

# Glass Half Full? The Peril and Potential of Highly Organized Violence\*

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**ABSTRACT** | Throughout the twenty-first century, El Salvador has been immersed in a crisis of armed violence, largely explained by an exceptionally high degree of organization of armed violence by three gangs, the police, and the armed forces. I trace the processes of organization and escalation of armed violence in the country, and address the potential for harnessing these organizations to constrain armed violence, as evidenced twice in the past decade, when gangs reined in the wars between them and reduced homicides by half. I analyze the organizational conditions that make this possible and the political conditions necessary to bridge short-term violence reduction and a long-term political vision and policy framework for social transformation.

**KEYWORDS** | Armed violence; El Salvador; gangs; homicide reduction; politics of violence; state violence

## ¿El vaso medio lleno? El peligro y potencial de la violencia altamente organizada

**RESUMEN** | A lo largo del siglo XXI, El Salvador se ha visto inmerso en una crisis de violencia armada, cuya principal explicación es el grado excepcionalmente alto de organización de la violencia armada por parte de tres pandillas, la policía y la fuerza armada. Rastreo los procesos de organización y escalada de violencia armada en el país, e interrogo el potencial de movilizar estas organizaciones para contener la violencia armada, como ha quedado evidenciado en dos ocasiones en la última década, cuando las pandillas se dispusieron a parar sus guerras y reducir los homicidios a la mitad. Analizo las condiciones organizativas que hacen posible esa contención, así como las condiciones políticas necesarias para vincular una reducción de violencia a corto plazo con una visión política y con un marco de políticas públicas de transformación social a largo plazo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** | El Salvador; pandillas; política de violencia; reducción de homicidios; violencia armada; violencia estatal

## O copo meio cheio? O perigo e o potencial da violência altamente organizada

**RESUMO** | Ao longo do século XXI, El Salvador tem sido visto imerso em uma crise de violência armada, cuja principal explicação é o grau excepcionalmente alto de organização da violência armada por parte de três quadrilhas, da polícia e da força armada. Investigo os processos de organização e escalada de violência armada no país, e interrogo o potencial de mobilizar essas organizações para conter a violência armada, como ficou evidenciado em duas ocasiões na última década, quando as quadrilhas foram dispostas a parar suas guerras e reduzir os homicídios pela metade. Analiso as condições organizacionais que tornam possível essa contenção,

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bem como as condições políticas necessárias para vincular uma redução de violência em curto prazo com uma visão política e com um referencial de políticas públicas de transformação social em longo prazo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** | El Salvador; política de violência; quadrilhas; redução de homicídios; violência armada; violência estatal

## Introduction

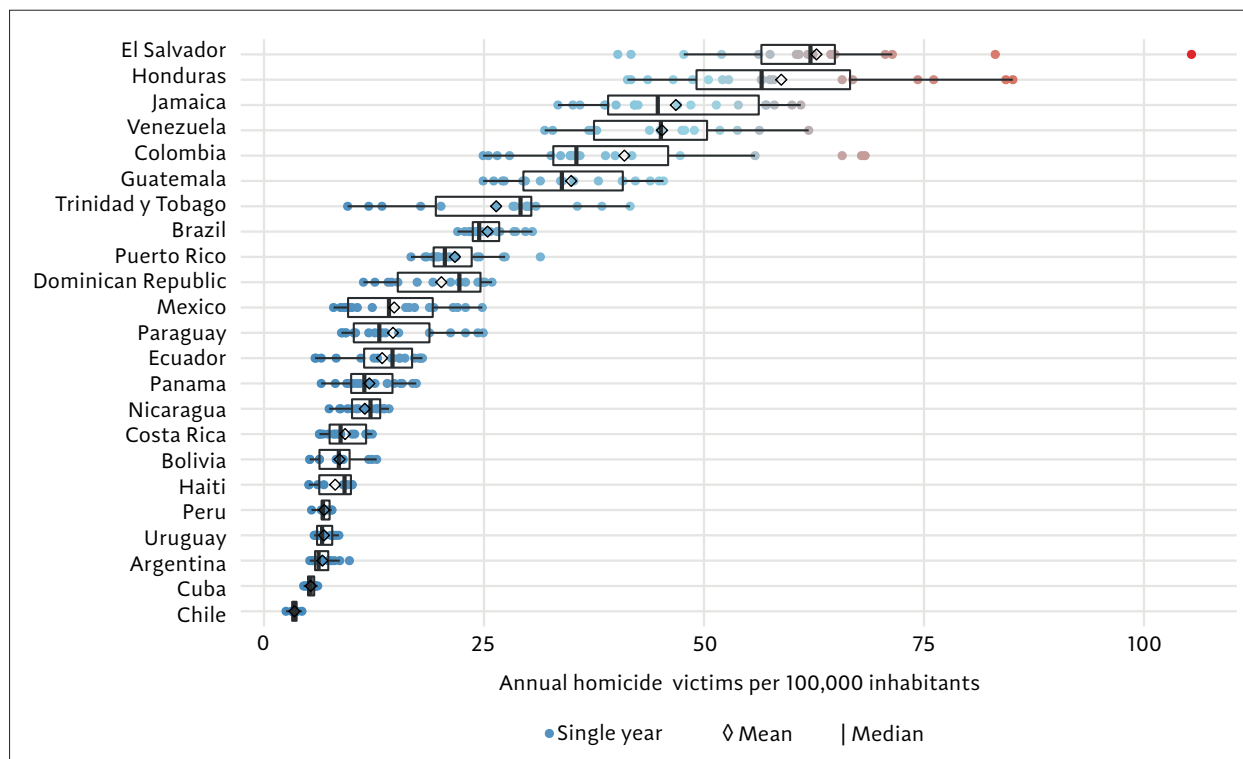
Over the past decades, homicide rates in Latin America and the Caribbean have risen while poverty and income inequality have dropped, and the middle class and gross domestic products have grown (Chioda 2017, 7). Nevertheless, this is the world region with the highest homicide rate proportional to the population, and the only region where the rate is rising. Addressing this apparent clash with conventional wisdom, in its 2019 *Global Study on Homicide*, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that,

