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USC quarterback is the second Trojan in three years (sixth overall) to win college football's top honor. USC's Reggie Bush finished fifth in the voting.

D1



A holiday story by Lemony Snicket.

USA
WEEKEND

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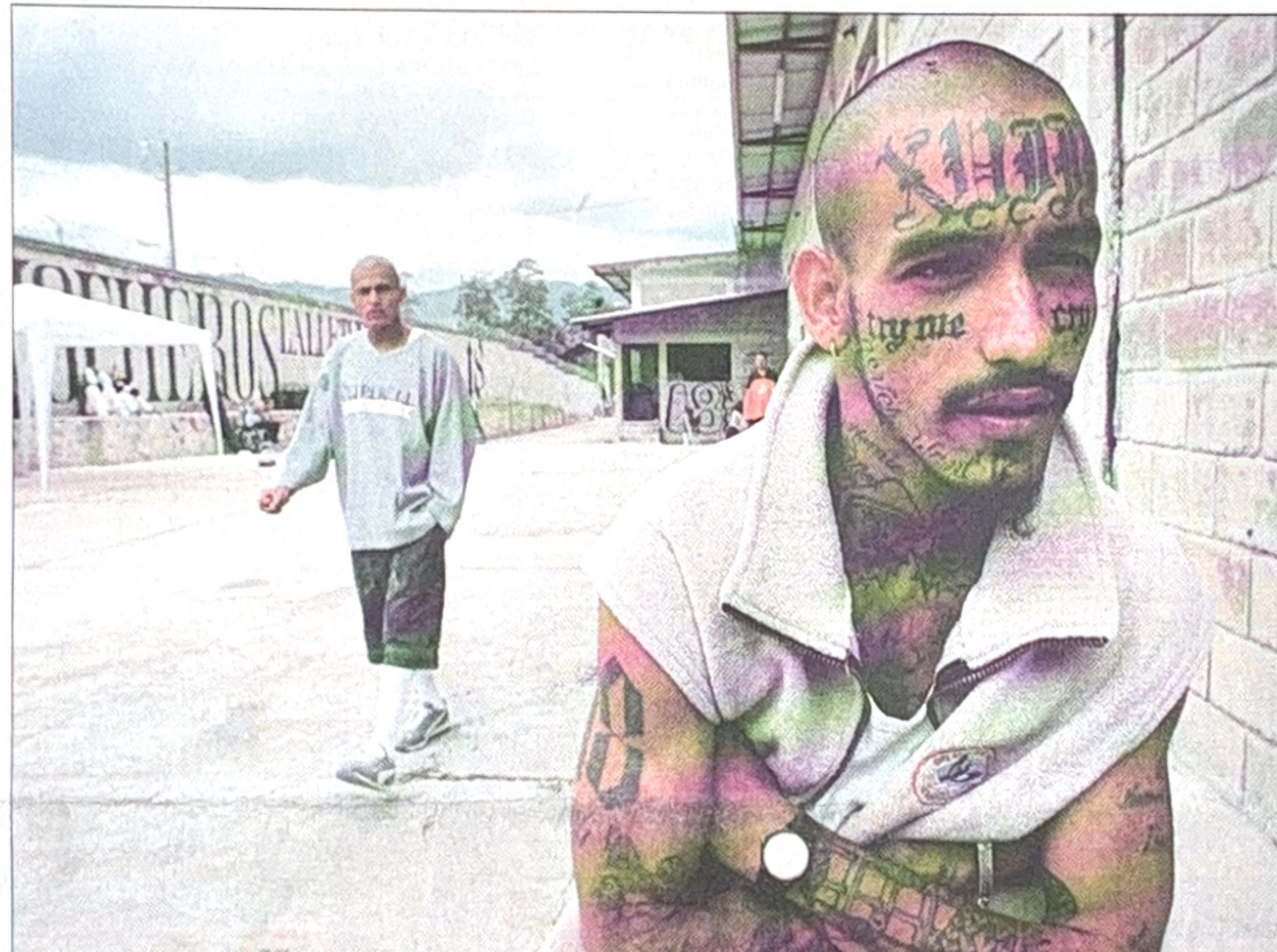
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110th year/Number 347
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The United States is deporting gang members but there's a boomerang effect: The culture is spreading across the Americas and winning recruits who see Los Angeles as the promised land.



Arturo Larios, 27, foreground, is questioned by Los Angeles police officer Frank Flores in Hollywood, home to the largest Mara Salvatrucha 13 clique in Los Angeles. Larios joined the gang while he was living in Guatemala.



Marlon Fuentes, 27, joined Los Angeles' 18th Street gang when he was 12 and built a 13-page rap sheet. Fuentes, whose nickname was "Little Bad Boy" when he was in Hollywood, was deported in 1995 to his native Honduras where he is imprisoned at the Tamara National Penitentiary near Tegucigalpa.



Lucifer, a 22-year-old member of the 18th Street gang, is serving 17 years for murder at the Honduras prison. He doesn't think the tough conditions are good for rehabilitation. "When you're locked up you just think about more bad things," he says.

A vicious cycle

Story By S. Lynne Walker
Photos By Luis J. Jimenez

COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

TEUCIGALPA, Honduras — Marlon Fuentes is a big man in his cell block at Honduras' largest prison. His face is tattooed. His talk is tough. He menaces with threatening stares.

A gang member from Hollywood, Fuentes spends his time behind bars impressing Honduran "homies" with his exploits in California. He joined Los Angeles' infamous 18th Street gang when he was 12, was arrested for selling dope and brandishing a deadly weapon, then deported in 1995.

Fuentes, 27, is the United States' violent export, a Honduran citizen shipped home under an immigration policy that Central American govern-

ments insist has helped spread the deadly gang culture throughout the Americas.

From Honduras to Hollywood and back to Honduras again, Fuentes moved in a distorted world where gang members identify themselves with tattoos and build networks via the Internet that bypass international borders.

Two decades ago, gangs were rare in Central America.

But in the mid-1990s, the United States stepped up deportations of criminals, many of them gang members from the 18th Street and rival Mara Salvatrucha 13.

