

# *The great financial power of the Maras*

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People may have the widespread conception of the Maras, the fearsome youth gangs, as groups of violent and socially maladjusted young people who extort and instill fear in their communities, since this is how they were in the beginning; but nothing is further from the truth now.

It's true that they were created in those marginal neighborhoods, when deported from United States where, as it is already known, they emerged as an alternative to face the violence and corruption that threatened Central Americans migrants.

The Maras growth and development in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras was commensurate to the extraordinary levels of misery, abandonment and discontent. Young people, teenagers and even children joined them as a cry of protest and revenge towards the society that marginalized them.

However, they never became an alternative to poverty, nor an effort to change social structures. In fact, their first victims were people who had to pay an extortion in exchange for keeping open small businesses, grocery stores, bars and even protect their own residences.

Their determination was relentless: whoever didn't pay was to be killed, meaning that the person, some random family member and frequently the whole family was threatened with death. This way, a regime of panic that soon surpassed the boundaries of the neighborhood was established.

Extortion was, and still is, the first and perhaps the most important source of income for the Maras and this was followed by other practices such as the contract killings, that is to say of the criminal activity carried out by a professional assassin who works for a crime syndicate. The demand rose so high, that a human life was valued for less than 50 dollars.

The next step was to join organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, stolen vehicles and, by the nature of their "business," they also came into contact with the illicit trafficking of weapons.

All of this gave way to a huge flow of money, but that it did not mean that all members of the Mara would benefit in the same way. We should recall the pyramidal structure of these groups. The "soldier" of a clique (a narrow exclusive circle of persons) has no idea where the money that he delivers finally goes, nor how much is collected in the end.

The prosecutor's office in El Salvador, calculated in 2018 that the Mara Salvatrucha is able to gain as much as 80 thousand dollars in cash on a daily basis. We can add to this figure what they get in Honduras and Guatemala, and it may result in millions of dollars each year.

Then, the lesser-known side of the Maras comes up, which is its incorporation into the business world where they handle sophisticated real estate businesses, import and sale of vehicles, financial transfers, commercial suppliers and everything that helps launder their profits.

They went all the way from the neighborhood clique to the uncontaminated business world. What will be the next step? Political power, or are they already operating in that position?

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