

The Emergence and Governance of Criminal Gangs in El Salvador

Bowen Tan^{1,a,*}

¹*Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Class of 2026, Class 19, No.1
Zhongjingji Avenue, Xicheng District, Beijing, 100032, China*

a. robertbowentan@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: El Salvador, a nation marked by stunning landscapes and rich culture, is also notorious for its violent street gangs, which leads to the significance of this study that lies in its examination of the dual facets of the gang phenomenon: their emergence and their governance. To investigate the emergence and governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador, this study focuses on how historical, socio-political, and economic factors have contributed to gang violence, particularly the rise of MS-13 and Barrio 18. Utilizing Strain Theory as the theoretical framework, the study underscores how societal pressures such as inequality and unemployment push individuals toward gang involvement. Comparing El Salvador's "mano dura" policies with similar efforts in Honduras, the study reveals the challenges and limitations of relying on punitive measures if they never address deeper social and economic issues. The analysis of this study emphasizes the need for a balanced approach that combines law enforcement with preventive strategies to tackle this issue.

Keywords: El Salvador, criminal gangs, Strain Theory, comparative analysis.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Imagine living in a country where stepping outside your door may expose you to some of the most dangerous criminal organizations in the world. For many Salvadorans, this is their daily reality. But how did this once peaceful nation become so deeply entrenched in gang violence? El Salvador, a country extraordinarily the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18. These gangs are feared within the country; as they become increasingly involved in transnational criminal activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, and human smuggling, they have garnered international attention [1], [2], [3]. The rise of these criminal gangs is deeply intertwined with the country's history of social instability, economic inequality, and political turbulence[4],[5], so recognizing how these gangs emerged and how they are governed is crucial [6], [7], [8]. The significance of this study lies in its examination of the dual facets of the gang phenomenon: their emergence and their governance; since crime has become a global issue today, the insights gained from this study could help inform more effective strategies that could be especially useful in countries facing similar socio-political challenges.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

To investigate the historical, social, and economic factors that have contributed to the rise of criminal gangs in El Salvador, this study analyzes how the Salvadoran government attempts to govern and control these organizations because it is especially important to tackle this problem. Focusing on both the emergence and governance of gangs can provide a comprehensive overview of this issue and how to solve this problem in El Salvador.

1.3. Preview of the Study

This paper begins by reviewing relevant literature and outlining the theoretical framework, which helps us understand what we know and what we do not know. Next, this study describes how to use methods to gather and analyze data, before presenting the findings of this study on the emergence and governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador. Finally, it discusses the implications of this study and potential future governance strategies to address ongoing challenges.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. The emergence and governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador

The emergence and governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador is a multifaceted issue that intertwines historical violence, social dynamics, and government responses [9], [10], [11]. One research traces the roots of gang violence to the armed conflict of the 1980s and the influx of deported gang members from the United States in the 1990s [12], leading to the formation of some of the most powerful street gangs like Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Barrio 18. Echoing this research, another work [13] examines youth gang involvement through the lens of prevention (focusing on the "Niños Protagonistas" Project). One paper expands on the theme of violence, specifically analyzing how gendered violence in El Salvador and neighboring countries perpetuates cycles of displacement [14]. The normalization of violence against women in hypermasculine spaces, which is exacerbated by patriarchal systems, has driven many women to flee.

One paper offers a theoretical perspective on the governance role that criminal gangs play in El Salvador; this theory describes how gangs exert control over local governance and influence national policy by leveraging their territorial power. This theory brings insights into understanding gangs in El Salvador. On the other hand, another paper more thoroughly explores gang dynamics because it centers on disengagement from gang life [15]. The findings of this paper suggest factors such as gang size, peer influence, incarceration, and evangelical church affiliations are critical in motivating individuals to leave gangs.

Therefore, it becomes evident that the emergence and governance of gangs in El Salvador are influenced by a combination of historical violence, socio-political dynamics, and governance vacuums filled by criminal organizations.