Today, gangs are Central America's

RETURN/A12

Soldiers in Iraq, their families put feelings on paper

By Seth Hettena
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

From Mosul, Iraq, soldier Ryan Alexander wrote a poem about a pregnant cat, "a happy distraction" that he fed from prepack-

aged military meals. Ignoring warnings from medics, Alexander put on a plastic glove and petted the wild creature, "who may be the one true heart and mind that America had won over."

Back home in Colorado

Springs, Colo., Melissa Herman imagined what her reaction would have been had her Army husband been aboard a helicopter that crashed in Iraq.

"I can feel the devastation and hurt of knowing that I am alone,"

she wrote. "I feel trapped in a tornado: screaming, crying, angry then numb."

Earlier this year, the National Endowment for the Arts asked U.S. soldiers and their families

SOLDIERS/A19

Workers' comp abuses alleged

L.A. COUNTY: Experts say numerous safety employees use a ploy to file pension-spiking claims a year before retirement.

By Troy Anderson

LOS ANGELES DAILY NEWS

More than two-thirds of Los Angeles County firefighters planning to retire have filed workers' compensation claims a year before their retirement dates — a ploy often used to boost pensions artificially, experts say.

The pension-spiking scheme, derisively called "chief's disease," has become more common and the annual cost to county taxpayers has more than doubled in six years, from \$23 million to \$50 million this year.

By filing a claim under the state labor code, fire and sheriff's employees are allowed to take a one-year leave of absence while collecting 100 percent of their salary tax-free. This gives them an extra year of service credit, and the tax-free benefit results in a spike in take-home pay, boosting their pensionable income.

It also paves the way for a job-related disability retirement, with half the income tax-free.

From 2001 to 2003, an average of 85 percent of county firefighters who got disability retirements claimed a disabling injury a year earlier.

"It would seem to me that it's very unlikely that 85 percent of our retirees became disabled in the last

RETIRE/A21

Delay of patients' records frustrates

SOUTH BAY: Doctors' group says Little Company of Mary is dragging its feet. Hospital says it is moving as fast as possible.

By Lee Peterson

DAILY BREEZE

A falling out between a local hospital and doctors group has resulted in confusion for some South Bay patients whose medical records weren't transferred in time for recent medical office visits or calls.

Although Little Company of Mary Hospital in Torrance said it has been processing records transfer requests as quickly as possible, doctors of the South Bay Family Medical Group say the snafu has left them in the dark on patients' past prescriptions, cholesterol levels and other information on the charts.

"People make the business decisions they do, and I don't have a problem with that, but we need our charts and I don't have them," said Dr. Lee Kissel, one of the South Bay Family physicians, saying Little Company did not respond to patients' chart-trans-

RECORDS/A21

A vicious cycle

Story By S. Lynne Walker
Photos By Luis J. Jimenez
CONTRIBUTING STAFF

RETURN: Gang growth hasn't been impacted by deportations

FROM PAGE A1

a problem and not expect it to come back," said David Brotherton, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York who has authored two books on gangs.

In El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, there's a whole new inner city youth subculture that originated in the First World," he said.

Some are dropouts. Many barely speak Spanish.

They survive by building networks of teenagers who are abandoned, unemployed and devoid of hope.

For these new gang members, as well as the deported veterans, the goal is the same: to make their way back to the United States and reach the gang culture of Los Angeles.

LA gang members teach their new recruits what they know best — robbing, stealing cars, selling drugs and, sometimes, killing.

"We've done a great job of exporting the gang culture all over the world," said Al Valdez, supervising investigator of the Orange County District Attorney's Office gang unit. "Now the gang phenomenon is international."

Today, more than 35,000 youths are members of gangs in Honduras, a country of 7 million people. El Salvador has approximately 30,000 gang members and Guatemala has 14,000. In Mexico, where nearly 1,000 Central American gang members have been arrested in the past two years, gangs are taking hold in cities on the southern and northern borders, including Tijuana.

The deportations haven't slowed the growth of gangs in the United States. Since 1992, the number of gangs has increased 625 percent, according to U.S. immigration officials.

The National Youth Gang Center estimates the United States now has 750,000 gang members. California has roughly 365,000 members, 100,000 of them in Los Angeles County. Every state in the nation now reports being plagued by gangs.

"I sound like Paul Revere riding across the country and shouting the alarm, 'The gangs are coming, the gangs are coming!'" said Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton.

Gang members deported from the West Coast sometimes sneak back across the border and head for East Coast cities. Since they are not known by local police, they can extend the reach of their gangs into virgin territory.

"We're everywhere," boasted a Mara Salvatrucha 13, or MS 13, gang member in Los Angeles. "Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, L.A., Washington, New York, Denver. There's a few in Missouri. There's homes in Canada, too. Wherever we go, we recruit more people. There's no way they can stop us. We're going to keep on multiplying."

Gang experts said U.S. immigration officials failed to anticipate the effect of deportations on other countries.

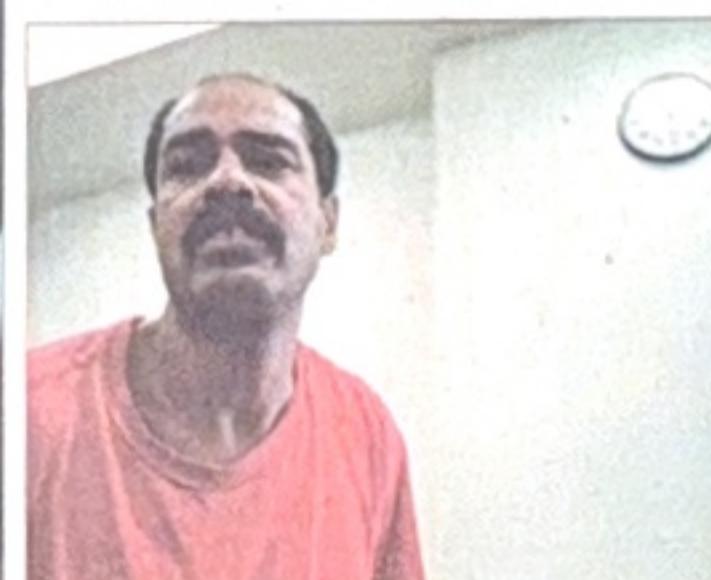
"The world is too global to export



Since an anti-gang law went into effect in Honduras 16 months ago, nearly 1,500 tattooed men have been arrested. Above, officer Francisco Vasquez lifts the shirt of a young suspect in a neighborhood in the industrial city of San Pedro Sula to look for tattoos that would identify him as a gang member.