In Europe and Asia, the different levels of socioeconomic development across countries explain their different homicide rates reasonably well; therefore, development policies in such countries are likely to be beneficial in terms of violence reduction. This is in contrast to Latin American countries experiencing

elevated homicide rates that cannot be explained by their level of socioeconomic development alone. In such cases, investment in socioeconomic development would not be sufficient to bring down the high level of violence. (UNODC 2019a, 36-37)

Even so, while research on violence in Latin America and the Caribbean is widespread, far less effort has been made to understand experiences of violence reduction (Hoelscher and Nussio 2016, 2399). Seeking to better understand experiences with both violence and violence reduction, here, I focus on El Salvador, a country that, between 2000 and 2017, recorded the highest mean (63), median (62), and maximum (105) rate of homicide victims per 100,000 inhabitants out of 144 countries in the world with over one million inhabitants. Figure 1 shows the Latin American and Caribbean countries in this sample and reveals that El Salvador is an extreme case within an extreme region.

**Figure 1.** Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2000-2017



Source: Elaboration by the author with data from UNODC (2019b).

To explain the soaring homicide levels in several Latin American and Caribbean societies, I argue that it is crucial to study the *degree of organization* of armed violence and, again, El Salvador is a radical case in point. Unlike countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, where the armed actors are numerous, in El Salvador, armed violence is largely exercised by three gangs, the police, and the armed forces, who together account for the lion's share of the 39,060 homicides registered between 2010 and 2019, in a country of 6.5 million people. From 2014 onward, the gang wars have been compounded by the government's war on gangs, which has served to escalate the dynamics of armed violence in the country and silence the alternatives to the use of force.

As I unpack this case study, I am concerned not only with the conditions that enable and constrain armed violence in the first place, but with how armed violence itself transforms those conditions over time. This, I argue, is critical, in that it implies that armed violence transforms the conditions for its own reduction. In the first part of the article, I lay out a simple framework for analyzing organization and escalation in armed conflict, followed by an analysis of the increasing organization of armed violence in El Salvador, the recent escalation of violence between gangs, on the one hand, and police and armed forces on the other, and how these developments have served to transform the conditions for violence reduction. In the second part, I start by addressing the two most significant reductions in armed violence in El Salvador over the past decade, both of which saw gangs take leading roles, before analyzing the organizational conditions that made this possible, the political conditions that made it unsustainable, and the implications for violence reduction moving forward. Throughout, I engage extensively with other cases across Latin America and the Caribbean.

## Organization and Escalation of Armed Violence

Reviews of the literature reveal an abundance of studies that cover cultural, economic, political, and social approaches to explain violence in El Salvador and Central America (Yashar 2018; Zinecker 2017), and albeit each of the explanations are insufficient to fully account for variation in armed violence within and across countries, they contribute to and are indeed necessary parts of a comprehensive explanation (Rivera 2016). While there is consensus that much of the armed violence in the region is organized, chiefly by gangs, the theoretical and practical implications of such a degree of organization for the dynamics of violence, as well as for violence reduction, have not been dealt with. Here, I seek to address this gap through a processual and relational approach.

Firstly, when I interrogate how, over time, armed violence transforms the conditions that enable and constrain it, I am preoccupied with *processes*. Following Stefan Malthaner (2017, 2-3), "While process trajectories are influenced by (and to some extent depend on) environmental conditions and individual predispositions at the outset, they are driven and shaped by dynamics that they themselves generate, thereby transforming initial conditions and generating new goals and motives (della Porta 2013; Kalyvas 2006; Neidhardt 1981; von Trotha 1997; Wood 2003)." While the fields of conflict transformation and peace building tend to emphasize the "roots" of violence, violence ought also be considered in its own right (Pearce 2020). Specifically, I posit that processes of large-scale armed violence can garner a momentum of their own which needs to be addressed directly.

Moreover, process tracing is helpful in demonstrating that present conditions are the result of "a sequence of events, some of which foreclose certain paths in the development and steer the outcome in other directions" (George and Bennett 2005, 212). This is one of the ways in which violence can work as an independent variable. Below, I argue that the escalation of armed violence between Salvadoran gangs and the Salvadoran state has progressively narrowed their repertoires of action so as to rule out forms of nonviolent engagement.

Secondly, I focus my analysis on the *relationship* between gangs and governments in El Salvador, rather than on any one of the actors. Specifically, I am concerned with the inter-organizational processes between gangs and governments that enable and constrain armed violence (Tilly 2003, 20). This implies the need for interpretation of the actors' behaviors. On the one hand, organizations may act (violently) with intent to generate a given effect—what Malthaner (2017, 3) refers to as "strategic interaction." On the other, organizations may act (violently) in response to the acts of other organizations—as "mutual adaptation in tactics and repertoires of action" (Malthaner 2017, 3). Usually, non-state armed actors are understood to exercise violence with intent, be it in El Salvador (Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016; Yashar 2018) or elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean (Kalyvas 2015; Koonings and Kruijt 2004; Lessing 2015). Of course, in practice, acts of violence are likely to be shaped by a mix of intent and response, and this tension runs throughout the processes that I deal with below.

