Leaving the Pervasive *Barrio*: Gang Disengagement under Criminal Governance

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ABSTRACT

Is it possible to disengage from street gangs in communities and districts where gang organizations rule? We argue that disengagement is possible when this process does not alter the social order that allows street gangs to continue controlling and establishing the rules that govern economic activities and relationships in the *barrios* they control. We explore the process of gang disengagement under criminal governance in El Salvador, a country plagued by the powerful MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs. We conducted a survey with nearly 1,200 people with a history of gang membership and 25 in-depth interviews with former gang members. We find that disengagement through religious conversion allows the gang to continue exerting power over the deserters, while at the same time enforcing religious commitment to the congregation. The religious community provides the normative framework that reassures the gang that its former associates will not act against it, consolidating its local authority.

KEYWORDS: gang disengagement; criminal governance; evangelicalism; MS-13; El Salvador.

Is it possible to disengage from street gangs in communities and districts where gang organizations rule? How do gang members disengage from those groups in social environments where they govern social life? We argue that disengagement is possible when this process does not alter the social order that allows street gangs to continue controlling and establishing the rules that govern economic activities and relationships in the *barrios* they dominate. To understand the processes of gang disengagement in some developing countries, where gangs tend to participate in local governance, we need to examine how other social institutions, such as evangelical churches, contribute to the reproduction of local orders that allow personal transformations without contesting the power of the gang openly.

According to the literature, gang membership is a transitory status. Most youth are street gang members for some years and then abandon such organizations (Carson and Vecchio 2015; Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013). However, in several developing countries, youth who want to quit their street gang face challenges, since these criminal organizations control the same neighborhoods where...
deserters expect to rebuild their non-gang lives. Even after leaving the street gang, former members must deal with behavioral prescriptions and social norms imposed by these criminal actors. The literature on criminal desistance and gang disengagement generally assumes that when members disengage from the gang, they usually return to social orders where the gang has little control over the lives of its former members (Kissner and Pyrooz 2009; Sampson and Laub 2005). Hence, the individual would integrate into social networks that facilitate crime desistance and gang disengagement (Kissner and Pyrooz 2009; Warr 1998).

Perplexed by the persistence of gangs in different parts of the world, some scholars have raised doubts about the transient nature of gangs (Hagedorn 2008; Rodgers and Baird 2015). They question whether street gangs can be considered transitory groups and whether their members abandon the group and discard their street identity after the teenage years. In many cases, these questions are linked to a debate about gang evolution (Ayling 2011) and whether they can be considered criminal organizations or other types of delinquent groups (Decker and Pyrooz 2014; Rodgers and Muggah 2009). However, these questions rarely revolve around the sociopolitical environment from which the gang member must disengage. Most scholars focus on the processes of personal change. They do not concentrate on the role of social order, particularly in countries with issues of corruption, state fragility, and violence. In some countries, street gangs are considered agents and rulers of social and political orders (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014; Arias 2014; Winton 2014).

The study of the role of gangs and criminal organizations in systems of governance and social order has usually been limited to penal institutions, where criminal organizations impose their rule over captive populations (Johnson and Densley 2018; Skarbek 2011). However, recent studies on violence in Latin America have drawn attention to the criminal groups’ role in imposing certain social orders in the communities they dominate (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014; Arias 2006; Willis 2015). In several barrios, criminal organizations participate in the imposition of rules and shape the collective behaviors of members of the community, which has been labeled as criminal governance (Lessing 2020). In these contexts, how do active gang members disengage from the group? How do gang members abandon the organization and stop participating in criminal activities while cohabiting and sharing the same communal spaces with their former peers?

In this article, we argue that religious conversion plays a critical role in disengagement from gangs. However, in contrast to existing arguments, which place the explanations on the individual’s identity conversion (Brenneman 2011 and 2014; Deuchar 2018), we contend that religious conversion, particularly through an evangelical church, allows gang members to integrate into an alternative group that participates in community governance along with gangs. The role of religion is essential because it is part of the social order regulating daily life in communities controlled and protected by gangs.

We study the process of gang disengagement in El Salvador, a country plagued by violence, where street gangs, such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18), play an essential role in the local dynamics of governance and social order (International Crisis Group 2017; Savenije 2009). They exert territorial control over many urban districts and rural areas throughout the country (Martínez and Martínez 2019; van der Borgh and Savenije 2019), which positions them as the de facto authorities of many low-income communities (Córdova 2019). Building on Offutt’s entanglement thesis (2019) and Garmany’s interpretation of churches’ role in governmentality (2010), we maintain that gang disengagement in criminal governance environments is possible when former gang members integrate into an alternative group recognized and tolerated by the gang. These groups require a legitimate social claim that does not threaten the social order constructed by the gang and its allies. In this case, evangelical churches hold that claim and contribute to the same social order. Disengagement is possible because former gang members continue abiding by some of the gang’s rules, which churches also enforce. This argument places the catalyst of disengagement on the structural conditions that allow former gang members to maintain relationships with their former group under a different identity.
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Explanations of gang disengagement generally gravitate toward individual-focused life-course perspectives of crime (Krohn et al. 2011; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014). The life-course interpretation suggests that age and maturity are critical variables when studying gang participation, criminal activity, and gang disengagement (Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Following the maturing process, most gang members abandon the group before the end of their teen years (Carson and Vecchio 2015; Decker and Pyrooz 2011). Thus, gang membership is usually a short-lived experience in young people’s lives (Carson and Vecchio 2015; Weerman, Lovegrove, and Thornberry 2015). Decker and Pyrooz maintain that “almost every youth that joins a gang will leave a gang, and not because of violence, imprisonment, or programming, but because of the natural desistance processes” (2011:16). They also contend that, although the teenage years are associated with a peak in criminal activity that later declines over time, the extent to which former gang members continue perpetrating illicit activities depends, in part, on the lingering ties with the gang (Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Pyrooz et al. 2014).