2.2. Strain Theory and criminal gangs

Strain theory supplies a foundational framework for appreciating the relationship between societal pressures and criminal behavior: extraordinary in the context of delinquent gangs [16]; [17]; [18]. Strain arises when society establishes universal goals but offers limited means for achieving them, creating inequality and tension between cultural expectations and individual realities [19]. Strain theory underpins much of the research on criminal gangs and provides insights into how marginalized groups respond to societal pressures.

Building on strain theory, the theory of delinquent gangs [20] focuses on the inability of youth to attain valued goals through legitimate means. The theory argues that when traditional methods of success, such as education and employment, are unavailable, youth turn to delinquent subcultures for alternative pathways. The subcultures often embodied by gangs provide a structure where members can achieve success, albeit through illegitimate means, and strain theory explains how young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, become involved in gang-related activities.

One paper extends the strain theory (GST) framework by emphasizing how individuals react to negative treatment or adversity. Expands strain theory beyond economic deprivation, this theory underscores emotional and psychological strains as key contributors to delinquency. It is the strain theory that scrutinizes qualitative differences across groups, such as racial and ethnic disparities in crime, revealing how strain can manifest differently based on social and structural contexts [21], [22].

There is numerous research on gangs that supports the idea that strain pushes individuals toward illegitimate means of achieving success. One study feature how gang offer alternative pathways for youth who face limited opportunities in education and employment [23]. As gang members lack positive role models and often come from disorganized families, they find in these groups a sense of belonging and a means to achieve goals that are otherwise unattainable.

In contrast to the focus on individual strain, recent research examines how criminal gangs can serve as quasi-governments in environments of state failure. The concept of "governance by violence" reflects how gangs respond to societal strain while simultaneously shaping the political and social order in their territories. The authoritarian "mano dura" (iron fist) policies employed by the Salvadoran government to combat gangs, often critiqued for exacerbating violence and undermining civil society [24].

The synthesis of strain theory reveals a complex interplay between societal pressures, individual experiences, and gang dynamics, where the concept of anomie [25] lays the foundation for appreciating how the failure to achieve societal goals leads to deviant behavior.

2.3. Gaps of Previous Research

In all, there has been extensive research conducted on the emergence and governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador. While many studies focus on the socio-political and economic conditions that lead to gang violence, they often fail to examine how these factors interact with individual psychological and emotional responses, which Strain Theory scrutinizes. Furthermore, comparative research is needed to analyze how gang governance in El Salvador compares to similar regions. Addressing these gaps would provide a deeper and more comprehensive view of the factors driving gang violence and governance in the region.

3. Research methodology

To fill in the above gaps, this study utilizes a historical analysis methodology, drawing from a variety of primary and secondary sources to explore the emergence and governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador. By employing this approach, the study supplies an in-depth examination of how gangs like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 have evolved in response to what the shifting socio-political and economic conditions have entailed, as these conditions have changed over time. The study draws on a range of sources, including government data, academic publications, and reports from international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, which offer a comprehensive perspective on the factors contributing to the rise of these criminal organizations; additionally, comparative statistics are analyzed to assess the effectiveness of Salvadoran government policies as they attempt to combat gang activities.

3.1. Data Collection and Sources

To prepare additional context, this study compares El Salvador's gang problem with those of other Latin American countries facing similar challenges, particularly Honduras. Like El Salvador, Honduras struggles with gang violence and instability, driven by shared socio-economic and historical factors. In the early 2000s, Honduras adopted its version of *mano dura* policies by emphasizing mass incarceration and punitive measures to combat gangs. This comparative analysis underscores how a common history of civil wars, weak institutions, and economic inequality has fueled similar gang-related issues across the region.

3.2. Comparative Analysis Framework

The research also considers how El Salvador's situation may differ from its neighbors. Honduras has been slower to adopt such extreme legal measures—choosing instead to address gang violence through a combination of law enforcement and targeted social programs—though the effectiveness of these programs is also still under review.

