

Jasmine Fernandez: As a Salvadoran citizen, which gangs do you currently consider the most potent in your country?

César Fagoaga: There are three gangs because Barrio 18 was divided some time ago, but they are not the only ones. The main ones are Mara Salvatrucha 13, Barrio 18 Revolucionarios and Barrio 18 Sureños. The MS, the one that is more organized than Barrio 18, has structures that are quite similar in operation to Barrio 18, but the most numerous gang is the MS.

JF: While working for Factum Magazine, have you faced cases related to crimes committed by members of MS-13 or Barrio 18?

CF: Not yet. At Factum, we also publish cases related to gangs, but I had to deal with them more frequently during my four years as editor of the judicial section at La Prensa Grafica.

JF: What cases did you report while working for La Prensa Grafica? What crimes did you most often report about when dealing with these gangs?

CF: I have not worked as a reporter for some time, but my job as an editor is to guide the team of investigative reporters, so I do have a lot to report. Even as an editor, I did interviews and took notes and conducted research. I get involved a lot in the investigations by directing the team, and I also have contact with the sources. I interview not only the police or the chief of the police, but also the gang members whenever possible. In my work as an editor, I always have direct contact with the investigations, but I do not make any difference between working as a reporter or as an editor because I always get involved. I was very involved when I worked in the judicial section. The main crimes we reported from the gang members, the most frequent, were homicides. There were a lot of homicides. In 2015, El Salvador had a murder rate of 103 homicides per every hundred thousand inhabitants, which was the highest in the world in a country that does not have a declared war. There were more than six thousand homicides and if it is true that you cannot establish a percentage of exactly how much can be attributed to gangs, you can at least say that there is some relationship, either with the war between the gangs, or the war between gangs and the state. Homicides are certainly the most frequent, but there are also extortions, which are the main source of financing for gangs in El Salvador.

JF: Do the gangs target many civilians, or mainly just rival gang members?

CF: Both. In the past, it was more frequent that the victims of the homicides were only rival gang members. However, in recent years, it has become more common to attack civilians, either because civilians have not paid the extortion, or because they have collaborated with gangs. In a large part of the country, gangs function as a real authority, where the Salvadoran state does not enter into gang-controlled territory, so gangs are the main authority. If the gang asks you to do something, for example, that you hide a firearm, or that you hide drugs, or that you collect the rent [extortion fees], and if in any way you refuse, they will kill you. If the gang members see you talking to a policeman, even if you do not tell them anything about the gangs, they think that you are snitching on them and they will kill you, then, too. More and more frequently in recent

years, we have seen an increase in attacks against civilians for the gang members wanting to be able to protect themselves.

JF: How did Salvadorans react to the Supreme Court ruling of El Salvador's street gangs being classified as terrorist groups in 2015?

CF: In general, it was a very positive reaction. It was positive because people reject gangs in most cases. There are very few people who support them, but the only people who do support them are the same people who are related to them or involved with them in some form or another. In this country, there are an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 -- or some authors speak of up to 90,000 -- active gang members, and the social base they have -- their relatives or collaborators -- is around nearly 400,000 people total. Of course, those people support themselves. But most of the population reacted positively before this resolution made by the Constitutional Chamber.

JF: Would you classify MS-13 and Barrio 18 as terrorist organizations?

CF: No, I would not classify them as terrorist organizations. I would classify them as criminal organizations because, although they have committed terrorist acts, such as in 2010 when they burned a bus with a lot of people inside, terror is not their end goal. They are basically all juveniles, who are from very poor sectors, and their intention is evidently criminal and they keep committing crimes and resort to terrorist actions very rarely. There is a connotation of a terrorist organization that I think does not fit with these street gangs. Groups like Al Qaeda, or the FARC or ETA constantly carry out terrorist actions and have frequent terrorist activity, but in the case of gangs, they do not do it consistently. I'm not justifying them. I think they are criminal organizations, but in this case, I do not see them as terrorists. The problem is that now, this rhetoric that began in El Salvador, claiming that they are terrorist organizations, is spreading throughout the United States as well, where President Trump has made them his number one public enemy when, in reality, they are not what they say they are. They are not a predominantly powerful criminal organization. They are an army of poor people -- that is what they are. They are a very violent group of poor people. They are not what people are calling them. The problem is that by doing this, instead of weakening them, it strengthens them because the gangs, right now, mainly the MS, will eventually occupy that political capital that the United States is granting them. If the MS was treated as nothing more than a violent street gang, you could have a better result than giving them these names and identities of transnational criminal organization -- as the MS is cataloged. Or, as a terrorist organization at the level of Al Qaeda, which is not the case. It is a very violent criminal gang, but people in the United States have had better answers for them, like in Baltimore or Washington, when it comes to controlling them with successful prevention. In the end, what they are going to start doing is manipulate the problem and they are going to send it back to El Salvador, and here, again, we will be worse off than before. That is not going to control this problem. Categorizing MS as something that it is not is a problem because it is true, they are very violent, but they cannot be compared to other, larger terrorist organizations. It's a mistake.