The study is based on my ongoing longitudinal research in El Salvador and Central America, which began in 2008, on the organization of armed violence, gangs, and opportunities for violence reduction, conflict transformation, and peace building. I draw upon extensive press reviews, participant observation, and countless interviews, as well as raw data from Salvadoran police databases and public information from the institute of forensic medicine.

## Organizing Armed Violence

Over the past twenty years, armed violence in El Salvador has increased, to the point where, in 2015, one in every 970 Salvadorans was murdered—the highest rate of homicides per inhabitant in the twenty-first century of any country in the world with more than one million people. This increase is inextricably tied to the uniquely high degree of organization of armed violence in the country, chiefly by three gangs, the police, and the armed forces. While there is a long tradition of gangs in El Salvador (Savenije 2009), the gang wars of the 1990s and early 2000s led to a convergence of dozens of small gangs into two large federations: the 18<sup>th</sup> Street (18<sup>th</sup> St.) and the Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS13), with the former splitting into two rival gangs in 2005, the 18<sup>th</sup> St. Revolutionaries and the 18<sup>th</sup> St. Southerners (Amaya and Martínez 2015). Only a few smaller gangs persist today (Amaya and Martínez 2014).

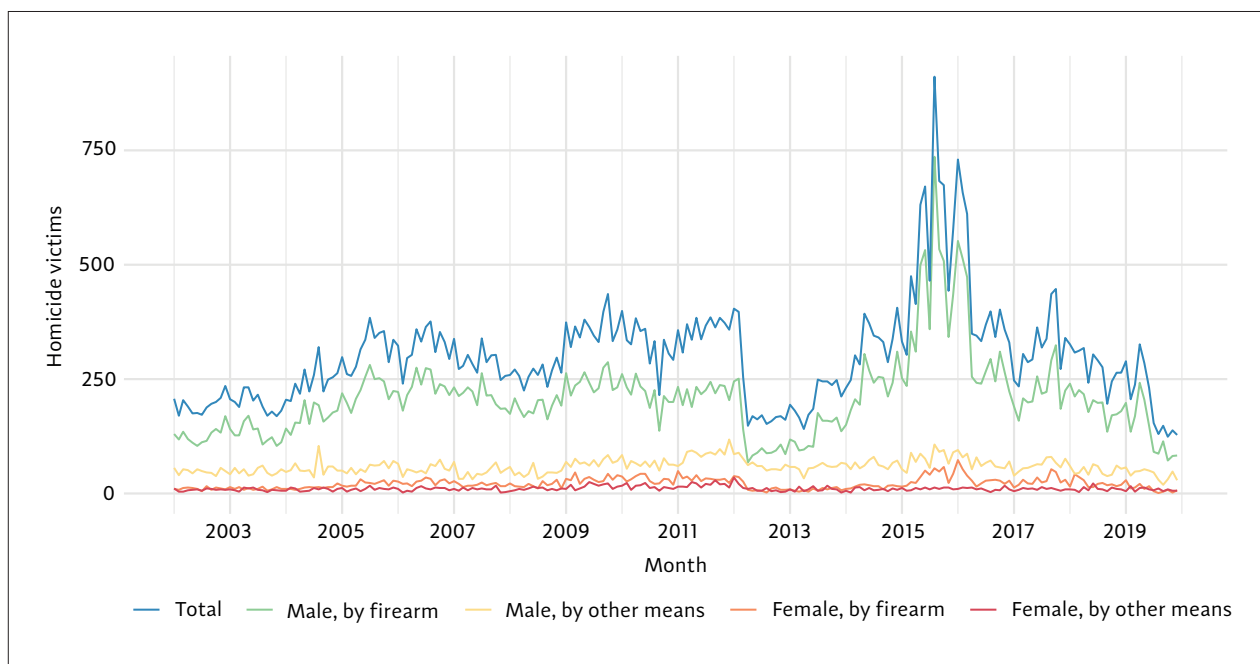
As shown in Figure 2, this degree of organization leads not only to generally high levels of homicide throughout the past twenty years, but to extreme *variation*, specifically in the number of women and especially men killed by firearm. In contrast, the number of homicides by other means remains relatively stable. Presumably, the former owes largely to gang wars and the war on gangs, while the latter are better explained by a wider range of dynamics (Hume 2009; Zinecker 2017), with gender playing a major role across the board (Applebaum and

Mawby 2018; Hume and Wilding 2015; Rojas Ospina 2020; Walsh and Menjívar 2016; Zulver 2016).