Honduras native Paul Antonio Zelaya, 30, moved to Los Angeles with his mother when he was 3. He joined the 18th Street gang when he was 11 and was deported last year. Now imprisoned in Honduras, he talks of going back to Los Angeles.



Oscar Zapata, waiting to be deported from the Terminal Island immigration detention center, is appealing because he fears arrest under Honduras' gang law.

tattoo on his right arm. His voice carried a touch of pride as he talked about his gang.

"The 18th Street is 1 in Los Angeles," said Potter, now 36. "It's the biggest in the world."

Latino kids living near downtown Los Angeles formed the 18th Street in the late 1960s to defend themselves against established gangs.

The MS 13 sprung up in the late 1980s, created by the children of Salvadoran immigrants who fled to California during a bloody civil war.

The MS 13, which now operates in 30 states, is "a little more violent and a little more callous" as well as more experienced in protecting members than its 18th Street rivals, said Joseph Esposito, one of the top deputies in the hand-cuff gang division for the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office.

"If their members commit serious crimes, they are organized enough to move them to Minnesota or Seattle or another city and start an enclave there," he said.

Jessica is a member of the MS 13, born in Guatemala and trained in the streets of Los Angeles. She has been the target of gunfire more times than she can remember. She is also a full-time office worker and the mother of an 8-year-old daughter.

She came to Los Angeles when she was 5 years old, brought by her mother, who saw Los Angeles as a city of endless opportunities.

While her mother struggled to support the family, young Jessica discovered a different Los Angeles. She started touching up her eyes with heavy black liner and slipping into gangster clothing after the left home in the morning. Eventually, she stopped going to school and started hanging out.

She took a 15-second beating during an initiation ritual when she was 14 and became an official member of the Mara Salvatrucha 13.

Now 26, Jessica has survived longer than most of her brothers.

But her safety zone has been reduced to a series of city blocks whose boundaries are set by rival gang members.

"On every block, on every corner, a home has gotten shot and killed," said Jessica, who asked that her last name not be published for fear of losing her job.

After 12 years as a gang member, she can't decide which direction her life should take.

"Being bad is so easy and being good is so hard," Jessica said. "I get bored by the routine. For me, it's the street, the adventure, the thrill of danger. People tell me that to change I have to get away. But I like being here."

RETURN/A14

"We've done a great job of exporting the gang culture all over the world. Now the gang phenomenon is international."

— AL VALDEZ, supervising investigator of the Orange County District Attorney's Office gang unit

member was shot at Sur La Brea Park. In the South Bay, gang investigators from Torrance, Redondo Beach and Inglewood met earlier this month for a two-day workshop that drew law enforcement officials from across the nation.

The focus was on the MS 13 because the gang is "up and coming," said an Inglewood detective who asked not to be identified.

"We'd better know who we're dealing with. If we don't, we're going to get saturated."

Gang violence touched Torrance in May, when a suspected gang

member was shot at Sur La Brea Park.

From Honduras to Hollywood the story is the same.

Residents watch with fear, frustration and helplessness as gangs take over neighborhoods — and then children — away.

As the gang culture spreads, people in the Americas find themselves locked in a new and uncomfortable way.

Residents are frightened to walk their neighborhood streets at night, police aren't adequately staffed or trained, parents are grief-stricken by the senseless deaths of their children.

Monica Boulevard and Western Avenue until a house was set out of the shadows to help them.

"There's another world around us," said a lifelong Melrose Hill resident who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal against his family.

At Melrose Hill Neighborhood Organization meetings, the gang problem is always at the top of the agenda, said Brian Brady, 48, who has lived in the neighborhood for 15 years with his wife and three children.

"You see what's going on in the surrounding streets, you see young Latino men posturing and you think, 'Oh, God. And you drive on.'

You wonder if the prudent thing wouldn't be to flee like other white people."

A woman was shot in the head

just a mile from Melrose Hill last year as she drove her husband and three children home after a Thanksgiving dinner. Police suspect an MS 13 gang member from El Salvador fired the fatal bullet.

Potter said he was going to divide the time between working at a clothing factory and witnessing youths in San Pedro Sula — which now has one of the highest murder rates in Latin America — about the evil of gangs.

"Everybody knows they're not going away," Brady said. "If there's

an answer to this problem, then it's pushing them in other places because there are always going to be gangs."

A few miles away, Hollywood Boulevard has become the 18th Street gang's turf.

The gang members hawk their drugs and sometimes shoot at rivals who slip in among the hundreds of thousands of tourists passing through every year.

Frank Flores, 36, who works the night shift at the LAPD's Hollywood precinct, has seen scenes of

gang violence.

A. vicious cycle

Story By S. Lynne Walker
Photos By Luis J. Jimenez
COPLEY NEWS SERVICE



RETURN: The lure of the streets is hard for some people to escape

FROM PAGE A13

"Anyway, I'd probably go to another state and find the 'hood again. You can always find someone from the MS because it's so big."

Jessica had a chance to start over after she posted her profile on the Yahoo personals page and met a Camp Pendleton Marine.

The young Texan took an instant liking to her, even flying her to Houston to meet his parents and paying for her trip to a Marine gala in Las Vegas.

But Jessica didn't love him, so she broke off the romance.

"I had a choice of a good man, benefits for life, or a guy from the street with no papers," she said.

She chose a 25-year-old gangbanger who goes by the name of "Puppet." Like Jessica, Puppet is an immigrant. He was already a member of the MS 13 when he arrived in Los Angeles at the age of 13.

Puppet was deported to El Salvador in June. Three weeks later, he called Jessica and told her he had killed a rival gang member.