Gang disengagement and crime desistance are heavily impacted by the social relationships facilitated by crucial life events associated with maturation (Sampson and Laub 2005). Marriage, the reestablishment of significant relationships, parenthood, and finding employment become catalysts for social control mechanisms that deter criminal behavior and facilitate gang disengagement. The critical factors behind the behavioral changes are not the life events per se but how they affect the informal social control mechanisms pushing gang members out of the gang life (Sampson and Laub 2005).

Some scholars underscore the role of peer associations in the prevalence of deviant behavior. They contend that criminal behavior is learned through social interactions with others as the behavior of others becomes one of the primary sources of reinforcement for one’s criminal conduct (Akers et al. 1979; Akers and Jennings 2016). According to this perspective, gang disengagement is more likely when the individual replaces the delinquent peer group for a prosocial group, such as the church. Weerman et al. (2015) contend that leaving a gang is associated principally with changes in two things: the peer-reference group and the bonds to conventional institutions. When gang members spend more time with non-gang peers, gang-based identities are replaced by alternative identities with different symbols, stories, and codes of conduct. Simultaneously, spending more time with conventional institutions, such as churches and schools, facilitates distancing from peers active in crime. Moving to a different neighborhood or enrolling in a new school may facilitate gang disengagement as the immediate environment of social interactions change (Carson et al. 2017; Decker and Lauritsen 2002).

Decker et al. (2014) argue that gang disengagement does not start with a change in the environment, but rather with personal doubts about gang membership. These doubts elicit changes in personal identity in a process where the environment pushes the individual to critical turning points and provides external validation to identity and behavioral changes. A member who manages to move away from the gang’s direct influence, such as moving to a new city, may find it easier to leave the group and desist from criminal activity (Decker and Lauritsen 2002). In contrast, individuals who maintain ties with former gang peers have more difficulties separating from the gang (Dooley, Seals, and Skarbek 2014). These ties refer to lingering social and emotional attachments to the gang, which persist even after the individual has abandoned the group (Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Pyrooz et al. 2014). Former gang members who stay in the same neighborhood and frequent the same spaces as their old gang have difficulties validating their disengagement. They find themselves victimized more frequently and engaged in crime.

In the study of identity shifts associated with disengagement, scholars focus on the role of religion and spirituality (Densley and Pyrooz 2017; Deuchar 2018). Various studies of Central American street gangs show that Pentecostal conversion (i.e., the immersion into a devout form of Christianity) helped many gang members exit gangs, abandon criminal life, and cope with the anxiety associated with role changes (Brenneman 2014; O’Neill 2015; Rosen and Cruz 2018). Brenneman
(2011 and 2014) focuses on how religious conversion in Central America provides former gang members with ways to cope with feelings of guilt and chronic shame. In addition to providing a support network, the effective management of emotions in the religious groups offers personal validation for the non-gang identity and facilitates social reintegration (Brenneman 2011).

In summary, according to the scholarly literature, youth disengage from gangs mainly when they are ready to abandon these criminal organizations (i.e., when they have the maturity, good sense, and will to change). The lingering ties, therefore, represent an issue because the individual continues falling back into the gang life. Yet what happens when the potential deserter has no opportunities to cut such ties? Moreover, how does a member disengage when the gang is so pervasive and occupies most social spaces? The studies of the persistent ties with family, gang friends, and neighborhood point to these issues (Densley and Pyrooz 2017; Pyrooz et al. 2014), but the gang disengagement literature’s applicability is limited by its rather individualistic perspective of the process and inability to consider contexts where gangs operate as de facto authorities.

When looking at the gang phenomenon in several developing countries, scholars should focus on the gang as an organization that has a larger impact on the disengagement process (Ouellet, Bouchard, and Charette 2019; Sánchez-Jankowski 2003). In the process of leaving the gang—or any criminal group for that matter—the individual needs to address the set of rules that govern membership and disengagement (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003; Venkatesh 1997). These rules may be severe in some American gangs (Klein and Maxson 2006), but they are pervasive when the gang organization exerts an overbearing influence on the local community, as is the case in several developing countries (Arias 2014; Hagedorn 2008; Rodgers and Muggah 2009). This pervasiveness means that, for several young people inhabiting the spaces where gangs are present, the gangs’ rules are the law of the land, even if they no longer belong to the gang.

To understand gang disengagement in developing countries, it is necessary to consider the structural and organizational conditions surrounding gang (Sánchez-Jankowski 1991; Venkatesh 1997). In some Latin American countries, gangs and criminal organizations contribute to and determine the social and political orders that govern social life at the local level. Benjamin Lessing (2020) defines this as “criminal governance,” namely, the “imposition of rules or restriction of behavior by a criminal organization” (p.3). These rules and checks extend beyond criminal group members and include non-gang members and civilians living in a specific territory (Lessing and Willis 2019). The gangs’ ability to shape the community’s social norms does not mean that they are the only key actor or that their power is uncontested. Gangs are part of social arrangements in which they collaborate with many actors to “create varied systems of localized order that perpetrate criminal power” (Arias 2013:263). These actors may be government officials as well as business and civic organizations (Moncada 2016). Some scholars have called these orders “hybrid social orders” (Dewey, Míguez, and Sáín 2017), while others have labeled them as “crimilegal orders” (Schultze-Kraft, Chinchilla, and Moriconi 2018). Ultimately, they point to the coordination between different actors, including criminal groups, to exercise social and political authority over certain territory.