Unlike the armed violence of the 1980-1992 war, which was readily recognized as “political,” the armed violence of the postwar period is broadly understood as “criminal” (Bergmann 2015; Moodie 2010), in line with a discursive shift that reaches across Latin America and the Caribbean (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011, 96). Crucially, this reframing shapes not only how violence is understood, but how it is acted upon: While political violence may be subject to dialog, mediation, and negotiation so as to build political solutions, criminal violence is generally referred to the law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

Predictably, El Salvador’s predominantly repressive law enforcement and criminal justice policies have been incapable of sustainably reducing armed violence or fostering urgent social transformations (Holland 2013; Wolf 2017). Instead, El Salvador has transformed into a mass incarceration society, warping from 132 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants in 2000 to 604 in 2018, second in the world only to the United States (Walmsley 2018, 6). What is more, this mass incarceration has played a central role in strengthening Salvadoran gangs organizationally. As the prison population swelled, prison authorities started to separate inmates by gang affiliation as of September 2, 2004 (Valencia 2014), and while this helped reduce inter-gang fighting within prisons

**Figure 2.** Homicide victims by means and sex in El Salvador per month, 2002-2019



Source: Elaboration by the author with data from Instituto de Medicina Legal, UAIP/2788/RR/195/2018(2) and UAIP/4/RAAdm/20/2020(5) (San Salvador: Corte Suprema de Justicia).

(Peirce and Fondevila 2020), it also brought members of the same gang together from across the country in a way that had never happened before and that the gangs would have been unable to do on their own. Through case studies of California, El Salvador, and São Paulo, Benjamin Lessing (2017, 257) shows how such “mass-incarceration policies, while incapacitating and deterring individual criminals, can simultaneously strengthen collective criminal networks.” In effect, mass incarceration paved the way for Salvadoran gangs to develop cohesive organizations with a national reach, both on the streets and across the prison system.

Countless times, Salvadorans have witnessed the harrowing potential that comes with this degree of organization of armed violence. The most extreme expression came in August 2015, when 918 people were killed, up from 470 in July. To put it crudely, murder at such a rate takes work—as well as a degree of logistics and supplies, not least of firearms, ammunition, and people willing and able to use them. The bloodshed of August was foreshadowed by the murders of eleven bus workers and torching of several buses in late July, which spurred a five-day halt in bus services, out of fear of more attacks, disrupting daily life across much of the country (Dalton 2015). Campaigns of armed violence like this have not only generated frenzied tensions, but also shaped the ideas that policymakers and the public hold about how El Salvador’s gangs may and may not, should and should not, be dealt with. Overwhelmingly, the effect on government policy has been to entrench and radicalize repressive strategies.

## Escalating Armed Violence

In the wake of the 1992 peace accord, a series of reforms sought to constrain state violence in El Salvador (Holden 1996), indeed aspiring to break with a long legacy of military dictatorship and widespread repression (Stanley 1996). The armed forces were scaled back and their political influence tempered, the judiciary was overhauled, and a new civilian police force substituted the three military police forces of the past (Williams and Walter 1997), yet the development of democratic institutions and practices was slow and contradictory (Call 2003; Wade 2016). When El Salvador’s first leftist government assumed power under President Mauricio Funes in 2009, there were hopes and efforts to turn a corner after years of failed public security policies (Hoppert-Flämig 2013; van der Borgh and Savenije 2015). However, fledgling attempts to consolidate the rule of law gave way to significant rollbacks during the left’s second term in power, from 2014 to 2019, including a massive expansion of the limits on state violence. Numerous incidents fed into this evolution, but one stands out for its long-term repercussions.

In the early hours of March 3, 2016, eleven men were brutally killed by members of the 18<sup>th</sup> St. Revolutionaries in San Juan Opico, an hour’s drive northwest of the capital. Some of the victims had suffered prolonged torture and the massacre spurred massive public outrage and debates over declaring a state of exception. Eventually, a package of “extraordinary measures” was passed into law on April 1 and later denounced by the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein (2017), for having “placed thousands of people in prolonged and isolated detention under truly inhumane conditions, and with prolonged suspension of family visits.” New special forces units, comprised of thousands of police and military personnel, were also set up and deployed in the weeks that followed (Salazar 2016).

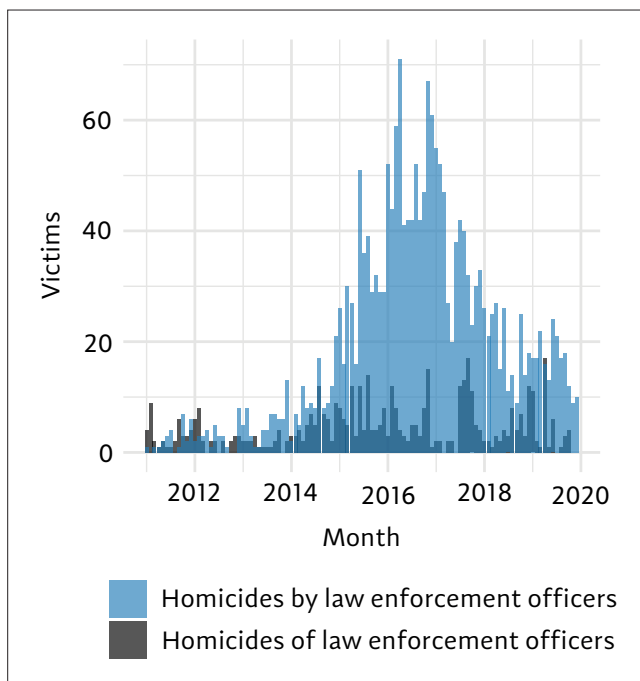
Within days of the massacre, President Salvador Sánchez Cerén—flanked by the minister of justice and public security, Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde, and the director general of the police, Howard Cotto—charged that, “although some say we are at war, there is no other way. There is no space for dialog, no space for truces, no space for reaching an understanding with them; they are criminals and must be treated as criminals” (Rauda Zablah 2016). Vice President Óscar Ortiz followed suit, avowing that, “now, no option is left to us but confrontation” (Calderón 2016).

