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GENERAL ARTICLES

Everyday Security Practices in Gang-Controlled Neighborhoods in San Salvador

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article looks at the everyday security practices of local residents in violent local orders, where capacities and strategies of state and non-state armed actors to produce regularity and stability are weak and contested. It discusses the case of gang-controlled neighborhoods in the metropolitan area of Greater San Salvador, El Salvador, in the years 2017–2018, when security "provision" of armed state and non-state actors was weak and contested, and as a result civilians mostly took care of themselves. The article analyzes the main characteristics of local violent orders, the insecurity experiences of local residents, and the everyday practices of local residents to deal with these circumstances. It argues that in neighborhoods where security provision by state and non-state actors is weak and contested, everyday security practices of local residents are key to understanding the functioning and reproduction of the local forms of "disordered order."

■ **KEYWORDS:** Central America, everyday security practices, street gangs, violent local order

Latin American cities continue to display relatively high levels of violence, and in 2013 42 of the 50 most violent cities in the world were in Latin America (Chioda 2017: xi). There is a growing research interest in the local governance patterns that emerge in violent contexts in Latin America, and how non-state armed groups (NSAGs), which have a capacity to use violence, affect local orders and security (Arias 2017; Arjona 2016; Blattman et al. 2021; Dewey et al. 2017; Jaffe 2013; Koonings and Kruijt 2015; Lessing 2021; Moncada 2013, 2016; Mueller 2018; Pansters 2016; Trejo and Ley 2020). While the everyday experiences of local residents in local hybrid orders have also received ample attention (Auyero and Berti 2015; Hilgers and Macdonald 2017; Kloppe Santamaría and Abello Colak 2019; Moody 2020; Pengalese 2014; Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff 2003), the relation between citizen experiences and agency, on the one hand, and the characteristics of violent local orders in Latin America's margins, on the other, is understudied.

This article analyzes the everyday experiences of insecurity and the practices used to deal with threats and challenges in gang-controlled neighborhoods of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (AMSS) in 2017 and 2018. The AMSS has faced staggering homicide rates over the past decades and was among the most violent cities in the world for many years (The Economist 2015). In marginalized neighborhoods, where gangs are strongest, local residents often suffered under the presence of street gangs, which was compounded by violence and threats from the police and the military, who were unable to regain territorial control. In most cases, this led to a highly unstable situation, where the fear and anxiety of local residents was at a fever pitch. This has been one of the reasons why Salvadorans, who live in what some residents call "conflict zones," left their neighborhoods, feeling they had no other choice than to leave the country and to migrate to countries such as the United States, Mexico, and Costa Rica (Wolf 2020).

In this article, I focus on neighborhoods where local order is weak and where the levels of predictability about the use of violence and coercion are low, a situation that InSight Crime (2020) calls "disordered order." While gangs and state actors (both police and municipal) deal with each other in different ways, their capacity to "provide security" to local residents is weak. As a result, many local residents face very high levels of uncertainty and unpredictability, as they cannot count on the security provision of local state actors or gangs, and have to navigate the everyday insecurities that are often created by these actors. This article analyzes the main insecurities of local residents and the everyday practices to deal with insecurity caused by armed actors, and it argues that these practices are key to understanding the dynamics of (in)security in extremely uncertain and unpredictable local and violent "disordered orders."

The article starts with a discussion of local orders and security governance in Latin American cities. It then proceeds with a brief section on the fieldwork methodology that was used. This is followed by a section that discusses the key characteristics of the local order in the margins of San Salvador. The subsequent sections discuss different types of insecurity that residents experience and the everyday practices residents employ to counter these threats. The article ends with a conclusion that examines the relevance of these findings for discussions about (in)security governance in "disorderly local orders."