JF: Did the Supreme Court ruling affect your job as a journalist in any way?

CF: No, our work was not affected. In the case of these gangs, almost nothing changed in the way the government was treating them. There was already a “Mano Dura,” or firm hand, policy -- extreme consequences -- against gangs, which had proved ineffective. So, things are getting worse because at practical levels, as in how they deal with these gangs, there were constantly only repressive measures. And the repressive measures, if they are not accompanied by other measures, have always been a failure. They have been a failure in the last 20 years and this has caused the government to be emboldened in the struggle against gangs without imposing other measures, and now, it is still a very real situation that there has been an increase in homicides. The situation has not improved -- the neighborhoods are controlled by the gangs, homicides continue to happen and extortion continues as well. Increasingly, there is a sense that we are now between the state and the gang in this war, which goes to say that the resolution made by the Supreme Court was more populist than it was real. That is what the people wanted, but that does not solve the problem, because if it is true that the gangs want to cause terror with their crimes, their motive is not to be terrorists, like other established terrorist organizations. This is one of the means they have, but it's not the only one. Basically, the ruling alone has not helped much.

JF: What has worsened the situation, if it was not this Supreme Court ruling?

CF: The decision has been part of a series of decisions that have further exacerbated the problem.

JF: Exacerbated the problem in regards to how the gang members are punished?

CF: In the way the government attacks the penitent, because in the last 20 years, we have had diverse governments -- including the last two, the current and the previous government -- that belong to the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) and the FMLN was the former guerrilla. Since we had a civil war between 1980 and 1992, the guerrillas, at the end of this war, became a political party and eventually, the party began to gain the support of the people until it won its first presidential election in 2009. The government that started in 2009, along with the one that started in 2014, are from this party. Both of these have used strategies that have been a failure in trying to fight gangs because gangs -- and this is something that surprises us because as journalists it seems so clear, but for the government not so much -- are not going to be eliminated by being killed off. This is something that the people have never wanted to see, since these repressive strategies that try to prevent crime are more popular.

JF: What does your job, as somebody who has a responsibility to report about these gangs, entail?

CF: Our job is to ethicize and to tell things that people probably do not want to hear. We live in a very violent country, but there are areas of the country, especially in the capital, where people can live peacefully and never find out what is going on outside. There is a marked inequality of social classes and you can live in places that seem to be like Miami, and you do not realize anything that is going on around you. Our job is to inform -- to tell the things that are happening while we are on the job, to reveal what is hidden. Our job is to ethically inform about what is happening in the war between the state and the gangs, which is increasingly affecting the civilian

population that is in the middle. We study the transformations of the gang members and how they are increasingly systematizing or doing more extortion and attacking people, or committing crimes against civilians. But also, the police. In this war that they have against the gangs, there are also more and more abuses by the authorities. We believe we must tell all of this, so that the population knows what is happening. In many cases, we know that they are not popular things to report because there is a public opinion in favor of everything that has to do with gangs being eliminated, but we believe that everything must be within the law. So, the work is difficult because many people do not understand what we try to do. We cannot bequeath to the authorities if the authorities are committing crimes, but we cannot go out to defend, or say that gang members are not criminals, because they are. This is why we often find ourselves in situations that are complicated in many ways. We have to report what each group does, and that is not always understood by the population.

JF: What type of limits, ethical or otherwise, do you set when you report on crime?

CF: When you are covering this, you have to be very careful not to belittle the crime. One has to be clear, for example, that gangs are criminal entities. However, one also has to know that the limit is *not* to transcribe the legality. These are the ethical parameters, but we also report on how the police have begun to form squadrons of death within their own ranks to murder the gang members. So if it is true that gang members are criminal entities, police cannot become criminals as well and start killing gang members instead of putting them before a judge. It also seems to us that this is a form of transgressing the law and, therefore, we also report it. That has brought us a lot of criticism from people who say that we defend gang members. Yet, we believe that no one is above the law, not even the police, and that it is not legal to do what they criticize in order to supposedly clean the country, because the country is still very violent. So the limits are always going to be that -- we're never going to be above the law and we're never going to downplay the crimes. We monitor the power. The police force is a power, but the gangs are also a power. There has to be somebody to monitor this power and decide when what they do is illegal, and you have to denounce it.

JF: What happens when people in power negotiate with these street gangs? Do the consequences imposed by the Supreme Court extend to anyone who is merely associated with these gangs?

