

The Forms of Gang Rule in Central America¹

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Introduction

The implementation of Nayib Bukele's State of Exception in 2022 has seemingly deactivated the public discussion about youth gangs in El Salvador and the Central American region. However, street gangs remain a major social problem in several Central American communities. In some areas affected by violence, gangs keep ruling over the lives of the "civilian" non-gang population. They tax economic activities, arbitrate conflicts and social exchanges, and provide access to education and employment opportunities within their turf boundaries. Scholars have labeled this phenomenon "criminal governance" (Arias 2006, Lessing 2021).

Street gangs' ability to impose limits on people's behavior in several Central American communities may represent an impediment to developing intervention programs to prevent gang engagement, mitigate youth violence, and curb criminal careers. The presence of gangs not only reduces the likelihood that their members would abandon their illegal activities. In some cases, they also prevent the establishment of organic and external youth violence prevention initiatives. Street gangs' dominance over the community also generates and perpetuates systems of impunity, namely, the power to sustain criminal activity without substantial repercussions for the gang. Community residents

live under the perennial threat of violence and are unable to report gang crimes and seek proper justice.

In this paper, we illustrate some forms in which gangs have imposed their rule over several urban—and rural—communities in northern Central America. We show the complexity of criminal rule in several neighborhoods affected by gangs and organized crime groups. Impunity plays an important role in bolstering and sustaining such systems of rule. This paper is based on the results of 19 focus groups with nearly 200 adults who reside and work in ten underprivileged neighborhoods and towns affected by gang activity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Youth Gangs and Insecurity in Northern Central America

Street gangs are a fixture in several urban communities across Central America. Born in Southern California in the 1970s (Ward 2013, USAID 2006), several groups transplanted and expanded in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras by the early 1990s (Savenije 2009). In the early 2000s, they had become a critical security concern for several regional governments (Arana, 2005). An extensive assessment from USAID in 2006 estimated that the number of gang members in Central America might have reached 305,000 (USAID 2006). Subsequent estimations and assessments placed the number

¹ This article is a summary of a research report on intervention programs and gang governance in Central America, prepared under Grant No. D4253_RG-002, Task Order AID-OAA-TO-16-00041 Latin America and Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention Project. We thank Josué Sanchez for his contributions to this project.

significantly lower, but still noteworthy (Seelke 2016). However, they all pointed to these groups' increasing role in the region's criminal landscape.

The way gangs relate with the community and, particularly, how they rule has been a black box in our understanding of the Central American region. With some notable exceptions (Fontes 2018, Rosen and Cruz 2023), studies have little information about how communities relate to gang members. The conventional wisdom has been that gangs and youths involved in criminal organizations contribute to insecurity and impede community development efforts. Studies using Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer data have repeatedly shown that the presence of gangs in the community increases people's perceptions of insecurity (Rosen 2021). Furthermore, other studies have revealed that people living in neighborhoods controlled by gangs tend to engage less in political and social activity (Córdova 2019). Whether through credible threats or negotiating with local authorities, gangs manage to impose systems of impunity that perpetuate their dominance.

Who Rules the Communities in Central America?

The question of who rules the community may seem irrelevant. Conventional wisdom and a long tradition in political sociology contend that formal authorities do (Weber 2009). Based on several years of gang research in the region, it is possible to identify three types of rule in communities with a strong gang presence in northern Central America. First, communities in which a particular gang enjoys uncontested power. In these cases, gangs seem to be recognized by all community members as the most significant actor in the social dynamics of the *barrio* or community. Second, communities where gangs share governance with other actors. These other actors are the police, community organizations, or institutions most community members recognize as legitimate. Third, communities where different gangs dispute territorial control. These are communities that are in bordering zones

between opposing groups or in neighborhoods that have faced the collapse of a dominant gang or gang leader.

Uncontested Rule

In some communities of northern Central America, street gangs exert uncontested control over the social dynamics of the neighborhood. The gang's presence and instructions determine intervention programs, business activities, and social life. A resident of a community with a heavy gang presence in San Salvador described how anyone who wants to start an intervention program in the community needs to secure gang authorization first:

The authorization to enter... In all communities, I believe, that's the first entity to ask for authorization is with them [the gang members]. Not with anyone else because if there is Adesco (a community association), you must look for the association, to say the least, the Adesco. However, Adesco is obliged to tell the boys so that they can give them permission or endorsement to implement that program or project in the activity (Participant 6, Focus group No. 1, El Salvador).