Everyday Security Practices in Disorderly Local Orders

The everyday security experiences and practices of local residents need to be understood in relation to the strategies of powerful actors (state and non-state) that can provide a degree of order.[1] The two co-constitute each other, as security practices of residents are often a response to local power configurations, and the patterns of responses of local residents give shape to local patterns of interaction between residents and local armed actors (Verweijen 2018). This article looks at local orders that are relatively unpredictable and unstable, or "disorderly," and asks how residents experience and respond to disorder. While in more stable and predictable orders local residents can count—in varying degrees—on the protection of local state and/or non-state actors, in less stable and unpredictable local orders, the behavior of these actors vis-à-vis local residents is unpredictable. How do residents relate to and cope with an unpredictable or "disorderly" context?

In most studies about local security in the urban margins, emphasis is placed on the local order in which certain actors (state and/or non-state) have "political power, including the use of organized force to establish and maintain social orders and to protect them from external and internal threats" (Luckham and Kirk 2013: 4). Many local orders in the Latin American margins are "hybrid," in the sense that state agents and non-state criminal and armed actors both play a role and relate to each other in complex ways (Boege et al. 2009). Thus, a variety of

political practices, structures, and actor networks establish (degrees of) order, while the exercise of power is not static, and more powerful actors—both state and non-state—can actively "seek to produce regularity and stability with a view to produce, manipulate or control situations" (Pengalese 2014: 6).

Several recent studies into non-state or hybrid local orders in Latin America have pointed out the variation in the types and degrees of local (dis)order that emerge in the same country or city and during the same time period (Arias 2017; Arjona 2016; Blattman et al. 2021: 2), using different terms and categorizations to distinguish between different types of order.[2] In this article, the focus is on disorderly or unstable contexts, a situation that comes close to what Enrique Arias (2017: 21–25) has called "criminal disorder." A key indicator of order is the degree of predictability that local armed rulers will follow a set of rules in their interactions with local civilians (Arjona 2016: 27), and the reason that civilians perceive more security in a stable or predictable order lies in this predictability and clarity of the "rules of the game" (North 1990: 3–4). Thus, in a situation of order people can form expectations regarding most domains of their life most of the time, as "specific patterns of social, economic and political interaction have come into existence," as opposed to more unpredictable or "disorderly" contexts (Arjona 2016: 22–28).[3]

Local order is a matter of degree, and the literature has identified several factors that are of particular importance to explain the instability and unpredictability of the local orders.[4] First, there are the attributes of the armed groups (Arjona 2016: 37) and in particular their "armed consolidation" (Arias 2017: 24). There is a wide variety of types of organized crime in the Latin American margins.[5] Criminal groups differ, among other things, in terms of their antecedents (subcultural or criminal), the ways they organize, their capacity to use force, and their economic base. More fragmented and disorganized local armed groups, like street gangs, will be less successful (and interested) in providing (or contributing to) a sense of order and security.

Second, there is the type of relationship between armed groups and state agents. These relations are complex, and can form a "gray zone of criminality in which criminals and state agents informally coexist" (Trejo and Ley 2020: 40). Arias (2017: 24) argues that more collusion is likely to lead to more stability. However, collusion can take different forms and be "partial," as "some state actors act as law enforcement agents and fight crime, but others collude with criminal organizations" (Trejo and Levy 2020: 40). Moreover, the forms and consequences of collusion need to be understood in their local contexts, as NSAGs become part of context-specific governance networks that are characterized by diverse linkages and forms of coordination between these groups, government agents, and societal groups (Abello Colak and Guarneros Meza 2014; Arias and Davis Rodrigues 2006; Baker 2010; Hilgers and Macdonald 2017; Moncada 2016). Collusion between state and non-state actors can take many forms and can create some predictability and stability. A lack of collusion or coordination between armed actors is likely to lead to more unpredictability and insecurity for local residents.

Third, there is the political juncture, which includes national-level conditions (such as a change of government) and sub-national war dynamics (Arjona 2016: 38). Changes in national government or national government policy (e.g., pleading for more repressive approaches) can deeply affect the room to manoeuvre of different actors in local urban spaces. Shifts in government approaches toward NSAGs (truces with gangs or crackdowns on them) can also affect the stability of local orders.