He's trying to get back to the United States, but Jessica is terrified that 18th Street rivals will kill him before he makes it across El Salvador's border. In September, he was in surgery for six hours after 18th Street members hacked at his head, ribs and back with machetes.

Jessica paid for his surgery with money collected from L.A. gang members. Now she's trying to scrape together Puppet's \$3,000 passage back to Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, MS 13 members in El Salvador are urging Puppet to be their leader. And local cops are watching him because he's from Los Angeles.

"The new law (in El Salvador) is locking up the guys who are getting deported. The cops think they're the leaders," Jessica said.

"Some of them are. Like Puppet. He will be one of them."

The Rev. Arnold Linares ticks off the gangs that held residents hostage in his Honduras neighborhood of Rivera Hernandez before the anti-gang law went into effect.

The MS 13. The 18th Street. And the Normandies, named for Normandie Avenue in Los Angeles.

"All this came from the United States," Linares said, shaking his head. "One 18th Street member killed (rival gang members) with an AK-47 his gang sent him from the United States especially for the job."

For five years, Linares, the 35-year-old pastor of the Place for Everyone Baptist Church, has tried to lead young men out of gang life.

Charitable organizations gave him six computers. A church in Memphis, Tenn., bought uniforms, balls and trophies for the soccer league he started for gang members. But he gets no government support for his efforts and in June, government officials evicted his league from the community soccer field.

Linares often confronts danger as he struggles to help gang members.

When he stood at the gate of gang leader Mario Montalban's house, he found himself looking down the barrel of a homemade shotgun.

Linares raised his big, worn Bible above his head and Montalban, trailed by his second in command, lowered the shotgun.

Montalban, 26, started his Barrio 11 gang when he was 16 years old after a failed attempt to migrate illegally to the United States. He was attacked by gang members when he crossed the Guatemalan border into Mexico, then sent home by Mexican authorities.

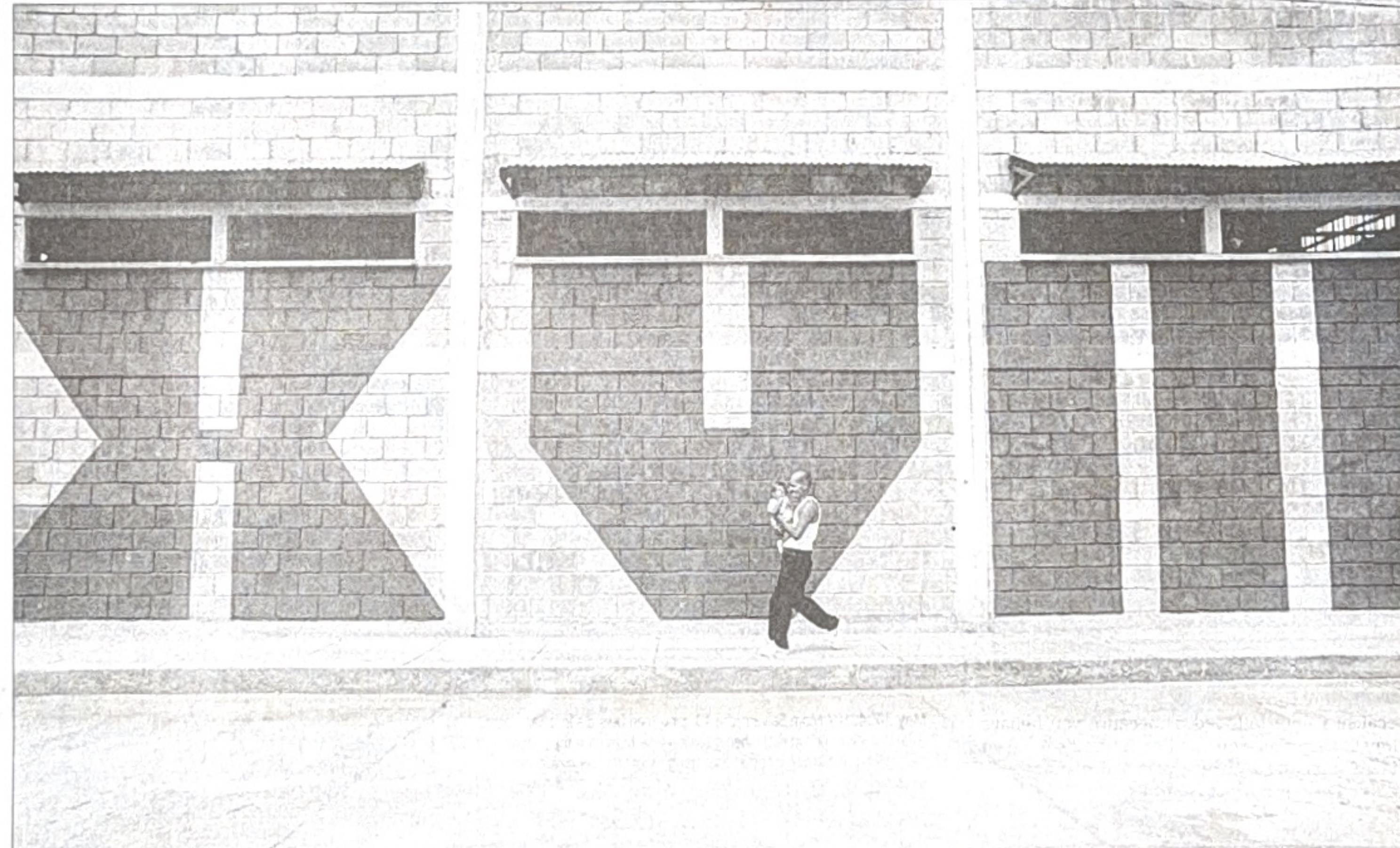
Montalban said he was "one of the worst," making homemade shotguns and forcing the working people of Rivera Hernandez to pay "rent" before they could walk down his street. He was high on drugs from morning to night. And he murdered at least six people. He stabbed his last victim in the throat with a screwdriver.

After Montalban accepted Linares' offer to join the soccer league, he disbanded his gang and converted to Christianity. But his decision to go straight didn't mean Montalban was given a job and welcomed back into society.

