinds of weapons! I had classes, it was like school, and they taught us to shoot, to strip and clean our weapons, and there were also exams. I can strip and re-assemble any kind of weapon–I know everything, I tell you! The basic weapon in the Army was the AK-47, but because I could shoot really well, I became a sniper, and so used a special rifle. I went and trained in Martinique and Marie-Galante, they're French islands, and I trained with the French Army and also the Venezuelan Army. [. . .] All of this helped me when I came back to the neighbourhood afterwards. [. . .]

During my service I'd come back every 15 days, and whenever I came, all the *bróderes* would say, 'bring me a gun, *mon*, bring me an AK', but I'd just say to them, *'oye maje*, do you know how to use a gun?' I'd tell them that I wasn't going to bring anything if they didn't know how to take care of their guns, if they couldn't strip and re-assemble them. I told them that they needed to learn all of this, and so they asked me to teach them.

So after a while, I brought back an AK-47 and taught them all, in groups of five. [. . .] You see, an AK-47 isn't complicated, but there's a specific order you have to follow to strip it in order to be able to clean it. The first thing you do is release the magazine catch, then you remove the magazine, then you cock the rifle, and–then–you take off the receiver cover and the recoil mechanism [. . .]. Then you remove the bolt carrier and then the bolt, and then you release the catch on the right side of the rear sight, and take off the hand guard, and then all that's left is the skeleton, which you clean. Afterwards, to re-assemble it, you just put everything back together in the reverse order.

Source: Dennis Rodgers interview with Jhon, LFH, 16 July 2012; authors' translation

CONCLUSION

At first glance, contemporary Nicaraguan gang dynamics seem to exemplify the 'democratization' of violence that Latin America is widely perceived to have undergone since the end of the cold war (Koonings and Kruijt, 1999; 2004). Along with cartelitos and private security firms, gangs are among a range of violent actors that have come to the fore in recent years, superseding more traditional ones such as authoritarian states or guerrilla movements. Beyond generally increasing levels of insecurity, this state of affairs also has a potential impact on illegal firearms markets, not least by increasing demand.

The evolutionary trajectory of Nicaraguan gangs suggests that the reality is more complex, however. The spread of Nicaraguan gangs in the immediate post-cold war period can be linked to the aftermath of the 1980s Contra war and the demobilization of conscripted youths; as such, it could be interpreted as linked to a process of violence 'democratization'. Yet gangs subsequently institutionalized on the basis of a process of local territorialization that owed little to geopolitical factors.

Specific gangs also developed unique evolutionary dynamics that affected their use of firearms and resulting violence levels, both of which have changed over time in non-linear ways. Ultimately, these patterns show that gangs are not just reflections of 'macro' structural conditions, but that their dynamics are also the result of a range of 'micro' internal and external factors. This is particularly clear with regard to gang member firearms use, which is not dependent solely on availability. A critical internal factor, for example, concerns the transmission of knowledge about gun use.

In both EB and LFH, firearms know-how was initially transmitted in the late 1980s and early 1990s by youths who had been military conscripts; subsequently, something of a 'Chinese whispers' effect caused this knowledge to become increasingly diluted. By the turn of the century, there were rising numbers of firearm accidents in both neighbourhoods, and guns were also breaking down in increasing numbers due to deficient care. This trend came to a halt in LFH when a single individual who had served in the army between 1997 and 2002 refreshed LFH gang members' knowledge, with major implications for the gang's violence levels and perceptions of security.

More generally, the trajectories of both the EB and LFH gangs during the 1990s highlight the importance of individual leader figures, and in particular how these contributed significantly to institutionalizing the gangs and their particular practices of violence. Leader figures declined over the following decade, but rather than resulting in less violent gangs, this trend made them more unpredictable and more prone to manipulation and domination by external actors. By 2008, the EB gang had been co-opted by the ruling FSLN party to disrupt opposition rallies. Similarly, in LFH, the cartelito began to co-opt leading gang members around 2005, significantly facilitating its subsequent brutal repression of the gang, which also increased general levels of insecurity in the neighbourhood. Such developments are relevant for anti-gang strategies based on attempts to 'decapitate' gangs by arresting (or killing) their leaders, as this approach can result in greater violence and insecurity than the more predictable and generally managed brutality of a clearly led organization.

Externally, the fact that leftover weapons from the 1980s began to break down in the late 1990s meant that it became more difficult for gang members to find weapons. This led them to source their firearms from new suppliers such as private security guards or the police; the fact that these guns were more difficult to access clearly contributed to reducing levels of gang violence between 2005 and 2010.[58] At the same time, the presence of other armed actors also impeded access to weapons. The rise of the cartelito in LFH was a key factor in the neighbourhood gang's decline, as it sought to both disarm and suppress the gang.[59] In EB, on the other hand, this process was mainly due to the interventions of NGOs and civil society organizations.