Until recently, the empirical research of gang-imposed social order has been almost exclusively focused on prison gangs (Butler, Slade, and Dias 2018; Johnson and Densley 2018; Skarbek 2011). The assumption is that inside prisons gangs can impose the rules that determine access to resources and relationships (Skarbek 2014). Gang members who wish to disengage from the prison gang while incarcerated must look for alternatives to remain safe from gang reprisals. Otherwise, they need to leave prison in order to separate from the gang. However, studying gang disengagement in Rio de Janeiro’s prisons, Johnson and Densley (2018) find that religious conversion to evangelical Pentecostalism facilitates in-prison disengagement. The adoption of rituals associated with conversion prompts costly changes in behavior that signal the personal commitment to criminal desistance. Disengagement within prison is also possible because Pentecostal churches are legitimate in the eyes of the prison gang. In other words, they are part of the same social order where gangs rule.
The nature of how criminal organizations rule depends on the structure of the gang, the context, and the gang’s main economic activity (Lessing and Willis 2019). Street gangs may impose different types of social orders, which entail the participation of varied actors (Abello-Colak and Guarnieromeza 2014; Moncada 2016). In some contexts, street gangs’ influence over the community resembles the power that prison gangs have over the imprisoned population (Arias 2014). Former gang members not only have to navigate the numerous ties and relationships with former peers, but they also must deal with the structures, institutions, and social relations that underpin the gang organization in the places where deserters must reconstruct their lives. Hence, in social orders where street gangs and criminal organizations replace, co-opt, or cooperate with state institutions, we must examine the issue of leaving a gang from a different perspective. The study of gang disengagement needs to consider how dissenters navigate the lingering relationships with gang agents while actively avoiding the fallout of publicly leaving the organization in an environment relentlessly governed by it.

In a recent study in El Salvador, Offutt (2019) contends that gangs and evangelical churches inhabit the same marginalized communities where they share strong family ties and physical spaces. These intersections invalidate the argument that evangelical churches provide a haven to people and former gang members. Instead, the connections create an entanglement that allows gangs and churches to influence each other and participate in shared community governance. Garmany (2010) argues that in some contexts churches and religion generate self-discipline and regulate individual practices that contribute to social order in areas of limited state presence. Ethnographic studies in different communities in Brazil (Garmany 2010; Lanz 2016) reveal that religious practices wrought by evangelical Pentecostalism define certain behaviors and demarcate social spaces acknowledged by both gangs and Christian groups. These practices are important because they contribute to constructing a social order where criminal groups, churches, and other institutions coexist in the same space.

Building on these contributions, we argue that disengagement from street gangs is feasible in criminal governance contexts when the act of leaving the clique does not threaten the existing social order. Religious conversion provides such a mechanism insofar as the local religious congregation adapts and underwrites gangs’ governance rules. The extant social order creates ad hoc disengagement mechanisms that strengthen the gang’s power and legitimize the church’s role. Thus, gang members in the process of disengagement choose religious conversion not only because it provides new personal identities and networks that restore self-esteem but also because it is part of the system of regulations approved by the gang.

The Salvadoran Gangs

El Salvador is home to some of the most notorious street gangs in the Western Hemisphere: Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang. These criminal groups also operate in Guatemala, Honduras, and southern Mexico (Bruneau 2014). Both gangs were initially formed in California around the 1970s by Latin American immigrants to the United States (Cruz 2013; Wolf 2017). Salvadoran returned migrants and deportees brought gang models and identities to El Salvador in the late 1980s (Cruz 2013). In El Salvador and northern Central America, gangs are street-based organizations. They control most urban and rural low-income communities across the country (Bruneau 2014; Valencia 2018). They are mostly comprised of youth ranging from 12 to 25 years old and with a strong connection to a group identity that includes unabated involvement in criminal activities (Cruz 2013). In the mid-2000s, they started to control several prisons due to state policies that segregated gangs in separate prisons according to membership (Valencia 2018).

An internal intelligence report from the Salvadoran Secretary of Justice estimated more than 27,000 active gang members operated in the streets across the country in 2017 (Ministerio de Seguridad Pública 2017). In addition, approximately 12,000 are imprisoned, which accounts for 30 percent of the gang population in El Salvador. However, independent observers maintain the total number of gang members is higher (Martínez and Martínez 2019). Salvadoran security agencies
estimate that street gangs are active in 76 percent of the municipalities (Ministerio de Seguridad Pública 2017). In 2013, authorities conducted a gang membership census, which calculated that approximately half a million people in the country are connected to gangs as social support networks (The Economist 2016). These networks represent about 8 percent of the national population. The census also calculated 1,955 gang cliques associated with six major gang organizations: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Barrio 18 Sureños, Barrio 18 Revolucionarios, Mirada Locos, Mao-Mao, and Mara Máquina (Bargent 2013).  

Mara Salvatrucha and the two factions of Barrio 18 constitute the largest groups in El Salvador, with MS-13 comprising approximately 65 percent of national gang membership (Ministerio de Seguridad Pública 2017). They form separate extensive networks of turf-based groups of youth and adults, known as cliques, who share the same gang identity (Cruz 2013; Savenije 2009). Cliques control specific territories and neighborhoods, where they usually exert undisputed power over people’s activities living or operating in this zone (International Crisis Group 2017). Gang organizations cluster their neighborhood cliques in regional groups called “programs” in the MS-13 argot and “tribes” in the Barrio 18 gangs. Each program and tribe have regional leaders overseeing the cliques and gang members’ activities within the areas. Regional bosses usually report to incarcerated national leaders. The latter form leadership boards called “ranflas.” The ranflas make consensual decisions concerning the national conduction of the cliques, tribes, and programs (Martínez and Martínez 2019; McNamara 2017). The national leaders regulate the relationships between their groups, loosely coordinate actions nationally, and determine when to go to war or negotiate with authorities (Martínez and Martínez 2019; Valencia 2018).