The gang's dominance is usually established in contrast to the limited capacity of the police or state forces to counteract the gang's power (Cruz 2022). In those cases, the police are viewed as bought off by the gang or in fear of the gang's power. In controlling daily life, the gang also determines who and how to access justice. A participant in focus groups comprised of adults living in communities with gang presence in Tegucigalpa illustrated this power:

Gangs rule because... I laugh to see two policemen in the patrols, in a neighborhood where there are up to 15, 20, 30 people involved in gangs, two policemen for 30. That's nothing! Sometimes, it is the same police who have respect for the gangs. I have seen them shaking hands. I will tell you: How is one supposed to trust the police in our country? [...] In my neighborhood, the gangs generally

rule there. There is a police post, but it is a post that is for decoration (Participant 3, Focus Group No. 4, Honduras).

In Guatemala, a person working in a violence prevention program for a suburban municipality illustrated the complexity of the relationships established by gangs in places they control:

Unfortunately, we know that the gang controls the place, and the relationship [between the gang and the community] is ambivalent. But no, the relationship is parasitic in reality, so to speak, because the neighbors do not complain. So, it is known that the gangs have control of the sectors, the area, and the places. And people learn to live with them [the gangs] in certain ways so as not to be affected or not be affected in a violent, aggressive way by gang members. I believe the point is not whether the relationship is good or not. It is a relationship (Focus Group No. 3, Guatemala).

Territorial control is central to the gangs' dominance in these communities. The previous statements underline the importance of controlling the places and areas where a gang settles and develops its activities. Uncontested rule over a territory entails a clear definition of the territory and effective surveillance over such territory. A young man who participated in a focus group in Tegucigalpa described the logic of borders and surveillance:

In our case, there are established areas. The one next to ours is from community X. If you enter there as if they do not know you, they arrive and ask you what you are doing there. These entries belong to the gangs, and they look at who enters and who leaves. If they do not know you, one of the things you must do if you want to enter those neighborhoods is call someone you know and enter with that person, and they don't do anything to you (Participant 2, Focus Group No. 3, Honduras).

Uncontested rule means that gangs have the unilateral ability to elude justice and punishment for their actions in the community.

Shared Governance

In some communities affected by street gangs, these groups do not exert absolute dominance over the neighborhood. Local gangs appear to share authority with other groups, including state forces, community organizations, and civil society institutions, such as churches. Our research did not explore how common this type of arrangement is. However, in some testimonies, the emerging picture is again complex, with no single actor holding authority but several sharing spaces of power. Yet, such arrangements ensure impunity for gang members and their activities. For example, a participant in the focus group with program implementers in Tegucigalpa described it in the following way:

The issue is that it is a matter of systems. There are several systems that interact in the same territory because [there is] the official state security system, which interacts in the territory, but there is also a local system of community safety. This system includes how community [gang] leaders behave with people, which is another system that is on the same terrain. So I would say that this must be interpreted by all the systems that interact in each territory (Participant 6, Focus Group 1, Tegucigalpa).

In other words, gang dominance is circumstantial, and it depends on the behavior of other actors, especially state actors, who command enough power to contest gang domination. A Salvadoran participant made this point considering the government's efforts to recover territory as part of the Plan de Control Territorial, the previous policy to the prevalent State of Exception:

I feel that there is no one who decides, they or the others. Because when this Territorial (Control) Plan was established, I remember that there was always a police patrol in the corner, right where gangs had been before. But then, that was forgotten because the police are always transitory, but only in

passing. Let's say that they are there just from time to time. But I don't feel that gang's rule either, I don't feel that either (Unidentified participant, Focus Group 3, El Salvador).

In any case, the sporadic presence of law enforcement and the participation of other actors in the community governance process do not preclude the ability of the gang to preserve impunity for its members.

Contested Governance

In some communities or areas within the communities, the dynamics of gang governance are determined by contestation. Rival gangs compete for control of the community, which tends to increase the levels of violent conflict and insecurity. Since law enforcement institutions are largely absent and unable to reduce impunity, community residents develop strategies to remain safe. A person who participated in a focus group with adults in San Salvador described the importance of determining the rules resulting from the conflicts between gangs to navigate the relationship with the predominant gang safely:

I think those rules were given because there was a time when [members of] the opposite community came to try to get into this community. So, I think that's why those things happened. There were attacks. So, it was very ugly because they had, let's say, they control over all the entrances and exits of the same neighborhood (Participant 9, Focus Group 1, El Salvador).