These factors largely define the type and degree of security governance that emerges and affect the everyday experiences of local residents as they "are protected (or protect themselves) from violence, abuse of power and other existential risks" (Luckham and Kirk 2013: 4). I use the term "everyday security practices" to point to the capacity of local residents to respond to

threats, a concept that has similarities with Henrik Vigh's concept of "social navigation," which he defines as the ways in which "people move and manage in situations of social flux and change" (2009: 420). Everyday security practices are not static (Pengalese 2014; Vigh 2009), they are context-specific and follow patterns or repertoires that have been developed over time (Verweijen 2018). In other words, while everyday security practices of the less powerful often are a reaction to a particular local order, these practices also co-constitute the local order.

There is a growing interest in the ways in which local residents deal with threats and uncertainties (Arias 2019; Hume and Wilding 2020; Kloppe Santamaría and Abello Colak 2019; Moncada 2019). The poor generally have less capacity to "modify urban infrastructure to shield themselves" (Deckard and Auyero 2022: 2.11), but they do have agency to deal with threats and to navigate local insecurities (Berents and Ten Have 2017). The individual and collective strategies and responses to cope with the threat of violence include isolation and practical measures to keep a minimum degree of safety (Deckard and Auyero 2022: 2.11). In addition, several studies point out the importance of local contacts, organizations, and networks to avoid or manage risks and threats (Berg and Carranza 2018; Deckard and Auyero 2022; Hilgers and Macdonald 2017). However, networks and even kinship ties can also become a burden when criminal actors are part of them (Deckhard and Auyero 2022: 2.12). In other words, insecurity and unpredictability can also affect social ties and family relations. However, the literature on (in)security in the margins has paid only limited attention to how residents cope with extreme uncertainties in disorderly orders. What strategies are developed within disorderly orders, where security is hardly "provided" by actors with a capacity to use coercion? How do residents navigate extreme uncertainties and deal with local situations that are highly unpredictable? These questions will be discussed in the following sections.

Methodology

The research for this paper focused on the main types of insecurity that local residents experience, the principal (in)security practices they develop, and how these relate to and co-produce (dis)order in the margins. The research focused in particular on the threats, restrictions, and protections that local residents experience in their everyday dealings with (state and non-state) armed actors. This is only one of the dimensions of the more complex experience of "chronic violence" felt by local residents (Pearce 2019), which includes, for example, intrafamilial and structural violence that are not included in this research. I explored the main types of security experiences and practices of local residents in relation to the workings of the disorderly local order. Therefore, only limited attention was paid to the variety of personal experiences of (in)security, both in terms of interpretation and in relation to the position of residents in the neighborhood (Balzacq et al. 2010; Hilgers and MacDonald 2017: 1; Pengalese 2014; Van der Borgh 2019: 9). The experiences can strongly differ, and relevant factors such as the particular locations or zones in neighborhoods (more unstable versus more stable ones), socioeconomic position, and age and gender also appear to be important factors explaining whether or how threats are experienced (Hilgers and Macdonald 2017; Hume and Wilding 2020).

The research for this project was conducted during three research periods: July 2017, November 2017 and November 2018. In addition, some material from earlier and later visits (between 2014 and 2019) was used. In 2017–2018, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with local actors with different levels of knowledge of and influence over the local situation in different communities. Contacts were established via local religious leaders, nongovernmental organization (NGO) staff, and local government staff. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

Interviews lasted anywhere between 30 minutes and several hours and focused on residents' experiences in selected neighborhoods; how, when, and why they experienced insecurity; and how they dealt with it.