The combination of high levels of inequality manifested in geographic segregation, extreme urban overcrowding, and a large informal economic sector, with sporadic state presence, has provided Salvadoran gangs with opportunities to become the de facto rulers in many communities (International Crisis Group 2017). They engage in criminal activities ranging from drug peddling to contract killings, but their main economic activity is extortion (Andrade 2015). Gangs establish extortion schemes against most populations living or operating within their territories. These include transportation companies, businesses, self-employed individuals, and regular people (Andrade 2015; Wolf 2017). In many places, these groups control the distribution of public services, suppress political participation, bribe law enforcement officials, and deal with local political elites (Córdova 2019; van der Borgh 2019). They have established criminal governance systems (Martínez D’Aubuisson 2019; van der Borgh and Savenije 2019), causing forced displacements in several communities (McNamara 2017). In 2012, they openly negotiated with top government officials to reduce homicides in a process that garnered international attention (van der Borgh and Savenije 2019). The organizational sophistication achieved by these groups in El Salvador and other Latin American countries relates to sociopolitical contexts where gangs have developed and shows the need to incorporate this discussion into the mainstream scholarly literature on street gangs (Ayling 2011; Winton 2014).

METHODS
This research project is unique in gathering information about some of the world’s most organized and violent street gangs. We aim to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we seek to explore gang disengagement in the context of social orders that prevail in several developing countries plagued by violence (Dewey, Míguez, and Sáín 2017). Criminal governance shapes those orders, which means that gang deserters abandoning the organization must still abide by its rules if they remain in the neighborhoods where gangs govern. Second, we base this study on various cross-sectional data that few studies on gangs outside the United States can achieve, given the difficulties in conducting research in hyperviolent environments. It includes a survey with nearly 1,200 active and

1 In 2005, the Salvadoran-based 18th Street Gang split into two rival factions, the Revolucionarios (Revolutionaries) and Sureños (Southerners). See Martínez and Martínez (2019).
former gang members and 25 in-depth interviews with former gang members. Finally, we contribute to the literature on gang disengagement by incorporating the notion of social orders built upon criminal governance. We underscore the importance of social orders constructed in conjunction with other institutions—evangelical churches, in this case—which facilitate desistance from crime.

Sample and Subjects' Selection

We base this article on 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with ex-gang members in El Salvador. These interviews provided interpretative information to a survey conducted with 1,196 gang and former gang members interviewed in detention centers and rehabilitation programs. In-depth interviews occurred in churches, rehabilitation centers, and an industrial plant that have intervention programs for former gang members.

For the qualitative interviews, the research team contacted the programs that provided the interviewers with access to former gang members. Interviewers explained to the respondents that they did not have to participate in the interview, but none of the respondents declined to partake in this study. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 to 120 minutes. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions about different aspects of their past gang lives, focusing on the process of disengagement from the gang. Ten individuals interviewed said they had belonged to MS-13, six to the factions of Barrio 18, and two to other street gangs. The rest (seven) preferred not to reveal their past memberships. They held different positions within their cliques. To protect the interviewees’ identities, the research team labeled the respondents as Pandilleros, the Spanish word for gang member, and identified them with a correlative number from 1 to 25. Only one of the interviewees was a female, and the rest were males. Ages ranged from 17 to 33 years old. Most respondents were enrolled in rehabilitation programs sponsored by religious organizations—the majority in evangelical churches.

For the survey, most subjects were approached while in prison or juvenile detention centers. Given the population’s nature, we used a multi-stage sample, based on available information about juvenile centers and prisons holding gang members and former gang members. Trained interviewers conducted face-to-face survey interviews with all participants following a standard questionnaire with 112 questions. Survey interviews occurred under the direct supervision of the authors in Salvadoran detention centers with both former and active gang members. Some surveys occurred in the two rehabilitation programs—one of them linked to an apparel factory and the other to an evangelical church.

We completed 1,196 valid surveys with active and former gang members. Active gang members constituted 41.1 percent of the sample, while disengaged gang members accounted for 58.9 percent. Most survey respondents were prisoners and did not participate in any religious-oriented rehabilitation program. The age range of the individuals in the survey is 13 to 56 years old, with a median age of 25.1 years old. 53 percent of the interviewees were between the ages of 13 and 23 years old at the time of the survey. Most interviewees joined the gangs at young ages: 59.1 percent joined before turning 16 years old and 17.4 percent between 16 and 17. Nearly half of all individuals surveyed (48.7 percent) belonged to MS-13, while 23 percent belonged to the Barrio 18 Sureños, and 11.1 percent were members of Barrio 18 Revolucionarios. The rest (17 percent) were affiliated with other gangs. Most survey participants were males (90 percent), which is consistent with official reports and other studies (International Crisis Group 2017). Given the purposive sampling design, we do not claim that the survey results represent all Salvadoran gang members. However, the survey provides an unparalleled portrait of how gang members in El Salvador articulate some aspects of their lives in the gang and the disengagement process.

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2 We also interviewed eleven subject-matter experts who provided contextual information about Salvadoran gangs.
3 We conducted nearly all interviews in 2016 and 2017. However, we added a new interview with a former gang member turned pastor in early 2020.
4 Detailed information about the survey sample selection is in the Appendix.
Analytic Strategy

Our analytic approach examines how the process of disengagement unfolds in relation to the gang organization. It also elucidates how gang norms are addressed, reinterpreted, and followed through the process of disengagement via religious conversion. The survey data offer a general picture of the most frequent disengagement practices. The qualitative testimonies, in turn, illustrate how those mechanisms attend to the social order and governance rules that gangs and other groups impose and reproduce locally. To understand disengagement in barrios ruled by gangs, we first examine how the gang’s power is experienced through territorial control. We then describe the process of leaving the gang under the watchful eye of the organization. Finally, we focus on the process of religious conversion and how that process is instrumental in constructing the local social order and the authority of the gang.