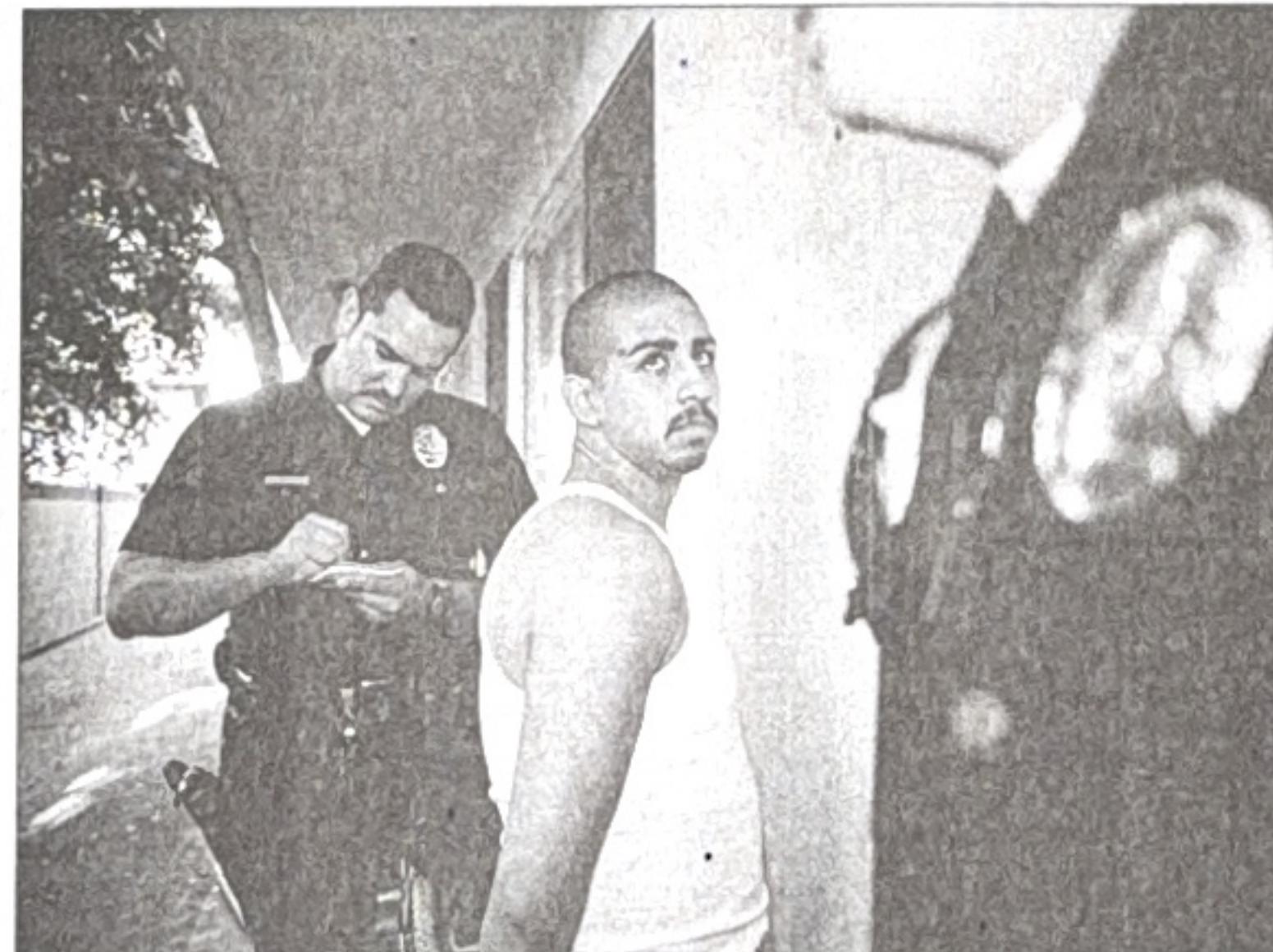
As a criminal, Montalban made enough money to feed his two young daughters and elderly mother. Now that he has gone straight, they sometimes go hungry.

When Linares walks the streets of Rivera Hernandez, he worries about Montalban and the others he has pulled away from gangs.

"We have so many kids in the streets doing nothing."

