

From Bad to Worse: Behind the Scenes of El Salvador’s “War on Gangs”

by **Jenna Knapp** | University of Notre Dame | jenna.e.knapp@gmail.com

I have an academic background in anthropology and international peace studies, but the most formative schooling I have ever received was the period of four years that I spent alongside young people experiencing incarceration in El Salvador. I had received a Fulbright grant to conduct ten months of research about trauma and resiliency among those incarcerated in El Salvador, but I stayed for eight years. Even so, I still only scratched the surface of all there is to learn from those who so graciously and courageously stepped into their wounds to speak their stories out loud to me, week after week. Nearly all of these young people were in some way gang involved. Those who were not involved before incarceration often become involved once incarcerated, because the structure of the juvenile detention facility itself forces them either to choose gang loyalty or be relegated to small and isolating spaces for the duration of their sentence.

Thanks to the gift of their openness and vulnerability, I was given thousands of windows into the complexity of their lives, the magnitude of their resilience, the depth of their despair, the limits of their agency, and the song of their whispered longings. I spent hundreds of hours sitting at a desk in the patch of earth directly outside their dormitory cell, moving around to follow the shade that the concrete walls would create for us depending on the time of day. These encounters remain the most sacred of my life thus far. One by one, the young people seated in front of me revealed their stories, and I wrote them down verbatim. Our goal was to produce a book of poetry and prose to problematize the

public image of who they were (something other than vermin, cockroaches, monsters, diabolic—as they are most commonly labeled in commentary beneath online news stories).¹ Much of what they shared never made its way into their testimonies, because it would have jeopardized their safety within the structure they were bound to. These stories remained between us and were spoken for the sake of whatever healing is possible when witnessed in their fullness by another, even when still trapped within a situation of the ongoing trauma of being harmed and simultaneously forced to perpetrate a great deal of harm.

When they would articulate a story they did want to share with a wider audience, I would write it all down with them, type it that evening, and return the next day to read it back to them. We’d then proceed to edit it together and co-create an order and a structure to their satisfaction. Such was the case with William, whose tenderness and soft-spoken manner always struck me, given the degree of pain, trauma, and violence that had made up much of his life experience.

In the hundreds of stories I heard, William’s story is the rule, rather than the exception, to the extent that his life is riddled with violence and abuse. William emphasizes the themes of violence and abuse carried out by his family, teachers, law enforcement, and himself; but it is important to remember that each of these individuals is operating amidst systemic violence and unresolved historical trauma. I have been hard-pressed to find a single Salvadoran who was not impacted by the US-funded war in El Salvador from 1980 to 1992 that took the lives of over

¹ I would gladly share pdf copies of these compilations that we self-published, entitled “Tras la máscara de un pandillero” and “Duras lecciones,” with those interested in reading and sharing this work.

70,000 Salvadorans. Not to mention the impact from the violence that has ensued since, with the gangs' rise to power following their exportation from Los Angeles, when Salvadoran refugees were deported from LA following the war. The Salvadoran state's increasingly repressive, "hardline" policies in response to the violence (with the backing of US funding), has only exacerbated the underlying hurt and oppression at the root of the complex, systemic causes to the current situation of violence and instability.

While William's story was recorded in 2013, it is even more relevant and urgent today than when it was originally recorded. I do not know William's fate. But of the young people's lives that I've been able to keep up with, 38 have been killed, and many more have been re-incarcerated. Though William and most of his peers were recruited into gangs as children, they are written about not as "child soldiers" but as delinquents, gangsters, and terrorists. As such, the treatment they are given by the state with the support (or blind eye) of the international community is one of violence, repression, and extrajudicial killing. While young people like William have indeed inflicted irreparable harm, the state's response to this harm has only exacerbated the situation. Warehousing youth with gang affiliations in detention centers with few opportunities for healing and growth has been equivalent to sending them all to get masters' degrees and PhDs in street smarts and illicit organization. It was not uncommon during my time accompanying these young people in prison that they would be made to collectively murder one of their peers for some transgression he had committed against the gang. This mechanism of violence and control, all while in state custody, served to solidify their belonging to their gang, for fear of internal retribution.

Salvadorans could likely all agree that the levels of violence and gang control in El Salvador have been intolerable, and something needs to be done. However, the response must take into account the complexity of compounded trauma, rather than adding ever increasing layers of fear, violence, and marginalization to the lives of boys such as William.