This comparison aims to provide insights into whether El Salvador's approach is part of a broader regional trend or whether it reflects a more unique strategy. The analysis of comparative statistics—such as the decline in homicide rates in El Salvador after the implementation of iron-fist policies versus the fluctuating rates in neighboring countries—helps determine if El Salvador's government has achieved distinct results or merely followed the same cycle of violence and punitive measures seen elsewhere in Latin America.

In addition, the study examines the role of foreign intervention in exacerbating gang-related problems in all three countries, particularly the deportation policies of the United States, which sent thousands of gang-affiliated individuals back to Central America in the 1990s and early 2000s. This influx of experienced gang members created fertile ground for the growth of criminal organizations in all three countries. However, El Salvador's exceptionally aggressive response to this threat, through its terrorist designations and extensive incarceration practices, may reflect a more distinct path compared to its neighbors.

4. Result

4.1. The Emergence of Criminal Gangs in El Salvador

The rise of criminal gangs in El Salvador is deeply rooted in three key factors: the country's historical socio-political instability, economic inequality, and foreign intervention. These factors created fertile ground for gang activities, exacerbated by the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992) and its aftermath. Deportations from the U.S. following the war brought gang structures from Los Angeles, including MS-13 and Barrio 18, which rapidly expanded their influence in a post-war environment of social dislocation and weak law enforcement.

Aimed at combating increased criminal activity and at controlling anomalies, the Salvadoran government's implementation of *"mano dura"* (iron fist) policies has been both effective and controversial. Although these measures temporarily reduce homicide rates, they also raise concerns about human rights violations and over-incarceration, which is not common in the world nowadays.

The persistent economic struggles in El Salvador (such as high unemployment, limited opportunities, and extreme inequality) contribute to the ongoing recruitment of gang members. This is because the unemployed had to find a job to earn money, like joining gang groups. Although there have been increases in tax revenue in the Salvadoran economy to some extent, suggesting an enhanced ability to levy taxes, there have not been economic gains trickling down to the general population.

El Salvador's history of political instability dates to colonial times when continuous foreign intervention and internal conflicts frequently occurred. For example, the 1932 suppression of peasant uprisings, led by Indigenous and Ladino populations, exemplifies the violent governmental response to social unrest, which causes the military's brutal crackdown on these uprisings, known as La Matanza, resulted in over 30,000 casualties, undermining the country's social fabric and setting the stage for future conflicts and organized crime. In all, the political instability and violent repression have significantly contributed to its ongoing struggles with social unrest and organized crime.

Furthermore, there are cultural aspects of instability in El Salvador that cannot be overlooked. Concentrated in regions like Izalco and Santiago Nonualco, Indigenous communities were historically marginalized, with their cultural and political institutions (such as the *cofradías*) fostering a sense of unity that supported their resistance.

Foreign intervention, exceptionally by the United States, has played a significant role in shaping El Salvador's socio-political landscape. During the Cold War, the U.S. provided over \$6 billion to the Salvadoran government to counter leftist insurgencies; this aid, intended to prevent the spread of communism in Central America, extended the duration of the Salvadoran Civil War and contributed to a culture of militarization and violence. It was the U.S. training of Salvadoran military forces that exacerbated the conflict and led to long-term instability.

The rise of criminal gangs in El Salvador is intertwined with the country's history of political instability, economic inequality, and foreign intervention. While *mano dura* policies have had short-term successes in reducing crime, they have never addressed the underlying economic and social issues that continue to fuel gang activity.

4.2. The Governance of Criminal Gangs in El Salvador

Strain Theory prepares a framework for recognizing the rise of criminal gangs in response to societal pressures. In this part, this study uses strain theory to analyze the governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador.