Sánchez Cerén, Ortiz, Ramírez Landaverde, and Cotto formed the hard core of the tight-knit group of former guerrilla members that controlled law enforcement and criminal justice policy during most of the 2014–2019 presidency. By early 2016, critical voices within the government had largely been sidelined and the policy disagreements that characterized the Funes presidency were substituted by a shared outlook, as my interviews with Ramírez Landaverde, Cotto, and others close to them make clear. As one senior policymaker told me, “now, they [the gangs] have gone too far,” with the implication that a ramping up of repressive measures was the only path left open to them. In turn, the use of lethal force by law enforcement officers became a key driver of the dynamics of armed violence in the country (Bergmann 2019).

As reflected in Figure 3, during the Sánchez Cerén presidency, from June 2014 to May 2019, 1,819 Salvadorans were killed by police and military personnel, allegedly in the line of duty—a third of them in 2016 alone. In February 2017, the percentage of overall homicides owed to state violence, peaked at a whopping 22 percent and, after her mission to El Salvador in early 2018, the United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard (2018, paragraph 36), reported that she “found a pattern of behavior among security personnel amounting to extrajudicial executions and excessive use of force, nurtured and aggravated by very weak institutional responses.”



**Figure 3.** Homicides by and of law enforcement officers in El Salvador per month, 2011-2019



Source: Elaboration by the author with data from police databases “Estadística” for 2011-2015 and “Imperium” for 2016-2019 (San Salvador: Policía Nacional Civil).

The victims of state violence included gang members and non-gang members, almost all men, mostly very young—some only thirteen years old. One woman in her forties told me: “The problem isn’t with the guys [gang members]; we know how to get along with them. The problem is with the police.” Over the past years, I have heard variations of this statement in several communities.

Meanwhile, under Sánchez Cerén, 355 police and military personnel were murdered in El Salvador, also reflected in Figure 3. An undetermined portion of these deaths were unrelated to the victims’ professional capacity—drunken brawls, jealousy, debts and, indeed, criminal activity in which they were themselves involved. Most, though, will have been targeted by the gangs. Whatever the motive, overwhelmingly, the victims were off duty at the time of their death—74 percent of police and 87 percent of military personnel. When on duty, they usually have a sweeping tactical advantage—in terms of numbers, training, communications capabilities, and equipment including bullet proof vests and high-power firearms—making them difficult targets. As such, the majority of targeted killings of law enforcement officers and their family members have taken place in or near their own homes, implying that the fear of being targeted permeates their professional and personal lives alike.

## Transforming the Conditions for Violence Reduction

Whereas the predominant discourse in Salvadoran politics and press squarely blames the gangs for the country’s crisis of armed violence (Carballo 2017; Wolf 2012), an alternative but complementary view emphasizes the role of public policy and state actors, and is widespread in academia and the human rights community. Meanwhile, a focus on the relationship between the gangs and the state highlights Randall Collins’ (2009, 20) argument that “escalation and counter-escalation are a process of feedback loops.”

In light of the above, the best explanation for the dramatic expansion of limits on state violence in El Salvador may be “that once certain practices get up and running, they carry an autonomous momentum that can be difficult to divert. Certain practices become the accepted norm; they become ingrained into the cultural and social milieu, such that political actors simply could not conceive of the world working any other way” (Ching 2013, 27). In their study of large-scale use and abuse of force by law enforcement officers in Venezuela, Andrés Antillano and Keymer Ávila make a similar finding: “Rather than a consistent, rational, and explicit policy, it approaches the notion of apparatus put forth by Foucault (1980, 194): A set of practices, discourses, institutional dispositions, regulations, and collective initiatives that take on consistency by way of their strategic usage” (2017, 86).

While individual acts of violence—be it the torture of a young man at the hands of a group of police officers or the dismemberment of a police officer at the hands of a group of gang members—are intentional (if not necessarily planned or wished for), the cumulative, broad escalation of violence over time has not been the intention or in the interest of neither gangs nor governments. What is more, the war between them may have come about less by design, and more as the result of a tragic spiral of mutual adaptations to tactics and repertoires of action.

In either case, the broader effect of the escalation of violence is to take any nonviolent strategies for engagement off the table. Even years before the radicalization of state violence under Sánchez Cerén, Mo Hume stressed that “police brutality, summary ‘justice’ and revenge killings ... should be contextualized as an endpoint in a broader continuity of exclusion and polarization, not as something outside *normal* social relations. They are indicative of the endurance of a hegemonic political project that continues to silence alternatives to the use of force” (2009, 9).

While this project has continued to build strength, the most encouraging experiences of the reduction of armed violence in El Salvador over the past decade have

gone against the grain. Not only have they involved nonviolent engagement with gangs, but indeed they have relied on Salvadoran gangs' ability to mobilize their organization of armed violence so as to constrain it.