Dynamics of contestation and ambiguous gang dominance are more common in border areas between communities. For example, a community leader in San Pedro Sula described the difficulties of navigating the rules in place given the constant shifts of gang control:

The problem is that there is no law. That is, the day before yesterday, they killed two people in Barrio X, and that community has historically been the territory of Barrio 18. But historically, that has become a border in the last two or three years. You have no idea! So, at the end of

the day, there might be some security today, but there might be something else tomorrow (Participant 4, Focus Group 7, Honduras).

Another participant referred to the difficulties that the community association had establishing the community center, which housed the violence prevention programs, due to the contested nature of the territory:

Because they [the community] didn't have a place, and the place they had was their center. This center was right on the border, right in the middle of a crossing point, where different gangs fought, and we wanted to be able to install the community center (Participant 2, Focus Group 7, Honduras).

The Mechanisms of Gang Dominance

Gang dominance is manifested in several areas of community life. It is not only about preventing rivals and the police from encroaching upon the gang's territory. According to participants in the focus groups, preventing the intrusion of rival gangs and the police into the turf consumes a great deal of the gangs' resources and time. However, once the group has consolidated its dominance over the neighborhood, it devotes significant time to managing social relationships and imposing social order. A critical aspect of maintaining social order is the regulation of people's behavior in accordance with the gang's norms. There are three areas in which gangs exert their rule over the community. First, gangs impose levies or taxes on the community through extortion. Second, gangs regulate economic activities beyond extortion and security taxes. This regulation involves legal and illegal activities. For example, a typical illicit activity is selling drugs or managing the local trafficking of illegal commodities. Gangs also help local community members to secure job opportunities in the formal market. Third, gangs may operate as arbiters, enforcers, and judges in common conflicts within the community. These conflicts range from disputes among neighbors to domestic violence.

Extorting and Imposing Taxes on the Community

In several communities across northern Central America, gangs utilize their territorial control to extort the population and extract monetary resources from the areas where they operate. Although not all gangs extort or impose taxes on the people under their influence in the same fashion, cash extraction constitutes one of the primary sources of revenue for the gangs in several communities. In some neighborhoods, gangs impose levies on every member of the community, as the following exchange between participants in one of the focus groups in Guatemala illustrates:

Interviewer: *I want to talk about the economic impact of the gang presence. Do you know about extortions in your communities?*

Participant 6. *Yes, all the stores, tortillerías, and even street vendors now.*

Participant. 8. *Also, street vendors, people selling, taxi drivers, bus attendants, drivers, and so on.*

Participant 9. *There [in my community], everyone pays extortion. There is no one that does not pay, most of the houses. Even the houses pay extortion there.*

Participant. 8. *Even the grannies pay!*

Participant 3. *Ah yes, there in the neighborhood where I live, even the street peddlers who walk through the crossroads at the traffic lights must pay so that they are not going to kill them because it is very dangerous (Focus Group 6, Guatemala).*

In other places, the imposition of extortions and taxes is conceived as a transaction for a security service. For example, a Salvadoran participant described the complaint he presented to the gang leader because the gang had failed to watch his car while parked in the neighborhood:

Where I lived, they asked you for money to take care of the car, but they didn't take care of it! Speaking of the situation, I told [the gang leader]: "Here ... You ... Someone scratched my car and fled, ok?" Then, you tell them: "Hey, look, I'm paying you, ok? What's up, they scratched me?" [The guy responds,] "Ok. That's ok. Keep it [the money], don't give me anything. I will figure out who scratched it up, and then we'll fix it..." Well... I feel that it [complaining] helps you in a certain way because it is a business they have forced on you (Focus Group 1, El Salvador).

Managing Economic Activities in the Community

In several places, gangs use their dominance to advance and consolidate their businesses. Other than extortion, drug trafficking remains one of the main illegal activities. In some places, their control over the community allows the gang to take over private spaces and displace families. A young woman discussed the case of a family in her community in Tegucigalpa:

A family in the neighborhood received a letter from the gang telling them to leave the house. [...] They are looking for an area where they see that drugs move a lot, where they can boost the business or build crazy houses [gang headquarters]. They established crazy houses within the neighborhood or outside, and so the reason they forced this family out was that. (Focus Group No. 2, Honduras).

Gangs also use their leverage to expand on other local businesses. When asked whether gangs have other businesses in the community, a participant in El Salvador responded:

Some have businesses, like little shops or things like that, little things like bars. Recently, I believe they have put a bar there. Before, when someone else ran that business, they kept us all up. I am far from that business, right... Well, they even kept me awake, right? They wouldn't let me sleep: drunk people screaming, talking on the weekends there,

fighting. And now, since the gang took over that business, well..., I have seen more order (Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

The previous statement describes the gang organization's incursion into legal activities and showcases the gang's capacity to establish order around the business. Such ability is in full display when discussing the intervention of gang members in resolving interpersonal conflicts in the community.