4.2.1. "Mano dura" (iron fist) policies

The Salvadoran government's strategy for managing criminal gangs has focused on repressive measures, peculiarly through the "mano dura" (iron fist) policies initiated in the early 2000s. While these measures have led to a rise in incarceration rates, their effectiveness remains questionable. Many gang leaders continue to control operations from inside prisons, and human rights organizations have criticized the harshness of the government's response. In addition, the financial burden of maintaining this punitive system has led to increased public debt and government deficits.

Despite these challenges from human rights organizations and financial burdens, the Salvadoran government has made notable progress in containing gang activities, but the long-term sustainability of such hardline measures is uncertain. While managing criminal activity is crucial for improving El Salvador's economy and living standards, it should also be noted that the government must ensure that its approach does not exacerbate social issues. There is no doubt that many criminal activities stem from economic and social challenges, not simply the will of gang members; so, it is vital for the government to dismantle gang control without undermining democratic principles or human rights if the government wants to tackle the problem of gangs. A balanced and gradual approach is essential to avoid abrupt outcomes in the fight against the *maras*.

From the perspective of Strain Theory, the Salvadoran government's 'Mano Dura' policies fail to address the root societal strains that push individuals into gang life. While incarceration may temporarily reduce gang activities, it simultaneously deepens economic hardship and social alienation, reinforcing the structural inequalities that Strain Theory identifies as key drivers of criminal behavior.

4.2.2. Reflections on Historical Parallels: The 1932 Insurrection and Modern Governance

The cycle of violence and fear in El Salvador, rooted in historical conflicts and economic disparities, has provided fertile ground for criminal organizations. The government's harsh responses, while intended to reduce crime, have often perpetuated fear and mistrust, creating an environment of instability. This instability has hindered economic growth and contributed to the country's recession. El Salvador's post-pandemic growth rate, at 2.6 percent, is the lowest in Central America, and the World Bank projects it will fall to 2.3 percent in 2024. Despite low inflation at 1.23% in December 2023, the prices of essential goods, peculiarly food, remain high, further stressing the population.

The historical failures of twentieth-century revolutions, including those in Central America, underscore the region's vulnerability to external manipulation and internal unrest. Drawing from Strain Theory, the 1932 insurrection in El Salvador reflects the enduring societal strain faced by marginalized communities, a cycle that continues in the modern era through gang violence. Historical parallels demonstrate that violent responses to socio-political strain, whether through insurrection or criminal gangs, are fostered by entrenched inequality and the failure to provide legitimate means for social mobility.

4.2.3. Implications for Contemporary Gang Issues

El Salvador is caught in a cycle of gang violence, poor living standards, insufficient labor supply, and slow economic development, which in turn fuels criminal activity. The government's failure to address these issues has led to extreme instability, prompting many Salvadorans, especially the young, to migrate in search of better opportunities. This migration has left the country with a weakened labor structure, characterized by a disproportionate number of children and women, and a heavy reliance on the secondary sector for production.

The continued public dissatisfaction, especially among the rural population, has done little to improve living standards, which feeds back into the gang problem. President Nayib Bukele's current "iron fist" measures aim to address these issues by cracking down on gangs at their root. However, this approach must be carefully balanced to avoid further alienating the population. A successful strategy would involve not only suppressing criminal activities but also addressing the social and economic conditions that allow these gangs to thrive. Only through a comprehensive and balanced approach can El Salvador hope to break the cycle of violence and improve the quality of life for its citizens.

Considering Strain Theory, the governance of criminal gangs in El Salvador must extend beyond punitive measures and address the underlying social and economic pressures that drive individuals toward gang involvement. Only by alleviating societal strain through comprehensive reform can the cycle of violence be broken.

4.2.4. Comparison with Honduras: Governance of Criminal Gangs

The "mano dura" (iron fist) policies implemented by El Salvador to combat criminal gangs share significant similarities with the approach used in Honduras when we compare these two countries. Both countries have been plagued by the pervasive influence of gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18, and both governments have resorted to repressive measures to curb gang-related violence, but the outcomes and broader implications reveal notable differences.