We used Stata 14.2 to analyze the survey data and NVivo Pro to dissect in-depth interviews.

The Importance of Territorial Control

We start our analysis by describing the nature of gang territorial control in El Salvador. Most street gangs are defined by their attachment to territory. They defend it and battle over it (Decker and Pyrooz 2014; Sánchez-Jankowski 2003; Winton 2014). Salvadoran gangs are no exception. Furthermore, Salvadoran street gangs are present in nearly every low-income community across the country. They split communities based on the dominant clique or gang (Valencia 2018). Hence, gaining territory is directly linked to gang’s power. When asked about the gang’s purpose in the qualitative interviews, most respondents said that the primary goal was to gain more territory. One former gang member maintained:

As a gang, there is an order. The gang always follows an objective . . . mainly, the gangs’ objective is control, gain territory, that all of El Salvador be controlled by one single gang. Then, all murders will stop. (Pandillero 2)

When pressed about the utility of that territorial control, he added:

When there is a war between countries, the thing is the area to be clear, that the enemy is no more, that you can walk free, enter any place and be there. Mainly this is also for money, because one can make money from extortions. When a territory is won, [service] trucks or others enter this territory. Then, these are the ones who you’re going to extort and, depending on the hit, that’s how much you make in a month. (Pandillero 2)

Territorial control in El Salvador is linked directly to the ability to extort money from businesses and the population living inside its boundaries. A middle-aged former gang member who remained in the gang for 13 years summarized the aim for territorial control: “For their finances . . . since they don’t have any income, their finances are sustained by extortions” (Pandillero 14).

In El Salvador, however, the scope of gang activities goes beyond extortions and gang wars. It is also understood as offering the possibility of exerting political authority. A former MS-13 gang member, a leader in the gang, remained active for more than eight years and is now affiliated with an evangelical church; he described the political implications of gang control:

To control territory includes having it subject to our law, to what we want. Remove a business from here simply because we want to and replace it with the people that we want. Gaining territory is important. Because of this, the gang has considered using or forming a political party so we can make decisions about the country. (Pandillero 13)

When speaking about business, Pandillero 13 refers to a formal business shop, not to a street drug outlet. This statement encapsulates Lessing’s conceptualization of criminal governance (2020) and is
consistent with ethnographic descriptions about how MS-13 and other gangs exert their power (Martinez D’Aubuisson 2019; Martinez and Martinez 2019). Such power shapes gang members’ lives, even before they join the clique and, as we will see, after they disengage from it. Pandillero 13 provides insight into the life before membership:

Well, I grew up in their midst. For me, the gang world was something common: drugs, beatings, street brawls. During that time, fights over territory were common, so for me it was all normal. I just had to make it official and become part of them.

The Process of Leaving the Pervasive Gang
The ubiquitous presence of the gangs and their dynamics in most low-income Salvadoran neighborhoods represents a challenge for disengagement. As we have shown in previous installments of this research project, most active gang members surveyed want to leave the gang (60.1 percent), and many leave successfully (Cruz and Rosen 2020; Rosen and Cruz 2018). Nearly 59 percent of individuals interviewed in our survey said they were disengaged from the gang or no longer active. Our survey provides a window to the gang power shaping the processes of disengagement. Asked whether their—former or current—clique has a way to oversee or track the disengagement processes of their members, 63 percent answered positively, meaning that the clique remains actively vigilant about their former members’ actions. The process, called chequeo (check-in), was described by several former gang members. Pandillero 13 summarized it saying:

When one is supervised, nobody tells you that you’re being supervised. The same kids who you know as flagpoles [informants] are the ones in charge. These flagpoles check where you go, who you’re with, and what you do.

This supervision process shows the power of the gang. Everywhere the individual goes, the gang is going to be there monitoring. Supervision seems to be significantly more prevalent among the MS-13 cliques, with 68.3 percent of respondents reporting chequeo and 71.7 percent among members who held a leadership position within the gang. Although most imprisoned respondents indicated that they are subjected to chequeo when disengaging from the gang, more than half of non-imprisoned gang members also reported being subjected to the gang’s constant supervision in the streets.

This process of post-membership supervision is stringent for most gang members. In the survey, two-thirds of respondents said that the supervision process was very intense. It includes a system of penalties or punishments—including death—when a former gang member’s behavior exceeds the limits imposed by the gang. For instance, Pandillero 21, a 23-year-old former MS-13 gang member, described a rule in his clique that established that they were allowed only one day per week to drink and use drugs. When he left the gang, he assumed that the rule was no longer applicable to him:

He [the leader] told me: “that law applies to you as well. You can only drink one day per week.” But I had the drinking problem, and after the gang, I drank, and drank a lot. . . . Well . . . they walloped me anyway, again!” (Pandillero 21)

Moreover, the post-gang supervision process is lengthy. According to the survey, 14.3 percent of respondents said it lasts for more than a year, but 67.6 percent indicated that it never ends, even after years of disengaging from the gang. Once again, Pandillero 13 provides a testimony: “This process [of supervision] lasts all your life.” The prevalence of gang supervision after the individual has decided to leave the group attests to the complexities of gang disengagement in a country like El Salvador. In these circumstances, and as documented by previous studies (Brenneman 2011; O’Neill 2015), religious conversion into Pentecostal evangelicalism plays an important role. Consistent with the recent growth of evangelical churches in El Salvador, especially in low-income and marginalized
communities (Christian, Gent, and Wadkins 2015; Offutt 2019), our survey with active and former gang members showed that affiliation to evangelical churches is widespread. 54.9 percent of survey respondents identified as evangelical Christians; only 17.6 percent said they were Catholics, and 27.5 percent mentioned they did not follow any religion. These results are consistent with studies that reveal the popularity of evangelical churches among Salvadoran gangs (Brenneman 2014; Offutt 2019).