## Deescalating Armed Violence

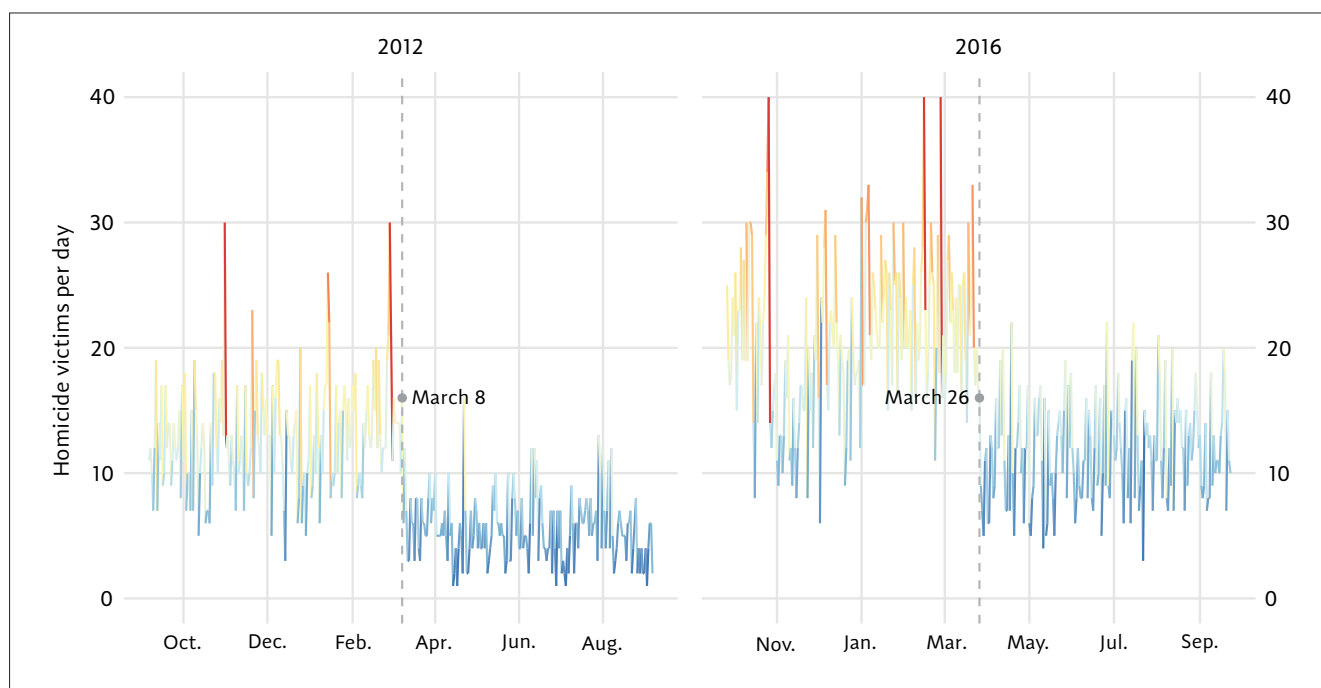
The same organization of armed violence in El Salvador that produced a peak of 918 homicides in August 2015, produced a low of 120 homicides in December 2019 and 65 under pandemic lockdown measures in March 2020. Two experiences stand out as forceful expressions of the potential for gangs themselves to take a lead in processes of armed violence reduction, as well as the controversy this entails (Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016; Kan 2014; Schubert 2016).

First, in 2012–2013, a truce reigned among El Salvador's main gangs, with crucial operational support from the government. The process brought about an instant, major reduction in the number of homicides—57 percent when comparing three months before and after it came into effect on March 8, 2012, 56 percent over six months, and 53 percent over twelve months. Indeed, the gang truce ensured the lowest rate of homicides since before the war started in 1980 and spurred significant international interest among scholars and practitioners. As the erstwhile minister of justice and public security, David Munguía Payés, put it to me in an

interview, it was a clear demonstration that “whoever controls the war between the gangs, controls the homicides” (San Salvador, November 13, 2018). However, while the gangs remained committed to the process, it gradually broke down as government support dried up in the latter half of 2013 and into the elections of early 2014 (van der Borgh and Savenije 2019).

Second, as mentioned above, on March 3, 2016, members of the 18<sup>th</sup> St. Revolutionaries killed eleven people in San Juan Opico, paving the way for a package of extraordinary measures to be implemented across the prison system, and for new special forces units to be formed. Subsequently, the government maintained that it was those repressive policies that led to a decrease in armed violence, while the case has not previously been addressed by scholars. However, a sharp homicide reduction set in a week before the extraordinary measures were even voted upon by legislators, much less in effect, when, on March 26, the MS13, the 18<sup>th</sup> St. Revolutionaries, and the 18<sup>th</sup> St. Southerners announced a “unilateral ceasefire” (Valencia and Martínez 2016). On the one hand, key gang leaders had sought to bring about a truce ever since the previous one imploded. On the other, it was an attempt to temper the fallout from the recent massacre. Over the months that followed, the gangs worked together to restrain armed violence (Martínez 2016b) and homicides were indeed reduced by 50 percent over three months, 43 percent over six months, and 46 percent over twelve months before and after March 26.

**Figure 4.** Homicides in El Salvador per day, six months before and after the start of the 2012 and 2016 gang truces



Source: Elaboration by the author with data from Instituto de Medicina Legal, UAIP/2788/RR/195/2018(2) (San Salvador: Corte Suprema de Justicia).