Like El Salvador, Honduras adopted "mano dura" policies in the early 2000s, focusing on mass incarceration, harsher penalties for gang-related activities, and military involvement in law enforcement[26], [27]. These policies were designed to address the skyrocketing homicide rates and the growing power of gangs, which led to both countries in higher incarceration rates and a temporary decline in violence in both countries.

However, Honduras has faced even more extreme difficulties in managing gang violence even using similar measures like El Salvador. This is partly because, unlike in El Salvador, the Honduran government's repressive measures have been hampered by widespread institutional corruption and ineffective judicial systems. As a result, many gang leaders continued to run their operations from within the prison system, just as in El Salvador, but with fewer checks on their influence.

Moreover, the harsh crackdown in Honduras has hardly significantly alleviated the country's gang problem because the measures often alienated large sections of the population, particularly the youth, who saw slight improvement in their socio-economic conditions. The gangs in Honduras remain deeply rooted in communities where poverty, unemployment, and inequality persist at alarming rates. These economic challenges continue to drive gang recruitment and abate the long-term effectiveness of "mano dura" policies.

Both Honduras and El Salvador have incurred significant economic costs because of their "mano dura" policies, but the economic situation in Honduras is more precarious. Honduras has struggled to maintain stability in the face of rampant corruption, a weak economic foundation, and limited social safety nets. While El Salvador has seen some progress in reducing inequality and boosting tax revenue, Honduras has not experienced the same degree of economic recovery.

The comparison between El Salvador and Honduras underlines important lessons for the Salvadoran government as it continues to pursue repressive measures against gangs. For El Salvador, learning from Honduras means recognizing the need for a balanced approach. While the initial success of "mano dura" in reducing homicides is notable, the Salvadoran government must address the root causes of gang violence—poverty, unemployment, and social inequality—if it hopes to achieve sustainable peace. Without such reforms, El Salvador risks falling into the same cycle of violence and instability that continues to plague Honduras.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

5.1. Findings of this Study

The results of this study elucidate that the rise of criminal gangs in El Salvador is strongly connected to the country's history of socio-political instability, economic inequality, and foreign intervention. The Salvadoran government's "mano dura" (iron fist) policies have been effective but controversial since these policies have temporarily reduced homicide rates, but they have also increased incarceration and exacerbated concerns about human rights violations, especially deeper economic issues, such as high unemployment, limited opportunities, and extreme inequality remain. These challenges continue to perpetuate gang recruitment. The study underlines the limitations of "mano dura" policies and stresses the need for a more comprehensive approach.

5.2. Limitations

One limitation of this study is the lack of long-term data, which makes it difficult to fully understand the lasting effects of policies like "mano dura" on gang activities and social dynamics. Even though the research includes a wide range of sources, it can never be appreciated in terms of how these policies impact crime rates, economic stability, and social trust over time without longitudinal studies. Another limitation is that the comparative analysis in this study centers mostly on El Salvador and Honduras, both of which face similar social and political problems. If this study includes other countries like Brazil or Mexico, which have comparable issues, it will offer a deeper insight into gang governance strategies that would be beneficial to recognize this problem.

5.3. Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on conducting long-term studies to track the effects of "mano dura" and similar policies over extended periods. This type of research can help determine whether short-term crime reductions are sustainable or if these policies lead to deeper socio-political issues in the long term.

Finally, if future research expands the scope to include other countries with similar gang violence, such as Mexico, Brazil, and South Africa, it will provide valuable insights and knowledge in terms of the parallels and differences among these countries.