When asked what gang associates must do to exit the gang, more than half (51.2 percent) said that they had to join a church or follow God; the rest mentioned that they had to ask for permission from leaders (15.6 percent); or that they could just leave (9.2 percent); or they mentioned other mechanisms (3.5 percent). However, one in every five survey respondents stated that gang members cannot exit the gangs. Bivariate analyses showed that although there are statistical differences, when comparing by some groups (gang affiliation, age, and rank in the gang, among others), joining a church remained the most common mechanism to leave the organization.5

The “Ordering” Role of Religion

To understand the appeal of the religious option in gang disengagement, it is important to consider the social order that governs the relationships between the gangs and other social actors in the community. In this case, we need to look at the role of evangelical churches. As we have seen, the apparent popularity of religious conversion into evangelicalism stems from the shared belief that this is the only viable option approved by gang leaders, particularly in a social order shaped by them. A former Mirada Locos gang member, who left the gang when he was 24, contended:

When you leave a gang without Christ, they kill you. . . . If you want to leave the gang, mind you, you cannot leave a gang in any other way than through the Church. That is one of the factors, the Church, because if there is one thing that gang members respect, it is the Church. (Pandillero 17)

Another former gang member, who had belonged to one of the factions of Barrio 18 argued:

Well, the only way out is for you to follow Jesus. There is a phrase they say: “Enter if you want and leave if you can.” That the only way out is death or at least that you follow Jesus but faithfully. (Pandillero 12)

The gang’s giving authorization to disengagement is, however, conditional, and heavily regulated by the threat of severe punishment. As Pandillero 12 continued explaining:

Because if you follow Jesus and do things you don’t have to do, they [the gang] themselves come and give you a “cut.” They don’t kill you, but they do beat you. In a way, it is a corrective that they apply so that you are either inside [the Church] or with them. But otherwise, you cannot get out.

Thus, the gang’s acquiescence comes under the condition that defectors will change their behavior and make it apparent to the gang and the public. For example, when Pandillero 10, a 19-year-old member of MS-13, communicated his intentions to leave the clique, he was badly beaten by his peers. After the beating, he insisted on receiving approval to leave the gang. The leaders then told him:

That if I was going to be with God, I should be solid. That I should take God seriously. “Well . . . that’s fine,” I said. But if they saw that I did not do things as they had told me, they were going to see what they did with me. “It’s okay.” I said.

Consistent with the signaling perspective proposed by gang scholars (Densley and Pyrooz 2017; Johnson and Densley 2018), the behavioral changes elicited by conversion into evangelicalism send
signals to the gang and the community at large that the personal transformation and dissociation from the gang is real. Pandillero 4 illustrates the importance of sending the right signals through routine behavior:

They [the gang] respect, they respect Christian faith. . . . If they see you that you are not smoking and that you are not threatening other people because of who you were. . . . They respect Christianity.

The embrace of the Christian faith should be ostensible, and it should not leave any doubt about the commitment to pious behavior and the rejection of immoral conduct. Pandillero 13 described it further by saying:

We really need to lead a godly life. As children of God, we cannot be on soccer fields because they see it as something liberal. Nor am I going to go to a birthday party where there will be alcohol. Because I can’t be there. As a child of God, I cannot be there.

Devout attitudes not only signal the personal process of transformation to the gang. Most importantly, they communicate that the defector will not turn into a competitor and become a threat to the gang’s activities in the neighborhood. A former MS-13 gang member linked the conversion process directly to criminal desistance:

The only way he can do it [leave the gang] is that he no longer continues committing crimes, because if he does it behind the back of the gang, that pisses the gang off. If he says he is going to turn his life around, he must do it radically. He cannot continue committing crimes behind the back of the gang. (Pandillero 15)

Thus, the gang’s supervision becomes crucial, as the former gang peers continue screening for signals of reengagement in non-religious behavior. This exchange with Pandillero 22 illustrates this process:

P22: Well, if God enters your life, they will notice. If you go to Church . . . but if you try to get out [of the Church], the gang notices that too.
I: How does the gang notice it?
P22: Watching how you act, how you change, mind you, how you walk.

Therefore, the religious mechanism becomes an acceptable alternative. It is the only one that may guarantee that the converted individual will not engage in criminal activities, even when he shares the same spaces and continues interacting with his old peers in the clique. Pandillero 2, recounting how he received permission to leave the gang, described the process of navigating gang disengagement amid several gang ties:

The leader told me to go ahead: “But remember that you don’t get to play with God and the gang. You know you can calm down, but you no longer can have things with them [the clique peers].” What I mean is . . . one thing is that they have been your friends, your comrades, as they say. They will always continue being your friends, you cannot not talk to them overnight. But look, the contacts to continue doing what you did before, that is a lie, you can’t!