Figure 4 reflects the scale, but not least the speed of the homicide reductions in the wake of the 2012 and 2016 gang truces. In both instances, the reductions took place literally from one day to the next, and neither the scale nor the speed can be reasonably explained without accounting for an exceptionally high degree of organization of armed violence; that is, there is no plausible alternative explanation to the gang truces. A corresponding level of control may be found at the subnational level in several Latin American and Caribbean countries, not least in some cities, including parts of São Paulo (Biderman *et al.* 2019; Feltran 2012; Manso 2016; Willis 2015) and Medellín (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013; Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016; Doyle 2019; Moncada 2016b), but not on a national scale, like in El Salvador.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that a similar effect was achieved under opposite political circumstances: In the first case, the Funes government supported a mediation team, improved prison conditions, and provided gang leaders with the communications capabilities necessary for them to direct the gang truce. In the latter, the Sánchez Cerén government sustained a fierce anti-gang campaign in prisons and on the streets, with the traditional gang leaders isolated in the maximum-security prison. Still, the gangs agreed upon and enforced a reduction in armed violence and developed mechanisms to manage disputes between them and to discipline members within each.

A third case in point is playing out under the government of President Nayib Bukele, inaugurated on June 1, 2019, with homicides dropping by 53 percent over three months and 52 percent over six months before and after July 6, 2019, when the reduction seems to have commenced. Little is yet known about this endeavor, but my off-the-record conversations with knowledgeable individuals inside and outside of government and gangs suggest that the gangs have again taken the initiative to reduce homicides. Rather than a negotiation between government and gangs, it may have to do with an alignment of interests, as all parties are keen to generate the conditions for a shift away from endless war. Moreover, it underscores that Salvadoran gangs' repertoires of action have now expanded to encompass everything from breathtaking campaigns of systematic killing to sober political strategizing.

### Violence Reduction as an Organizational Project

The 2012 and 2016 gang truces both fell short of developing comprehensive, durable solutions to armed violence and social conflicts in El Salvador, yet their accomplishments warrant an earnest effort to explain the conditions for their successes and failures, and two crucial conditions stand out—one because of its

presence and the other because of its absence: Firstly, the existence of *cohesive organizations* capable of committing to and delivering on agreed change processes and, secondly, the development of a *cohesive political project* capable of bridging responses to immediate and emerging crises, including violence reduction, and a long-term vision for social transformation (Lederach 2012). I address the latter point in the next section.

My emphasis on the role of organization springs from an acknowledgment of what Anthony Giddens' (1986, 25) labeled the “duality of structure”—namely that social structures at once *enable and constrain* social action. Correspondingly, social structures such as gangs, police, and armed forces can be harnessed both to enable and to constrain armed violence, and this is the point where the armed violence of the postwar era intersects with the armed violence of the war: Not in its political content, but in its degree of organization. This is a parallel fraught with controversy, to the extent that it may be misinterpreted as casting the guerrilla in the same moral category as gangs. However, the logic is straightforward: In 1992, a group of guerrilla commanders and military generals were able to bring the war to an end. Today, a group of national gang leaders and a handful of government officials can do the same.

Then as now, an organization's degree of *fragmentation* or *consolidation* influences its ability to regulate violence. For instance, under the 2006-2012 presidency of Felipe Calderón, the Mexican state set out to “dismantl[e] criminal organizations by dismantling their leadership structures in order to fragment them into minor and more manageable groups.” However, Octavio Rodríguez (2016, 43) warns that “this ‘strategy’ intensified pre-existing conflicts and generated others by creating smaller, less predictable, and more violent groups fighting fiercely for smaller turfs.” Equivalent strategies have been adopted throughout the region, from Brazil to Guatemala, with similar effects: Generally, greater fragmentation of armed organizations tends to lead to greater competition among them, which in turn tends to lead to more violence (Durán-Martínez 2018, 18-19).

The perils of fragmentation notwithstanding, Salvadoran police and prosecutors have also been influenced by this approach to law enforcement, reflected in the increased targeting of the gangs' finances and chains of command, principally striking the MS13 and most significantly through operations Jaque, Tecana, and Cuscatlán in 2016, 2017, and 2018, respectively (Martínez 2018a). Notably, during the 2012 gang truce, the Salvadoran government not only desisted from systematic attempts to fragment the gangs and break down their leadership structures; effectively, the government threw its lot in with those gang leaders who were committed to reducing homicides and carving out a new path for their organizations. However, the best of intentions and earnest efforts do not make up for the absence of the kind



of transformative politics that both helps make sense of and go beyond reductions in armed violence.

### Violence Reduction as a Political Project

While cohesive organizations that are able and committed to deliver on agreements can reduce armed violence, a cohesive political project—that is, a clear political vision and a sound policy framework—is necessary to forge broader processes of transformation and provide them with direction, content, and legitimacy. Kristian Hoelscher and Enzo Nussio find that, “while micro-level policy interventions may be suited to explain short-term reduction in urban criminality, sustained decreases in lethal violence may be more likely in situations where policy changes complement, or are integrated into, wider reforms to political and social institutions” (2016, 2399).

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín in Colombia are held up as success stories of reduction of armed violence to be emulated (Maclean 2015; Moncada 2016b). While emphasis is commonly placed on a series of innovations in public spaces and services, including transportation, parks, and libraries, Francisco Gutiérrez *et al.* (2013, 3136) stress that “the ‘miracles’ [of Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín] cannot be understood without dealing with urban politics and in particular with the ability of innovative politicians to successfully create viable transformational coalitions within the city.” That is, the differences in conditions and policies between cities notwithstanding, the mayors broke with ingrained political polarization to develop more inclusive visions of the cities and cultivate the social support necessary to sustain them, including from the media and business sectors (Moncada 2016a).