This contrast between LFH and EB highlights how processes of gang 'pacification'—which are effectively about closing up the spaces within which gangs can emerge—do not necessarily have to occur violently. That lesson is relevant to the entire Central American region, where repressive anti-gang policies popularly known as *mano dura* have clearly failed.[60] The most effective non-violent policy interventions remain context-driven, however, and must be informed by close qualitative understandings of specific gang dynamics.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EB	Elías Blanco
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front)
LFH	Luis Fanor Hernández
NIO	Nicaraguan córdoba

ENDNOTES

1 The emergence of maras in the region is partly linked to the mass deportation of Central American refugees from the United States in the mid-1990s, including almost 46,000 Central American convicts deported between 1998 and 2005, although not all were gang members (UNODC, 2007, pp. 40–42). Maras do not represent a transplanted US gang culture, however, but rather an amalgamation with local pandilla culture. They are quite different from US gangs; the number of deportee gang members has been declining steadily since the mid-1990s, such that they now constitute a minority of contemporary Central American *mareros* (Demoscopía, 2007, p. 49). Due to their transnational origins, maras are less embedded within local social and cultural norms than pandillas, and therefore less constrained in their brutality. This partly explains why Nicaragua is less violent than its northern neighbours, although its levels of brutality are higher than generally reported. See Rodgers (2009; 2012a).

2 Although pandillas still operate in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, they are much less visible, and also much less extensive, than maras. For an explanation as to why there are no maras in Nicaragua, see Rocha (2006a).

3 These names are pseudonyms.

4 See note 27 for more on the interviewees, their characteristics, and interview methods.

5 See Rodgers (1997; 2000; 2006a; 2007a; 2007b; 2010; 2012a) and Rocha (2000a; 2000b; 2003; 2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2008), as well as Rocha and Rodgers (2008). Assertions made in this chapter that are not directly referenced or associated with a specific interview, particularly with regard to developments in barrios Elías Blanco and Luis Fanor Hernández, are based on knowledge acquired by the authors during previous research, or represent a synthesis of information obtained from interviews with both gang members and non-gang members in these neighbourhoods.

6 The term 'Contras' comes from the Spanish word *contrarevolucionarios* (counter-revolutionaries).

7 Although armed groups of ex-Sandinista Popular Army military personnel and Contra guerrillas continued to plague rural areas in the north of the country well into the 1990s, these were generally local in scope and never constituted a major threat to the Nicaraguan state. See Rocha (2001).

8 Since 1990, a process of depoliticization and reductions in both size and budget have severely affected the operational capacity of the Nicaraguan National Police, which has limited patrolling capacity and is completely absent in 21 per cent of the country's 146 municipalities (Cajina, 2000, p. 174).

9 The Pan American Health Organization estimates that more than 50 per cent of all mortalities in Nicaragua in 1995 were not registered due to deficient record keeping by hospitals and morgues (PAHO, 1998, p. 384).

10 There are, for example, marked discrepancies between Nicaraguan police statistics and those of other organizations, including the International Criminal Police Organization. The latter recorded that 1,157 homicides were 'known to the police' in Nicaragua in 1998, compared to official figures of 381 homicides and 180 assassinations (INTERPOL, 1999; Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, 2000, p. 34).

11 This particular association is explicit in many of former president Enrique Bolaños' speeches, including for example the one delivered to the Association of American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America on 9 May 2002 (Bolaños, 2002).

12 This approach has sometimes led officials to contradict themselves, as when they prioritize crime suppression despite official data suggesting that the problem is not significant, or when they simultaneously proclaim the country safer than the rest of Central America but make regional citizen security a key policy focus. See GoN (2002a; 2002b).

13 Bolognesi (2009); Rocha (2007a); Rodgers (2000; 2006a; 2007b); Vermeij (2006).

14 Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas.

15 It should be noted that media reporting on crime and insecurity is not necessarily accurate. See Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2009).

16 Although female gang members are not completely unknown in Nicaragua, they are not the norm (Rodgers, 2006a, p. 286).

17 By comparison, Managua's population reportedly grew by just under 4 per cent between the 1995 and 2005 censuses, from 903,100 to 937,085 (GoN, 2006, p. 26).

18 Although it is not clear whether he defined gangs in the same way as the police, Juan Carlos Núñez recorded the existence of a total of 13 pandillas just in the two Managua barrios San Luis and Altagracia in the early 1990s. At that time, both of these were relatively typical examples of poor urban neighbourhoods in the city, which had more than 400 such neighbourhoods (Núñez, 1996, pp. 245–50).

19 On the reasons for this particular trend, see Rodgers (2006a, pp. 278–79).

20 The Nicaraguan National Police often claims that the decline in gangs is related to its putatively 'preventative' violence-reduction policies, which it argues are more enlightened than the repressive *mano dura* (iron fist) policies put in place in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Granera, 2012). Based on research conducted in the Nicaraguan juvenile justice sector, Rocha has found such policies to be more symbolic than substantive; he highlights that repression remained the guiding principle for police action against gangs on the ground, even if this approach did not reach the same levels of brutality as those associated with mano dura in other Central American countries (Rocha, 2007c). See also Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers (2009).