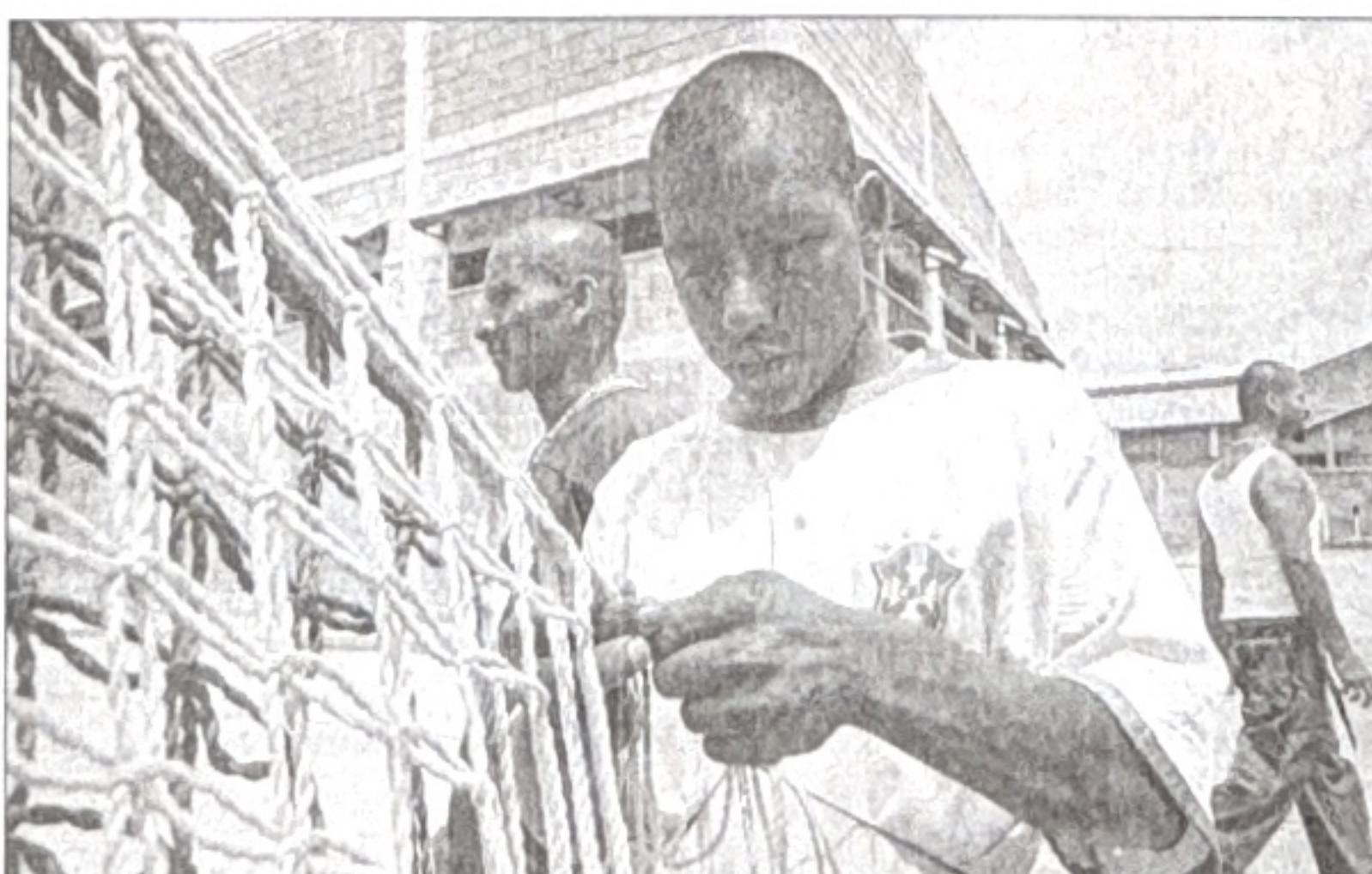


There are no guards inside the 18th Street gang cell block at the Tamara National Penitentiary in Honduras, where it was visiting day. "This is their house," one guard said.



Gerson Ramos, above center, is questioned about his probation by LAPD officer Fernie Montes de Oca, background, during a search of the Mara Salvatrucha 13 gang member's Hollywood apartment. At right, Honduran Mario Montalban, shirtless, says he regrets his tattoos since he was converted to Christianity by the Rev. Arnold Linares, right.

An 18th Street gang member, who identifies himself as Carlos, weaves yarn into fabric bags in a cell block at Tamara National Penitentiary outside the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa. The gang members earn money by giving the bags to relatives to sell outside the prison.



If they can't find work to feed themselves, they do the easiest thing — they rob people," Linares said. "We are asking the government to give them a place for recreation, to give them work. This is not just a spiritual matter. It is a question of jobs."

In Southern California, which has had gangs for nearly 100 years, the solution is just as elusive.

"We live in a nation where we want instant results. Unfortunately, the programs — suppression, intervention and prevention — take a little while

to gestate," said Valdez, of the Orange County District Attorney's Office.

Although gangs have now sprung up in every state in the nation — the MS 13 and the 18th Street have been reported as far away as Hawaii — Valdez said "there is a tendency for the very affluent communities of America to deny that gangs exist. It's always somebody else's problem."

Los Angeles County, which has almost 1,000 different gangs, has responded with more police, more crackdowns, more arrests under gang injunctions.

In Redondo Beach and Wilmington, injunctions have resulted in a marked decrease in crime. Since the Wilmington injunction went into effect in March, at least 75 gang members have been arrested.

But the injunctions, which allow police to arrest gang members simply for hanging out together in court-designated "safety zones," have drawn criticism from civil rights activists.

"Injunctions are a way of outlawing normally legal behavior," said Los Angeles civil rights attorney Constance Rice. "You can't gather. You can't drink together. You can't talk together. You can't go to a restaurant together. It's a suppression method."

City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo acknowledged that, "we are imposing on their civil liberties. That's the whole idea. We do that all the time in our society for safety reasons and the Supreme Court says that's OK. People in our communities deserve protection, too."

If the government was going to have an anti-gang law, then they should have prepared prisons for them because they knew they were going to capture a lot.

"

— AIDA RODRIGUEZ,

left, whose 24-year-old son, Alan, died in a prison fire May 17 at a San Pedro Sula, Honduras, prison. Her 14-year-old grandson, Eric Carrasco, holds a picture of Alan.

But pushing gang members from one place to another is not the solution, said the Rev. Gregory Boyle, who works with gang members in East L.A. Nor are massive deportations the answer to the international gang problem, he said.

"The police are passing them off to the INS. And what do folks do? They get deported and they come back," said Boyle, who founded Homeboy Industries to help gang members break their criminal ties.

"The idea is to banish them, to demonize them. Tell me how that approach will keep a 15-year-old from doing it again."

Lately, Boyle has been receiving phone calls from foreign-born gang members locked inside the immigration detention facility on Terminal Island, waiting to be flown to the nations where they were born.

Among the deportees waiting nervously in the facility in June was Oscar Zapata, who was to be sent home to Honduras. Zapata, 42, said he was out of the 18th Street gang, but a routine "stop and frisk" by L.A. police showed he was wanted by immigration authorities.

Zapata joined the 18th Street gang in the early 1970s, shortly after he arrived in Los Angeles. His childhood in Honduras had prepared him for gang membership. At age 9, he was tortured by police and incarcerated with adult men in San Pedro Sula's prison. At 12, he was conscripted into the Honduran Army and taught to fight with an M-16 rifle. When he was released by the army, he lived on the streets of Honduras until his mother took him to California.

By the time Zapata got to Los Angeles, "I wasn't afraid of anything. I had lost my fear. I came here with a different mentality," he said.

He was deported to San Pedro Sula two years ago after being arrested on drug charges, but he quickly returned to California. Zapata is appealing a judge's order to deport him this time because he's afraid he cannot survive the tactics of Honduran police.