The lingering ties with gang peers are, thus, enhanced by the fact that most former gang members remain in the same barrios that the gang controls. Disengagement is possible insofar as religious conversion is expressed in visible gestures, and relationships are constructed in the understanding that
the former gang member is no longer engaged in non-religiously sanctioned behaviors. But even in
the cases in which the defector sends all the right signals, the gang continues exerting its power over
former associates. An 18-year-old MS-13 member summarized the lingering connections to the gang:

You know you belong to the gang when you tell the leader that you want to leave. . . . If it is to seek
God, the opportunity comes quickly, it’s called “the pass.” The word that you can get out comes
quickly from the prisons. . . . But this is when they tell you: “From the moment you jumped in, you
will always be in the gang, until you die. You will just no longer commit extortions, homicides, and
you will no longer be with us. You are going to have your life, but you are going to belong to the
gang.” That is the way the gang has it, with the difference that one is no longer doing the same things.
(Pandillero 3)

Yet the gang’s apparent deference to evangelical churches has limits. These limits are marked by
the individual behaviors of the religious community members. They are also established by the shared
understanding that the religious congregation will not challenge the clique’s local power and author-
ity. Asked what the church and the congregation do to avoid being targeted by the gangs, even
though their proselytism subtracts members from the clique, a former Barrio 18 member who had
turned into a pastor of a thriving Pentecostal church said:

The key, I repeat, the key is that it’s not us, it’s something supernatural. Of course, I mean, we . . . I
live my life as God commands me to live it. I don’t attempt to fool around. I respect what they [the
gang] are. I don’t mess with their things. Eh . . . moreover . . . there are certain things that I can’t
talk to you freely about, because . . . because my idea is not to harm them, right? Rather, my idea is
that they also convert to Christ, that they leave the gang, right? But . . . I must not harm them, right?
So, as long as I stay within that margin of living my life as a Christian, not hurting them, respecting
them, I think there is a mutual understanding. They say, “Well, you chose that life. Don’t you ever . . .
don’t make a mistake because the day you do, we will be there.” (Pandillero 25)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Disengagement from gangs is always a complicated process. In social orders characterized by criminal
governance, the personal decision to leave the clique usually represents an arduous ordeal. In places
like the one studied here, street gangs wield unrelenting power over the lives of their members and
the activities of the communities they control. Thus, perhaps one of the first questions that we need
to ask ourselves when studying gang disengagement—or gangs in general—is: who rules the commu-
nities that street gangs inhabit? This is a fundamental question when studying violence and crime in
developing countries with issues of state fragility.

In El Salvador and several Latin American countries, the dynamics of gang formation, evolution,
and disintegration are intricately linked to the nature of local governance. This, however, is not exclu-
sive to developing countries. As Sánchez-Jankowski (1991; 2003) and others have insisted, gangs are
organizations shaped by the social structure where they operate. In developed countries, gangs bur-
goein at the social margins of wealthy and resourceful urban communities (Klein and Maxson 2006;
Venkatesh 1997; Vigil 1988). In several Latin American countries, gangs tend to be embedded in the
social and political landscape (Rodgers and Baird 2015). They constitute an important player in the
prevailing social order (Arias 2014; Arias 2006; Dewey et al. 2017).

Hence, the social conditions that facilitate gang disengagement and crime desistance take a very
different form in contexts where street gangs contribute to governance. The overall findings of this
research project (Cruz and Rosen 2020; Rosen and Cruz 2018), as well as other studies on Central
American gangs (Amaya and Martínez 2019; Savenije 2009), attest to the fact that most gang
members in El Salvador follow the life-course path explained by the literature (Decker et al. 2014; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). They start entertaining doubts about their gang affiliation as soon as they emerge from the teenage years, critical life events become hooks for change and opportunities for disengagement, and the establishment of new interpersonal relations support transformative identities (Carson et al. 2017; Krohn et al. 2011).

Yet the powerful gangs studied in this article shape the life course of their members and the people around them in different ways and intensities. They restrict the personal choices of their members and associates, even after they have declared their autonomy from the group. In effect, the former has to do with the nature of the gangs in El Salvador. But the crucial point is not the gang per se but the social order in which these gangs operate and contribute to. In contrast to prison gangs and street gangs confined to marginalized communities in advanced post-industrial societies, gangs in El Salvador, Brazil, Venezuela, and others inhabit hyper shantytowns and slums that constitute the urban standard (Auyero 2000; Garmany 2010). In these environments, gangs set the norms of behavior even for people who do not belong to the gang.

Thus, in several developing countries, street gangs do not leapfrog between inner-city islets of poverty. Instead, they navigate a sea of impoverished barrios, where economic formality and state institutions are intermittent and weak. How an underprivileged young man navigates those barrios across the city depends on the configuration of the criminal landscape: which gang rules and how they exert their authority.

In El Salvador, street gangs have managed to dominate most low-income and non-gated residential communities. For gang members, any community in the country is either controlled by a friendly clique or a rival clique. For former gang members, it means that most territories are a potential risk. These are the environments that any person wanting to abandon MS-13 or the Barrio 18 gangs needs to circumnavigate. The notion of ties that keep binding the person to the clique is illuminating here (Pyrooz et al. 2014; Pyrooz et al. 2013). However, the scale and magnitude of those bonds in social orders ruled by gangs are also qualitatively different. Potential deserters must navigate the pervasive networks forming the territorial scaffold of the gang. They also need to move through territories and spaces controlled by former rivals, law enforcement, and other hostile groups. Thus, gang disengagement requires the adoption of identities, with their symbols and practices that assist the individual in crossing over these different micro-social orders safely. Studying gang rehabilitation in Guatemala, O’Neill (2015) emphasizes the importance of dressing up for former gang members embracing Christianity. This act signals that they have now changed. In the Salvadoran context, where gangs are even more ubiquitous (International Crisis Group 2017), it means that they are no longer a threat to former rivals or friends.