21 On the issue of collusion between drug dealers and police, see Dudley (2012).

22 See Rodgers (2004; 2012b). At the same time, a limited number of new police substations were also established in certain Managua neighbourhoods, as a consequence of the implementation of a range of international aid-funded programmes aiming to improve citizen security. José Luis Rocha interview with Jimmy Javier Maynard, police general commissioner and national police sub-director, Managua, 18 April 2012.

23 Dennis Rodgers interview with the Luis Fanor Hernández Sandinista youth organization coordinator, Managua, 30 October 2009.

24 See Fox (2012) and O'Neill McCleskey (2012).

25 This name is a pseudonym.

26 See Rodgers (forthcoming).

27 This section relies on primary research conducted in the two barrios. The two authors conducted a total of 14 interviews in EB and 16 in LFH. Interviewees were all male and between 14 and 42 years old; they were deliberately selected to obtain a representative spread of gang members from different gang epochs in each neighbourhood. Interviews were cross-referenced and also compared with information provided by individuals who were not gang members, including family members and other neighbourhood residents, to avoid taking gang member discourse at face value. Unattributed assertions are either based on knowledge acquired from the authors' previous field research or they represent a synthesis of information obtained from interviews with gang members and non-gang members. All individual gang member names mentioned in this chapter are pseudonyms.

28 José Luis Rocha interview with Hamyn Gurdián, police commissioner, Managua, 17 March 1999.

29 In other neighbourhoods demobilized Contra youths also formed gangs, although they were generally a minority (Rodgers, 2006a, p. 283). Not all demobilized youths joined gangs, partly because the overwhelming majority were from rural areas. A clear majority of youths who came from poor urban neighbourhoods ended up joining gangs, however.

30 This study uses the term 'golden era' because it was an expression frequently used by post-2000 gang members in both EB and LFH to describe the 1990s.

31 Dennis Rodgers interview with Miguel, LFH, 4 November 1996.

32 Dennis Rodgers interview with Julio, LFH, 4 November 1996.

33 Street dealers in EB actually often sourced their crack in LFH.

34 For the history of such initiatives, see Rocha and Bellanger (2004).

35 Dennis Rodgers interview with Doña Yolanda, resident, LFH, 2 November 2009.

36 Dennis Rodgers interview with Mayuyu, LFH, 13 July 2012.

37 Individual ownership was particularly common with respect to firearms, which gang members systematically claimed they never lent to anybody, except sometimes to their closest friends within the gang. Yet several gang members in LFH did report that some collective weapons existed during the 1990s, although these weapons had generally been stolen by small groups of two or three gang members, who shared them among themselves; in EB, some gang members said that they regularly held collections among themselves to buy ammunition, which they then shared.

38 José Luis Rocha interview with el Revoliático, EB, 5 July 2012.

39 Some gang members also reported obtaining firearms for 'personal protection'. This was especially the case if they were engaged in long-term personal vendettas.

40 Gang members generally acquired the firearms they used in gang warfare individually and not as a group; indeed, they tended to be the same weapons that they used for their delinquency.

41 Dennis Rodgers interview with Bismarck, LFH, 13 July 2012.

42 José Luis Rocha interview with El Cofla, EB, 1 July 2012.

43 Dennis Rodgers interview with Milton, LFH, 17 July 2012.

44 When asked how he knew that it was an Uzi, Mayuyu replied: 'Because I know what Uzis look like, I've seen them on television.' Dennis Rodgers interview with Mayuyu, LFH, 13 July 2012. His identification was, however, confirmed by Jhon, another gang member who was familiar with Uzis following a stint in the Nicaraguan Army.

45 José Luis Rocha interview with Daimaku, EB, 5 July 2012.

46 Dennis Rodgers interview with Felix, LFH, 15 July 2012.

47 This observation is made on the basis of information from 2012 interviews as well as the long-term longitudinal investigations being carried out by the authors in EB and LFH.

48 Dennis Rodgers interview with Julio, LFH, 14 July 2012.

49 José Luis Rocha interview with Picapollo, EB, 9 September 2012.

50 Dennis Rodgers interview with el Gordo sucio, LFH, 21 July 2012.

51 José Luis Rocha interview with Daimaku, EB, 5 July 2012.

52 José Luis Rocha interview with el Pelón, EB, 5 April 2006.

53 Dennis Rodgers interview with Jader, LFH, 13 July 2012.

54 Dennis Rodgers interview with Spencer, LFH, 13 July 2012.

55 Dennis Rodgers interview with Bismarck, LFH, 13 July 2012.

56 This observation is based on information from 2012 author interviews as well as their long-term longitudinal investigations in EB and LFH.

57 Dennis Rodgers interview with Bismarck, LFH, 26 February 2002.

58 Overall, though, it must be stressed that Nicaraguan gang members generally show a relatively low level of sophistication in their firearm use, exhibiting more opportunistic than systematic approaches to weapons acquisition. This suggests that gangs are not a primary source of demand for firearms or an illegal market of weapons and ammunition in Nicaragua.

59 The cartelito's relationship with the LFH gang goes against the grain of much current thinking about the relationship between gangs and organized criminality insofar as much of the literature casts gangs as institutional channels to organized crime. See, for example, Lo (2012).

60 See Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers (2009).

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