CF: It has been discovered that politicians have negotiated with gang members before the elections, and the law against terrorism is very clear. It says that anyone who negotiates with terrorists are also considered terrorists and should be prosecuted as such. But none of those politicians, not even the latest mayor of San Salvador, who was one of those who dealt with them, have been processed for anything. This is, I believe, a populist measure because it does not directly apply to their classification. For me, that's why it does not make sense to use the term "terrorist" because, with the legal tools that exist, you can already prosecute gang members for murder, extortion and organized crime. The penalties are high and the problem is that if you fear some gang member and you put him into some rotten prison system, where there is no possibility of reintegration, and where the conditions are brutal, no one will pay for his punishment, nor, if

the case should happen, would he want to re-enter society. Prisons are now barracks of crime because of the corruption that exists inside of them. For example, there are always cell phones inside prisons and gang members commit extortion while in prison. The only explanation is that someone inside the prisons allowed the phones in, and these helpers are the same custodians. The prison system we have is not adequate for what we want to do. You cannot start to fight gang members and say you want to end this and change things if you have a prison system that does not work, or is inadequate.

JF: Can you describe a typical crime scene?

CF: Most of the homicides in El Salvador -- and this is a real statistic and you can verify it -- more than 80 percent of the homicides are committed with firearms. Also, most of the victims of the homicides are young men. The typical homicide scenes are men who have been killed with guns. However, within the gangs there are rituals to commit homicides. Before, it was more frequent. Now, not so much, but they use terminology to refer to specific things. I will give you an example: they say that a person is "paid" when, after killing this person, they bury him or her. Before, they were more ritualistic in the sense that according to the gang and according to the specific group within the gang, they killed in a specific way. For example, they buried you, or, before they tied you up and before burying you, they hanged you or things like that. They had a signature in each "clica."

JF: What is a clica?

CF: The clicas are like the cells of which the gangs are composed. In the case of the MS, they are called "clicas," and in the case of Barrio 18, they are called "courts." And each court, or each clica -- and this was more frequent in the past -- had a particular way of killing. It sounds very macabre, because it is. There was a whole ritual for how they conserved death and how they disappeared, or what they did with their victims. More than ten years ago, for example, it was common for gangs to begin decapitating their victims and leaving them at points in the city. For example, there was a very famous case of a woman they beheaded and dismembered and left in various parts of the city. The message was to send terror to the population. In that case, you can find some of the most famous gang members in Barrio 18 who were involved. One was named Carlos Ernesto Mojica, also known as "El Viejo Lin," and the victim was known as Rosa N. That case was very well known.

JF: How do you cultivate your sources? What does it take to win the trust of your sources and who are your sources, typically?

CF: One of the great things that we as journalists have to do is take to the streets. It is impossible to realize what is happening in the neighborhoods if one does not personally go into the neighborhoods. If you spend all of your time in an office, you will never be able to know what is actually going on in the streets. What we do is visit, for example, people who we know work in the neighborhoods. We go with pastors of evangelical churches, community leaders and young people who work in the neighborhoods, and that is our way to enter those neighborhoods, which

are controlled by gangs, and then you have access to all the parts of these communities. You have access to the people, religious leaders, policemen who arrive there and also the gang members. Those constant visits -- because the only way to earn your trust is to go frequently to certain places, and in a methodical way -- are what allow you to discover phenomena, as we did last year. We discovered a phenomenon that had not been reported, which was in a neighborhood of San Salvador. A group of Barrio 18 had forced women, who had nothing to do with the gangs, to raise their children when either the gang member or the gang member's wife was put in jail. The gang would select women from the community and say, "you're going to take care of our children and raise them." We called this phenomenon "The Nannies of the Gang," and we were able to discover this by entering this community in a methodical way. We knew a social promoter and he told us, "come and see what happens in our community," and this is how we found our way in. This investigation took four months, little by little, until we started talking to the women and the women began to tell us their stories. We also talked to the gang members and they confirmed it because they did not see any problem with it. But this is a form of the enslavement of women. And then we came to the conclusion of this phenomenon that no one had previously reported and the only way to do it was by taking to the streets. That is how we do things.

JF: How have recent remarks made by the Trump administration and the new focus on MS-13 in the United States changed the approach of your work?

CF: Changes have not happened at the moment, but what we are very alert about is what this will mean in the future. We foresee that this position of the United States -- totally wrong, in our opinion -- to treat the MS as something that it's not, is going to probably cause more deportations of those gang members or of other people, who have absolutely nothing to do with gangs, and force them to come to a very poor country. This only adds to our own problems of violence. So we are very attentive of how this will affect us. On the other hand, we also begin to see a new phenomenon, which is how gang members from here are also migrating to other countries, where they did not migrate to before. Countries in Central America, or even Mexico, where we know that many of the historical leaders of the MS have gone.