In this informal social order and hybrid governance contexts, personal religious conversion becomes effective. Most of the time, it is the only gang disengagement option. The apparent success of the religious conversion exit stems from its required commitment to radical personal transformation, from adopting an identity that requires substantial behavioral change, pushing the individual away from the practices of the gang. Yet the explanations about the ability of Pentecostal organizations to draw people from the gang would be incomplete if we do not consider the social and political role these groups play in the existing social orders in underprivileged communities (Garmany 2010). In other words, in many communities where gangs rule, they do not rule alone. They do it with the collaboration of other actors. In some places, churches and pastors are those agents because they have the capability to regulate behaviors enforcing prescriptions that serve the gang’s purposes.

People with a long and often public, criminal history can join evangelical churches because the latter collaborates with the gang at the individual level by imposing limits on their former members’ behavior and at the social level by legitimizing the local dominance of the gang. Consistent with Brenneman (2014) and Johnson and Densley (2018), we found plenty of evidence that behavioral changes prompted by the renewed spirituality are instrumental in sending the “right” signals to the leaders of the gang and the community at large. These same signals convey compliance through
moral norms of conduct and perpetuate the power of the gang. They reduce the chances that former peers, with insider information and access to a repertoire of illicit activities, will become competitors and threaten the gang’s local supremacy.

The religious exit allows the clique to continue exerting power over the deserters and enforce the commitment on behalf of the congregation. For its part, the religious community provides the normative framework that reassures the clique that its former associates will not move against it. Thus, in an order usually defined by violent contestation, evangelical congregations contribute to gang governance. In exchange, the gang provides the churches and congregations the security and protection to continue operating in the neighborhood.

Indeed, this is possible because the religious congregations comprise the same families and social networks that form the cliques. The former is not exclusive to El Salvador, as other scholars have found similar configurations in Brazil and Guatemala (Lanz 2016; O’Neill 2015). As Offutt (2019) has elucidated, this entanglement has implications extending and perpetuating the gangs’ ability to rule over the lives of the population within their territories. Under these conditions, many evangelical churches underwrite gang governance and contribute to gang pervasiveness. The former posits a dilemma for former gang members who do not want to embrace the religious option. They may leave the gang and cease their criminal behavior through religious conversion while still observing the codes of the gang, or they may exit the gang without the church’s protection. Therefore, anyone wanting to leave the gang faces the non-alternative of joining the church or risk being targeted un forgivingly by the clique. Moreover, that is why religious rebirth stories are frequently interrupted by cases of recidivism, failed conversions, and death at the hands of former peers (Amaya and Martínez 2019; Valencia 2018). In countries where gang presence seems ubiquitous, the ultimate choice is fleeing the country, as thousands have done in northern Central America (McNamara 2017).

This article provides a framework for understanding gang disengagement and crime desistance in social contexts dominated by street gangs and criminal organizations. There are important differences in the way violent groups exert their local authority across the globe. Based on our study in El Salvador, we argue that the modes of criminal governance define the disengagement mechanisms available to members of criminal groups. It also illustrates how criminal governance systems operate in conjunction with non-criminal institutions to perpetuate certain types of social order. In Latin America, this may apply to some favelas in Brazil, to slums called comunas in Colombia, and barrios in Venezuela, and in most large urban centers in Guatemala and Honduras. Indeed, several other actors participate in these systems, and we have not considered how a key actor, namely the state, takes part in this complex equation. However, in several hybrid social orders, the prospects of leaving and surviving the criminal group are better determined by what some informal institutions do than by state institutions.

**APPENDIX. Sample Selection Procedures**

This study is partially based on a survey conducted with active and former gang members in two juvenile detention centers, four adult prisons, three police jails, and two rehabilitation centers across El Salvador. Given the hyperviolent Salvadoran context, the research team discarded the possibility of conducting survey interviews on the streets or in households as other studies previously have done. Therefore, for the survey, the research team focused on subjects housed in detention centers or participating in rehabilitation programs. The team used a multistage-selection process that combined purposive sampling in prisons and convenience sampling outside prisons.

First, the sample design was based on information available about the distribution of gang members in detention and rehabilitation centers across the country. The research team selected the centers that had the largest concentration of gangs and requested authorization to the authorities to work in

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6 Surveying gang members in police jails was critical because we had access to people who had just been on the streets.
these facilities. The Salvadoran government denied access to some of the prisons where the top national gang leaders are incarcerated but granted permission to work in four adult penitentiaries, two juvenile centers, and three police jails that held many inmates with a gang membership record. In addition, two non-governmental rehabilitation programs, one linked with an apparel factory and the other with a church, granted access to former gang members.

Second, in each center, the field research team met with the institution’s director to request access to all the inmates (or participants, in the case of rehab programs) with a record of street gang membership. The research team randomly selected subjects based on the roster of known gang members provided by each center. We used a variant of the self-nomination technique to confirm who was—or had been—a gang member. We asked what gang organization the potential interviewee belonged or had belonged to. People who said that they had never belonged to a gang were not interviewed even though their name appeared in the center’s list as a gang member. The field team leaders explained the study goals to every potential participant and answered any questions before and after the survey. The survey was conducted by trained interviewers, who recorded the answers to the 112 questions on paper. In total, the research team conducted 1,300 survey interviews during a six-week period, which came to 1,196 valid surveys with active and former gang members. The research team went through four rounds of full board review with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors’ institution to ensure that all provisions of human subject protection were followed during the project. The authors of the study trained a team of twelve local interviewers, who interviewed the participants in Spanish under the direct supervision of the authors. Given the non-probabilistic sampling, we do not claim representativeness of the Salvadoran gang population.

REFERENCES


7 The Salvadoran government had enacted temporary restrictions in the prisons where gang leaders were incarcerated as part of what it called "extraordinary measures policy."

8 The research team discarded 104 surveys because respondents did not answer all the questions or because the research team found evidence that the interviewee had never belonged to a gang. Interviewees did not receive any compensation for participating in the study.