In addition, a point of attention was whether and how people's experiences and practices related to the informal and formal (in)security practices and strategies of state and non-state actors. The focus was on experiences that were perceived as limiting individual freedoms, threatening the physical integrity of residents, and/or frustrating or blocking the collective action by government and civil society. In many cases, these restrictions were related to the presence of gangs, but law enforcement agencies also played a role. It is important to stress that the interviews were conducted with people who chose to stay in their neighborhood even as a large number of Salvadorans decided to leave the country because their lives were in danger. The findings of this study therefore focus on the experiences of residents who remained in their neighborhoods and who tried not to end up in a life-threatening situation. The selected neighborhoods all had a high incidence of violence (in the period 2017–2018 and in the recent past), a low socioeconomic status, and a presence of NSAGs (gangs). The choice to include several neighborhoods from 7 municipalities of the AMSS[6] was made for security reasons and to reduce the potential risks for interviewees. A total of 61 semi-structured interviews and one focus group were carried out. Additionally, an extensive literature review was conducted.[7]

Lastly, as discussed in the previous section, national government policies vis-a-vis gangs deeply influence the local experience of (in)security and the characteristics of local orders. During the years in which this study took place (2017–2018), the Salvadoran government of president Sánchez Céren decided to crack down on gangs, leading to high levels of uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity for local residents in neighborhoods with a gang presence (see next section). Although this study does not compare the period studied with the subsequent period of the Bukele government (2019–present), the situation on the ground has undergone marked changes, particularly in 2022. In March 2022 the Bukele government declared a state of exception and in the period until October 2022 the authorities have jailed more than 50.000 alleged gang members (ICG, 2022). The state of exception led to massive human rights violations, such as arbitrary detentions (Amnesty International, 2022). It is too early to say how this has affected the local situation of (in)security, but there is little doubt that the arrest of many alleged gang members has weakened the power of gangs and strengthened the position of the police and the military at the local level, changing the characteristics of the local orders, and thus also affecting the experiences of local residents regarding their (in)security.

Gang Power and Violent Local Orders

This section introduces the Salvadoran gang phenomenon, the dominant responses to gangs of the central government, and some of the key characteristics of the local unstable order in 2017–2018. I argue that the Salvadoran gangs have changed considerably over the past decades, but have not developed a serious capacity or willingness to govern local spaces. This was compounded by the repressive approaches developed by the central government to deal with gangs, which have generally led to tense local relations between gangs and law enforcement agencies at the neighborhood level. While gangs have built up strong local power positions, this has not led to a situation of "full control," but rather to high levels of social control in which most local actors—including religious actors and local government staff—have to take into account the presence of the local gang.

There is wide variety in the types of actors that have built up local power positions in the Latin American margins. In this regard, the Salvadoran street gangs have a different struc-

ture and background than for instance the Mexican cartels or criminal organizations in Rio de Janeiro and Medellin. The historical roots and *modus operandi* of gangs go a long way in explaining why, in places where they have a presence, the local order is more likely to become unstable and unpredictable. The Salvadoran street gangs started as a subcultural phenomenon of small and loosely organized groups that over the years have transformed into armed coercive organizations that are a part of larger networks (Savenije 2009). Recent studies stress that, despite the enormous growth of gangs, they remain complex organizations that are "in constant flux," with marked differences between and within gangs (Cruz et al. 2017b: 35). Of the principal Salvadoran street gangs—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the two factions of Barrio 18—the former is a more structured gang, while the two factions of the 18th Street Gang are less structured in terms of their organization (Cruz et al. 2017b: 4, 38). However, even MS13 is a "diffuse organization of sub-parts, with no single leadership structure that directs the gang" (Dudley and Avalos 2018: 4), and local cells have a relatively high level of autonomy. Moreover, the degree of organization can differ per cell and can change over time. These local cells—called *clicas* in MS13 and *canchas* in the 18th Street Gang[8]—vary in size, ranging from a dozen to hundreds of members. They operate in different ways and can have varying effects on neighborhoods and the security situation of local residents.