References

- [1] Andrea, D., and Tanuwijaya, T. A. (2023) *Weak State as a Security Threat: Study Case of El Salvador (2014-2019)*. *Jurnal Sentris*, 4(1), 14-33.
- [2] Boerman, T., and Golob, A. (2021) *Gangs and modern-day slavery in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala: A non-traditional model of human trafficking*. *Journal of human trafficking*, 7(3), 241-257.
- [3] García Pinzón, V. (2023) *Containing violence in El Salvador: community organization, transnational networks and state-society relations*. *Development and Change*, 54(1), 192-219.
- [4] Méndez, M. J. (2020) *The violence work of transnational gangs in Central America*. In *Violence and the Third World in International Relations* (pp. 175-190). Routledge.
- [5] Pinzón, V. G. (2024) *Setting the Stage: Politics, Violence and Peripheral Cities in Colombia and El Salvador*. In *Trajectories of Governance* (pp. 24-54). Bristol University Press.
- [6] García Nebot, A. (2023) *Ten Proposals to combat transnational crime in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. An Approach from Criminology and International Relations*.
- [7] Ponce, C. (2021) *The criminal governance, geography, and network features of extortive offences in El Salvador*.
- [8] Van der Borgh, C. (2021) *Understanding the dynamics and functions of gang violence: The case of El Salvador*. In *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies* (pp. 412-425). Routledge.
- [9] Cruz, J. M. (2022) *Gangs and criminal governance in El Salvador*. In *Crime, violence, and justice in Latin America* (pp. 44-62). Routledge.
- [10] Rahman, E., and Vuković, S. (2022) *Sympathy for the Devil: When and How to Negotiate with Criminal Gangs—Case of El Salvador*. In *Revisiting the "Ripeness" Debate* (pp. 126-143). Routledge.
- [11] Rosen, J. D., Cutrona, S., and Lindquist, K. (2023) *Gangs, violence, and fear: punitive Darwinism in El Salvador*. *Crime, law and social change*, 79(2), 175-194.
- [12] Acosta, V. M. L., and Herrera, J. P. B. (2023). *The origin and development of gangs in El Salvador*. *Southern perspective/Perspectiva austral*, 1, 68-68.
- [13] Rivera, R. (2019) *Preventing Youth Violence in El Salvador: A Relational Social Marketing Model*. *Case Studies on Social Marketing: A Global Perspective*, 195-204.
- [14] Obinna, D. N. (2021) *Seeking sanctuary: violence against women in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala*. *Violence against women*, 27(6-7), 806-827.
- [15] Cruz, J. M., and Rosen, J. D. (2020) *Mara forever? Factors associated with gang disengagement in El Salvador*. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 69, 101705.
- [16] Rivera, L. G. (2015) *Security and remilitarization in the name of democracy: The impact of global crime control policies in Honduras*. *CMI Working Paper*.
- [17] Agnew, R., and Brezina, T. (2019) *General strain theory*. *Handbook on crime and deviance*, 145-160.
- [18] Brezina, T. (2017) *General strain theory*. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of criminology and criminal justice*.
- [19] Merton, R. K. (1938) *Social Structure and Anomie*. *American Sociological Review*, 3, 672-82
- [20] Cloward, R. A., and Ohlin, L. E. (1960) *Delinquency and opportunity: A theory of delinquent gangs*. Free Press.
- [21] Agnew, R. (2006) *Pressured into crime: An overview of general strain theory*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
- [22] Kaufman, J. M., Rebellon, C. J., Thaxton, S., and Agnew, R. (2008) *A general strain theory of racial differences in criminal offending*. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 41, 421-437
- [23] Klemp-North, M. (2007) *Theoretical foundations for gang membership*. *Journal of Gang Research*, 14(4), 11.
- [24] Lovato, R. (2020) *Unforgetting : a memoir of family, migration, gangs, and revolution in the Americas*.
- [25] Agnew, R. (1992) *Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency*. *Criminology*, 30, 47-8
- [26] Glebbeek, M. L. (2010) *Mano dura: fighting crime, violence, and insecurity with an iron fist in central america*. *Police use of force: A global perspective*.
- [27] Mani, K. (2021) *Honduras: All-purpose militarization*. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*