Unfortunately, President Nayib Bukele's government has done just the opposite. On March 27, 2022, El Salvador's legislative assembly approved a "State of Emergency," temporarily suspending certain fundamental rights such as habeas corpus and the right to legal defense. Since the police are targeting anyone who "directly or indirectly benefit from relationships of any nature" with gangs, and currently have no legal accountability, this has led to a wave of arbitrary arrests. Since the State of Emergency was approved, as of September 15, 2022, more than 52,700 Salvadorans have been arrested (which is 20 percent of people in El Salvador aged 15–30).

I conducted several interviews in August 2022 with those who had managed to be released from this most recent wave of detentions, and each person detailed unthinkable horrors taking place inside of the prisons. Hunger and dehydration are the norm, and people are dying in droves of tuberculosis, kidney failure, COVID, and murder by state officials, though these deaths are not being reported by the state. Each day, people like William who manage to complete their sentences are being handcuffed as soon as they step out of the front doors of the prison, and reprocessed with 40-year sentences, because in March 2022, it was declared a crime punishable with 20–45 years in prison to "belong to a gang."

Yes, something had to be done, but this was not the solution. Though there is a momentary reprieve from gang violence in many communities in El Salvador, people have begun to turn on one another in the atmosphere of mistrust and fear of state authorities, and people are describing it as being a "crime to be on someone's bad side." With a mere accusatory Facebook post, it is now possible to get someone incarcerated overnight by a police force whose official T-shirts state: "Si te corres, solo te morirás cansado" (If you run, you will only die tired). Abuse of power, violence, and machismo have only proven to seed more of each of these in El Salvador's history, and the next iteration will surely be like nothing we've seen yet.

It is an honor to share William's story with you. It is no small thing that it has managed to find its way out of the bars that likely constrain him, if he is still alive. I told him I would try to share his story as widely as I could. He hoped his testimony would contribute to the world, as part of his journey to try to become the "best good person" he could be. When you see images of the mass detentions in Central America and celebrations of the "war against terrorists," remember William, and the complex story of each handcuffed body you see. Imagine their longings, and what they might need to survive, or even thrive. Imagine a way forward that can both take seriously the tremendous grief of those they have harmed, as well as their own experience of harm that led them to the structure that promised them the respect and agency they longed for. Invite others in, and take the first step towards creating this healing pathway you've imagined.

Caged Where My Life Began

William

I was made in prison.

My father spent ten years and five months locked up for two murders. My mom went to prison to visit her uncle and while she was there my dad talked her into being with him. My mom took the risk and put up with him for his whole prison sentence. They made me and my older brother while he was in the big house. My brother was planned though, and I wasn't.

My grandpa always told me since I was little that I was an accident and that I'd be good for nothing my whole life. He told me over and over again that no one in our family wanted me because I was too hyperactive. My whole family told me that I was the black sheep.

For as long as I can remember, my dad beat me every single day. He always fought with my mom and if I looked at him he'd yell, "What are you looking at son of a bitch?" and he'd beat the shit out of me.

When I was five he was teaching me how to tell time on a clock but I couldn't do it. He broke it over my head yelling, "Son of a bitch! Learn this shit!"

I always said to him, "When I'm old I'm gonna become a gangster. They're going to kill me and it's gonna hurt you to see me lying dead." He always just responded, "I hope they kill you son of a bitch!" as he punched and kicked me.

One night when I was only seven, I grabbed a knife to kill him while everyone was asleep. But I wasn't brave enough to do it. Another time I stuffed a bunch of pills in a water bottle and I left it by his bed so that he'd drink it. I stood in the doorway watching that son of a bitch snore. But I didn't know how I'd escape from the house, so I took the bottle away from his bedside.

Aside from my father's abusiveness, my mom favored my brother in our household. She'd buy him more than she'd buy me. I always had to clean everything.

At school everyone looked down on me. My damn life has always been that way. My teachers would kick me because I wouldn't do my homework. I was smart. I always outscored everyone in the PAES.² I came in second place on the municipal level, but since everyone looked down on me, I dropped out of school.

When I was nine my dad left for the United States to help our family out. I was happy when he left. Once he got there, he stopped calling us. My mom's aunt eventually told her that he had another woman and children there. I felt sick thinking about how much of a piece of shit my

² Standardized testing for primary and secondary students in El Salvador.

dad was. It hurt me so much to know that my mom had waited for him for over ten years while he was in jail and he still cheated on her.