Gangs are generally strongest in marginalized neighborhoods of the larger cities, but the phenomenon has also spread to the countryside (Segovia et al. 2016). The estimates of the number of gang members differ,[9] but gang violence is one of the most explicit causes of the extremely high homicide rates in the country. Despite the marked differences between the local cells of gangs, they operate in similar ways. They have a hierarchical structure, with a leader, members, and non-affiliated wannabees, and depending on context these hierarchies can be more or less stable. As a result of arrests, killings, and internal conflicts, leadership positions are often contested and such contestations lead to changes in the conduct of local cliques. Interviewees mentioned that there is diversity in the leadership styles of gang leaders, some being more open and communicative toward local residents or local policymakers, and others more aggressive. One NGO worker noted that in her zone "some leaderships are very aggressive, while with others you can have dialogue and some feel they are the Robin Hood of the gangs."[10] Some local cells of MS13 have a set of rules or guidelines, and a capacity to uphold them, including rules about the use of drugs and alcohol and the treatment of local residents (Dudley and Avalos 2018: 25–30).

Coercion and violence vis-à-vis different persons and groups (especially toward other gangs, but also toward their own gang, residents, and police) are key to the *modus operandi* of gangs (Van der Borgh 2021a). Within gangs, a fascination with violence and the capacity and willingness to use it is part of the very identity of the group, including violence vis-à-vis peers as a rite of passage or a punishment for not respecting internal rules. Relations between enemy gangs can be extremely tense, which is reflected in violent turf wars and cycles of revenge. However, at different levels (in particular at the leadership level) there is a long history of gang members making deals with local politicians and government officials. In relations with residents and businesses, the capacity and willingness to use violence provides gangs with a power position, allowing them to extort local residents and businesses (see discussion in next section) (Van der Borgh 2021a).

Government responses have had a profound effect on the development and *modus operandi* of gangs (Van der Borgh and Savenije 2015). Repression has been key in dealing with the gang phenomenon, but the degree and type of repression has varied between and within administrations. While repression against gangs is as old as the gang phenomenon itself, the right-wing ARENA governments (in the last year of the 1999–2004 administration and in the period

2004–2009) introduced the highly mediatized Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura approaches, which led to a steep increase in the number of imprisoned gang members and changes in gang structures (Hume 2007; Wolf 2017). All governments since 2004 have stressed the importance of repression, but there is growing evidence that, on a parallel track, high-level national government representatives have undertaken efforts to dialogue, negotiate, or collude with gang leaders (imprisoned or not), as well as with persons that are close to the gangs (e.g., family members) (Briscoe and Breda 2020; Martínez et al. 2020). Most of these interactions take place backstage, and the evidence about these interactions is patchy and anecdotal. The most important episode of gang–government collusion was in 2012–2013, when imprisoned national gang leaders made a truce, leading to a marked reduction of homicide rates (Van der Borgh and Savenije 2019). Importantly, one of the architects of the truce was Munguia Payés, Minister of Justice and Security, who had only recently been appointed and (in his public performances) promised to crack down on gangs.

When the truce unraveled, the new left-wing government led by Salvador Sánchez Cerén that took office in 2014 rejected new efforts for talks. His government developed a comprehensive security policy (called *El Salvador Seguro*), while at the same time repression intensified, leading to an increase in extra-judicial killings by police and other groups (PDDH 2019; Valencia 2016).[11] This was the result of measures taken at the national level: the Constitutional Court ruled that gangs should be considered terrorist organizations (Elsalvador.com 2015), the involvement of military personnel in public security tasks increased, and a newly appointed Minister of Justice and Public Security (JPS)—Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde—defended the right of police to use force in "self-defence" against gangs in early 2015. Moreover, a number of new "special measures" (*medidas especiales*) were announced, which cut off the contact of gang leaders in seven major prisons with gang members in the streets (La Prensa Gráfica 2016). The consequences of these policies were deeply felt by gangs and in local communities. The resulting fear and paranoia by gangs toward police and the army led to increasing confrontations with security forces and to more distrust vis-à-vis local residents.