Resolving Community Conflicts

Participants in focus groups who live in neighborhoods controlled by gangs constantly referred to the role of gangs in mediating and resolving interpersonal conflicts in the community. Furthermore, some people referenced the gangs' ability to dispense punishments against residents who have committed crimes or broken any community rule. For example, a participant in the focus group of program implementers in El Salvador summarized this notion in the following manner:

Many people turn to gangs to solve their problems. It's that simple. And we live it in the community, in the neighborhood where we were implementing (Participant 2, Focus Group No. 4, El Salvador).

A participant in another focus group in El Salvador illustrated one of the conflicts in which gangs were asked to intervene:

The boys [gangs] had to intervene ... Because, speaking of my friend, who, as I mentioned, no agreement was reached with the problem with the neighbor. So, they called them, they called those who rule there, the boys, and they had to intervene to resolve the conflict (Participant 4, Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

Resolving community conflicts is, perhaps, the area where gangs show their power to ensure impunity. Some behaviors viewed as transgressions to the gang norms are immediately punished, while others that align with the gang's interests are not. Gangs are called

to dispense punishments to other community members when they have wronged somebody in the community. Regarding a case involving a bike accident, one participant in El Salvador told a story of gangs being called to punish the individual responsible for the accident:

But the lady next door comes up and says to my brother: "No way! How are you going to let that son of a bitch go? I'm going to call the boys [gang members] to beat him up." Then, the lady came and stirred up the hornet's nest. My brother humbly said, "No, there's no problem." But this lady complicated things and called so-and-so, and in the end, they hit the guy just for an accident (Participant 1, Focus Group No. 5, El Salvador).

One of the areas in which participants frequently described the intervention of gangs was in domestic abuse cases. Despite their history of abuse against women (Van Damme, 2019), gangs are called to intervene and stop domestic violence situations, protecting women or children from abusive males. A participant in the focus group with young women in Tegucigalpa provided the following testimony:

In my case, there was a neighbor who hit his wife, and he had two children. It turns out that he always played loud music every time he hit her. Then, he lowered the volume, and the girl went out with the bruises and the children with traumas. It reached a point where people felt very bad about it, and they accused him. A gang member got into it, and I did not listen to what he said, but since then, the situation between the couple calmed down because he is already calmer... (Participant 8, Focus Group 2, Honduras).

Participants explained that, in several cases, the intervention of gang members in domestic matters and interpersonal conflicts within the community is motivated by the gangs' desire to keep the police and state institutions away from the neighborhood.

[When a couple is fighting] and screaming, the boys [gangs] are going to listen to everything. They will come and ask you, "What's the problem?" The thing is not to call the police. That's the point they tell you: when you have a problem or personal issue, don't call the police. "Better call us because we can fix the problem. We will help you" (Participant 3, Focus Group 5, El Salvador).

Conclusions

This paper has illustrated the different forms in which gangs exert their rule over several communities across northern Central America. In some, these groups wield substantial power over public life, to the point that even state authorities and other institutions are not able—or willing—to contest their rule. In other places, they are just another social actor who participates in community decisions but defer to other actors in matters of importance for the community. In some cases, they even would cooperate with other actors in the neighborhood in the search for solutions to collective problems. However, more frequently than not, youth gangs are engaged in long and violent disputes over territorial control, especially in neighborhoods located in the middle of rival territory. In these cases, they significantly contribute to the insecurity of the population. They also contribute to chronic impunity. Criminal activity is left unpunished. In these contexts, gang presence is perpetuated, and extortions and extractive activities expand and affect people's lives. Furthermore, in some communities, gangs also act as the arbiters of personal conflicts, judges in family disputes, and third-party enforcers of other groups. In addition, they enact rules of individual and collective behavior that range from who can enter the community to what residents are allowed to keep their homes.

The apparent success of Bukele in the fight against gangs in El Salvador should not divert attention to the fact that several communities in the region remain under some type of criminal rule. Even with the enactment of the State of Exception—and its deleterious effects on human rights in that country—reports of gang activity

keep unnerving some communities in need of youth violence prevention programs and rule of law. Responses addressing the chronic problems of criminal violence in Central America need to tackle the structural conditions that have allowed the rise of criminal rule in so many neglected communities across the region.

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