Quite the contrary, the Funes government failed to imbue the 2012 gang truce with either a political vision or support from crucial social actors (Cruz 2018; Roque 2017; van der Borgh and Savenije 2019). While the gang leaders and the mediation team kept the violence reduction process going, and isolated initiatives for alternative livelihood strategies and community development were rolled out (Rivard Piché 2017; Pries 2015), the budding peace process never matured into a coherent public policy framework, never mind a viable political platform. In this vein, Achim Wennmann argues that the thousands of lives that were spared are “a testament to the positive achievements of dialogue and negotiation in one of the most crime- and violence-affected regions of the world.” However, he adds, “El Salvador’s gang truce also highlights that, for such processes to be sustainable, they must be embedded in broader social and political transformation processes” (2014, 269).

In the years since, the political failure of the 2012 gang truce has severely complicated the prospects for

renewed nonviolent engagement with gangs, as critics hold up the eventual unraveling of the past process as proof that any such approach is unfeasible. Moreover, the experience has been dragged through the mud by unsubstantiated claims that the gangs took advantage to better arm themselves, develop strong links to Mexican drug trafficking organizations, and substitute homicides for forced disappearances (Carcach and Arto-la 2016; Farah 2012). Along with the horrifying spike in armed violence in subsequent years, these accusations have made nonviolent engagement with gangs a political no-go zone. Nevertheless, leading politicians from all major political parties have kept on making backstage deals with gangs in the years since (Martínez 2016a and 2018b). Former lawmaker and current Mayor of San Salvador Ernesto Muyschondt concedes that “it is a reality that this country lives, and if you want to be a politician in this country ... if you want to be a mayor and do a job in your municipality ... Then you have to deal with them to be able to work in the territories” (Labrador and Martínez 2016, online). Indeed, this has been the norm since the 1990s (Sanz and Martínez 2012).

The Colombian processes mentioned also involved nonviolent engagement with organized crime, gangs, militias, paramilitaries, and guerrillas, but that context of overtly political conflict offered more familiar ways to explain this to the public. However, the development of a conducive language and political framework for engaging with gangs—actors that are usually held to be criminal and depoliticized—is extremely challenging. The most durable, large-scale experience to this effect has been developing in Ecuador since the late 2000s, when the country’s principal gangs—the Crazy Souls, the Masters of the Street, the Ñetas, and the Sacred Tribe Atahualpa Ecuador—embarked on a journey to reduce armed violence (Brotherton and Gude 2018). Building on an initial gang truce facilitated by police, the gangs were incorporated into the decade-long political project of President Rafael Correa (Clark and García 2019), and the Ecuadorian “citizens’ revolution” provided crucial political and social space for the gangs to transform themselves—each in their own ways and over the course of a decade—into street organizations that retain their distinct cultural outlooks and expressions, but leave crime and violence behind (Brotherton and Gude 2020).

### Conclusion

The calamity of violence in twenty-first century El Salvador was not intended by gangs, governments, or any other actor. Rather, it recalls the fundamental sociological insight of Norbert Elias (2000, 366), that “the basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of people can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created.” For years, Salvadoran gangs and governments have been locked

into a process of mutually harmful escalation of armed violence, even though it is broadly against the interests and wishes of everyone involved.

Yet, the years of gang wars and war on gangs has only made the challenge of articulating an alternative political platform and policy framework to gang repression that much more difficult. Between July 23, 2003, when President Francisco Flores declared “*mano dura*” against gangs, and December 31, 2019, 61,754 people were murdered in El Salvador, and the dead weigh heavily on today’s politics. The immense suffering involved may prop up the allure of authoritarianism, but the evidence is resounding: This policy has been a disaster and the war on gangs must stop.

The most significant reductions in armed violence in El Salvador have come about when the gangs have mobilized to rein in the wars that they are tangled up in—most notably, by way of gang truces in 2012 and 2016—, demonstrating, as these gangs have repeated in numerous joint communiqués over the years, that “just as we are part of the problem, we can be part of the solution.” Clearly, they have the necessary organizational capital—for better and for worse. However, any amount of organizational capital cannot make up for the absence of a far broader political project, capable of developing strategic links between short-term responses to urgent needs and longer-term visions for a society capable of dealing with conflicts without violence.

Ultimately, this is a pragmatic approach. It may be uncomfortable for many—unsatisfying perhaps—but there will be gangs in El Salvador and across the Americas throughout the rest of this century, no matter the policies. Coupled with the tragedy of the first two decades of this millennium, this recognition should allow us to at least entertain a new set of questions: Say, how might we live with the gangs but without the violence? That is, might we shift our focus from futile attempts to eradicate gangs to more realistic efforts to *eradicate gang violence*?

If previous Salvadoran presidents have been unwilling or unable to break with decades of failed gang policies, President Bukele at least has the conditions to raise a formidable political project. With approval ratings above ninety percent, he has a political capital unlike any of his predecessors (Margolis 2019). Moreover, in the face of the electoral implosion of the country’s traditional political parties, Bukele’s outfit, New Ideas, is set to win the 2021 legislative and municipal elections handily, thus consolidating an immense power base. In early 2020, though, the political vision and actionable policies of this government are still being formed—a process that was abruptly put on hold by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Then again, COVID-19 has also thrown the ordinary rules of the political game up in the air. Maybe, just maybe, it offers an opportunity to

imagine living together without violence and to strive for peace by peaceful means.

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