Beads of sweat stood on Zapata's forehead as he remembered how the Honduran police kicked the body of a gang member and said, "This one is dead."

"I am afraid of the police. Nobody can stop them," he said. "If they send you to prison in Honduras you are going directly to your death."

Nearly 1,500 tattooed young men have been arrested since Honduran President Ricardo Maduro began his anti-gang campaign 16 months ago.

Almost 200 of them died in two separate prison fires — one in an 18th Street cell block and the other in an MS 13 cell block — in which the guards were either found negligent or directly responsible. In the most recent fire, on May 17 in San Pedro Sula, 61 of the 107 gang members who died hadn't been convicted of a crime.

Aida Rodriguez blames the Honduran government for the death of her 24-year-old son, Alan, who died in the inferno. A veteran of the MS 13, Alan was serving a 69-year sentence for double homicide.

"If the government was going to have an anti-gang law, then they should have prepared prisons for them because they knew they were going to capture a lot," she sobbed.

Ramon Custodio, who heads Honduras' National Commission for Human Rights, calls the incarceration of the gang members "a massive illegal detention" and vowed to ask the Supreme Court to declare the law unconstitutional.

"Because you're tattooed or because you behave this way or the other, you can be captured and taken to prison," Custodio said. "The principle of innocence doesn't exist any more in this country."

Christian Antunez hides from Honduran police in the single room he shares with his wife and 18-month-old daughter.

He has tattoos on his biceps, forearms, back and stomach. Above his right eyebrow are the faint letters NLS, or Normandie Street Locos, for the MS 13 clique he identified with in Los Angeles.

Antunez has never been to the United States. He was introduced to gang life by his cousin, who grew up in L.A. joined the 18th Street and then became a leader. When the cousin was deported to Honduras, he brought back his expertise in gang warfare.

By his own admission, Antunez was a violent gang member. He was given a distinctive nickname: Mr. Crime. He murdered one man and said he participated in the deaths of others.

"Sometimes you have to kill or be killed," he said.

Antunez, 25, says he is out of gang life now, but until he burns off all his tattoos, he is in constant danger of being arrested under Honduras' anti-gang law. The only time he ventures out of his house is for his monthly trip to a clinic in San Pedro Sula called Adios Tatuaje, or "Goodbye Tattoo."

"It's a human hunt in this country," Antunez said.

"You know what they are doing with the anti-gang law? They are putting all the young people in jail. There is no rehabilitation. You know what rehabilitation is for the government? To kill them like dogs in the street."

Suyapa Bonilla, who runs Adios Tatuaje out of a room in her house, said many of her patients "came here crying because companies would not give them a job." Some had tried to gouge out their tattoos with a knife or the tip of a hot machete.

The demand for tattoo removal is so great that Adios Tatuaje has clinics in El Salvador and Guatemala and is about to open one in Nicaragua. Even men and women who've never been gang members feel compelled to remove their tattoos.

Juan Carlos Brito, 24, pulled up the sleeve of his T-shirt to show the heart on his bicep that he'd gotten in the Merchant Marine.

"I am sorry I have one," he said as he waited at Bonilla's clinic for his treatment to begin. "I have never been a gang member. But this law affects me, too."

Oscar Alvarez, the country's minister of security, shrugs off accusations by human rights activists that the gang crackdown is turning Honduras into a police state as it was in the 1980s when hundreds of suspected leftists were tortured and murdered by a secret military unit.

Law and order, not human rights concerns, are on the public's mind, he said. And Alvarez, who is rumored to be considering a presidential bid, is at the vanguard of the politically popular effort.

"The public was crying out, 'I want security,'" he said, "because this affects the people who are the least protected in the country."

Demographics underscore the seriousness of the problem, he said. In Honduras, 51 percent of the population is younger than 18. In El Salvador, more than half the population is under the age of 24.



Mario Montalban, 26, founded the Barrio 11 gang in his Honduran neighborhood when he was 16 after a failed attempt to migrate to the United States. He has since converted to Christianity and disbanded his gang, but Montalban, shown here carrying his daughter, Ana Ruth, has trouble finding work. When he was a criminal, he said he made enough to feed his two young daughters and his elderly mother.

Importing and exporting GANGSTERS

GANG chronology

1960s: The 18th Street gang is formed by Latino youth living on 18th Street near downtown Los Angeles.

1980s: The Mara Salvatrucha 13 is formed in the Rampart district of Los Angeles by the children of Salvadoran immigrants fleeing a bloody civil war.

Mid-1990s: The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service steps up the deportation of thousands of 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha 13 gang members to their native countries of El Salvador and Honduras.

April 2003: 61 members of the 18th Street gang die during a prison riot and fire in La Ceiba, Honduras. Guards stab or shoot most of the victims as they try to escape the inferno.

August 2003: The Honduran congress unanimously passes one of the toughest anti-gang laws in the hemisphere.

May 2004: 107 Mara Salvatrucha 13 gang members die in a San Pedro Sula, Honduras, prison fire, when guards refuse to release them from their cell block. Some 61 of the dead gang members had never been convicted of a crime.

June 2004: An international gang conference is held in Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas. Top law enforcement from all the gang-plagued countries in the Americas attend, including a representative from the White House.

August 2004: The El Salvadoran congress passes a harsh anti-gang law known as the "Super Firm Hand."