When I found out he'd cheated, I thought, "One day my dad is gonna need me and I'm gonna send him to hell." I said that if I saw him I'd kill him right then and there. I joined the gang, and my dad had the nerve to tell my mom that it was her fault I'd joined, when he was the one who never cared for me. He never gave me one piece of advice.

I took out everything I'd suffered with my dad on the shit ton of guys that I killed. Maybe one day someone will take out what they've suffered on me, just as I took out my anger on them. Being in the gang, I started thinking about everything that had happened to me in my damn rejection-filled life. I didn't give a shit if they killed me. So I would go to rival gang territory and kill them. I released some of my anger, but at the same time I felt like what I was doing wasn't good. It was good in the eyes of my gang, but not in God's eyes.

Since I was involved in crime, the police were always after me. They'd steal my bikes, phones, money, and they even took one of my mom's gold chains and her perfume. The judicial system ensures that our lives are as awful as possible. The police are supposedly here to arrest those who commit crimes, but they're more corrupt and unlawful than we are. One time they grabbed me by my house and they dumped me right in the middle of rival gang territory where a bunch of rivals were waiting for me with machetes. I barely escaped alive because they wanted to slice me to death. If they had killed me I wouldn't have cared.

Since my family rejected me, I looked for support from a girlfriend. I found it in Sindy. A few months after having met, we moved in together. I really love her. We did everything together. We bathed

together, slept together, and ate off of the same plate. We both had arrest warrants so we'd run from the police together, too, though she was pregnant with my child.

Shortly after we moved in together some guys carried out a murder in her house and, because she has three brothers who are gang members, the police implicated her. She was arrested and she cried and cried. Since I was still outside, tons of chicks told me to my face that we should make love, but no. I said no to these whores. My woman was locked up and pregnant and if she found out that I was with someone else . . . that could kill her. Instead, I bought her everything she needed.

A few days later, I was arrested for murder. About 20 cops surrounded my block. I ran from them over the rooftops. They finally found me hiding in the water basin of an abandoned house. They beat the shit out of me, as if I were a piñata, trying to get me to tell them where our gang hides guns. They offered to throw me over the border into Guatemala in exchange for information,³ but I didn't tell them anything.

Like it or not, I'm in jail because of my father, that son of a bitch. He told me that he would pay for a lawyer to get me out, but I told him to pay for a lawyer for my lady instead so that she could get out since she's pregnant. Then she could come and visit me here.

My mom wants to sell her land and use the money to send me to the United States⁴ if I get out. Now that I'm locked up they want to help me, but it shouldn't be like that. Everything they do to you when you're little hurts you. We're human beings . . . we feel.

³ Gang members who reveal confidential information to the authorities are often killed by members of their own gang for "snitching." Although they may attempt to hide out in neighboring countries, they are often found and killed. Additionally, gang loyalty is such that gang members will elect years of prison time over protected-witness programs, which themselves are grossly ineffective.

⁴ Immigrating to the US is one of the only ways to "escape" gang life, yet it is incredibly dangerous for gang members, given that the migration pathways are controlled by rival gangs and cartels in Mexico.

I wonder what God's plan is for me here. Maybe they were going to kill me on the outside, or maybe I was going to get more addicted to cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, crack, or cocaine. . . .

I think to myself, if I wasn't planned but I'm here, God must have sent me to the world for some reason. Maybe to see the mistakes that I've made and then repent.

When I was on the street, I got to the point of wanting to make a deal with the devil. If I was going to be bad, I wanted to be the baddest bad person in the world.

Now I think that if I'm going to be good, I want to try to be the best good person in the world.

Although we always make mistakes, we can try to avoid them.

Maybe that's why God sent me to be locked up.

We don't gain anything by doing bad things, but we gain so much by doing good. If I have this opportunity, I have to take advantage of it. But here in El Salvador there's no way in hell I'll change, surrounded by the same temptations and obstacles as before. My rivals will kill me. The police will charge me with any murder that's committed. . . .

That's why when I get out, I want to go to the US and start a new life. Once I'm out of danger, I can share my story and my pain with other kids and be a support for them so that they don't choose a bad path and a bad mentality. I want to be a good father for my child, since my father was not a good father for me. //