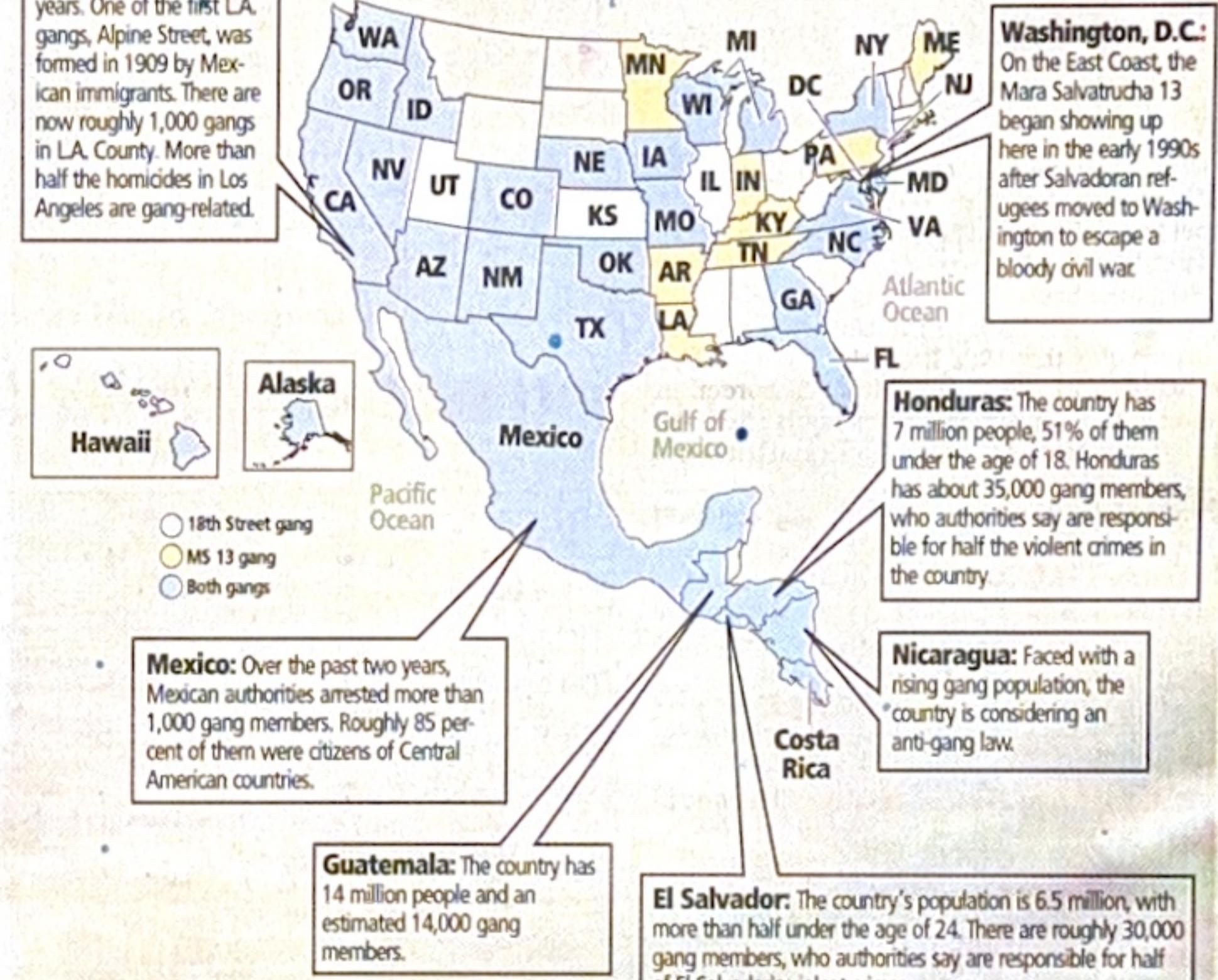
October 2004: Mexican federal and state authorities launch a nationwide crackdown, arresting 224 members of the MS 13 and 18th Street gangs in 28 states.

GANG movement

California: Has about 365,000 gang members, 100,000 of them in Los Angeles County. In Los Angeles, gangs have been in existence for nearly 100 years. One of the first LA. gangs, Alpine Street, was formed in 1909 by Mexican immigrants. There are now roughly 1,000 gangs in LA. County. More than half the homicides in Los Angeles are gang-related.

Born on the streets of Los Angeles, the 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS 13) gangs have found fertile ground for their organizations in Central America and Mexico. For gang members deported under United States immigration laws, Los Angeles continues to be a magnet.

There are an estimated 30,000 MS 13 gang members and more than 30,000 18th Street members in the United States. Many of them were born in Central America and Mexico. Now those gang members are spreading across the United States.



The 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha 13 make their money primarily from drug sales. Law enforcement officials say the gangs are also fierce competitors in other illicit businesses such as smuggling undocumented immigrants, counterfeiting identification and arms trafficking.

SOURCES: Los Angeles Police Department, Orange County District Attorney's Office, National Youth Gang Center, Honduran National Commission for Human Rights and staff reports

PAUL PENZELLA/DAILY BREEZE



Candles and flowers and a "Stop Violence" sign mark the spot in East Los Angeles where former gang member Miguel Gomez, 34, was killed as he removed graffiti. He had been working for the Rev. Gregory Boyle's Homeboy Industries.

"We have to stop more youngsters from becoming gang members," said Alvarez. "If we don't do something about it, we are predicting a very grave future for our country."

At Honduras' Tamara National Penitentiary outside the capital of Tegucigalpa, an 18th Street gang member named "Lucifer" mocks officials who believe they can stem gang vio-

lence.

"If you can't control gangs in the United States, how are they going to end it in this (expletive) country?" cracked the 22-year-old convicted murderer as gangsta rap throbbed and inmates pumped iron in the searing Honduran sun.

Paul Antonio Zelaya is an example of the problems faced by both countries.

Born in Honduras, his mother took him to Los Angeles when he was 3. At age 11 he joined the 18th Street gang.

On his bulging right bicep, Zelaya, who also goes by the name Ricky Alexander, shows off the tattoo bearing his California prison number.

He was deported to Honduras in 2003 after being paroled from Imperial County's Centinela State Prison. Three months later, he was arrested by Honduran police for robbery.

Zelaya and his fellow Los Angeles inmates talk about going back to the United States, to the city they consider home.

So does a prisoner who calls himself Looney, even though he has never set foot in the United States.

Looney is one of 18 children in his dirt-poor family. Four of his brothers are also in gangs — two in the MS 13 and two in the 18th Street.

In 1995, family members who had already settled in Los Angeles sent him money to make the trip. But he got arrested for stealing and has been in prison off and on ever since.

He imagines Los Angeles as "a beautiful city" where homies can find "a blessed peace," because "there is not a lot of violence against them."

"They have cars, TVs, food on the table. Everything. Everything. Everything," he said.

"Los Angeles is a paradise."