The combination of a violent crackdown on gangs in the years under study (2017–2018) and the gangs' lack of interest in—and their reduced capacity to be involved in—local governance led to a situation where both state security actors and gangs were not able to provide order and mostly looked after their own security. "There is no order" was the answer of a mayor when asked who maintained order in the neighborhoods of his municipality, acknowledging that neither the local government, nor the (national) police were able to "control" them.[12] In neighborhoods with a gang presence, security provisioning by police was partial at best and often problematic, as the focus was on cracking down on gang members in an attempt to break their power at a local level. While many residents complained about the lacking capacity and willingness of the police to undertake action, residents in gang-affected neighborhoods reported that they were distrusted and harassed by the police as well. Moreover, they were afraid to cooperate with the police, as the police were distrusted by the gangs. Interviewees also argued that gangs had become increasingly paranoid about the police, and not only prohibited residents to deal with the police, but also told representatives and grassroots workers of local governments and NGOs that wanted to work in neighborhoods with a gang presence not to "bring" the police.

The security practices of gangs primarily focused on their security and on the establishment, protection, and consolidation of their power vis-à-vis other actors (including rival gangs, government, and residents). Residents and staff of NGOs and governments stated that gangs "are the law," "the authority," or "the ones who rule." The *modus operandi* of gangs consists of the use of intimidation, violence, and threats toward local residents, government officials, and other

gangs. An interviewee working in a neighborhood with a strong gang presence explained that "the discourse of gangs is intimidation. They are feared and by intimidating they want to show that they are the law."[13] Another NGO worker commented on the importance of masculinity: "It is a control by 'machos' of territories. The one who is biggest is the one who rules. They are not interested in ruling rightly; they are not interested in obtaining resources for the community. It is tyranny."[14]

Local cells claim to control a neighborhood or a portion of a neighborhood, an important practice being the control of the territory through a system of *postes* (usually young kids that are not yet members of the gang) who monitor the movements of residents and non-residents. Depending on the local context, local cliques do take into account the needs of local residents, and a degree of coexistence with local residents can emerge. The acceptance of the gangs tends to be higher in neighborhoods with a historical gang presence, where many families have relations with gangs. These are places were gangs sprouted up decades ago, and a large number of local youths have joined the gangs over the past decades (many of them have died or are imprisoned) and where the families (parents, women, children) of (former) gang members reside and maintain close contact with gangs. These close relations, in combination with the presence of older gang members living in the neighborhood (or in prison but still holding influence over local affairs), seem to have led, in a number of cases, to a degree of acceptance and more predictability regarding the behavior of the local gang. Interviewees in these places reported that the gang is more accepted: "We have lived together for such a long time, people got used to it."[15] In these cases, residents report being at ease with the gang presence: "They don't do us any harm." However, this does not imply that the gang is seen as legitimate by residents, but rather that its presence and power cannot be denied. In addition, there were also neighborhoods with a historical gang presence where the situation had become highly unpredictable. In other areas, where gang presence is more recent and generally not (yet) very strong, acceptance seemed to be virtually absent, and the levels of violence involving residents (who resisted the new presence of gangs or extortion) were higher.

A key characteristic of the violent and unstable order in San Salvador in 2017–2018 was thus the contestation between state actors and NSAGs—there is not one single agent who "controls" a territory. In the places where gangs establish a power position, this is generally on the basis of their willingness and capacity to use violence vis-à-vis different actors. The police and the military can usually gain access to gang territories without the latter's consent, but they are not able to break their social control. The contested practices used to control urban space lead to a context where all "non-armed" local actors need to take the local gang into account. This is not only the case for civilians (as will be discussed in the next section), but also includes organized local actors: political leaders, mayors and aldermen, municipal staff, members of community organizations, social workers, promoters of the local government, and church leaders: they all recognize that at some point they have to contact the local gangs. For instance, government staff reported to me that service delivery (from garbage collection to health services and education) can be risky, depending on the strategies chosen to deal with the gangs. A number of interviewees working for the local government argued, for instance, that the local government had to negotiate (and pay for) access to gang-controlled neighborhoods. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the different types of communication, engagement, and collusion that are developed by the staff of government organizations, but it is fair to say that government actors, community organizations, and churches have to abide by the rules of the gang, and by doing so can carve out some space to do their work. These dealings with gangs do not lead to high levels of stability and predictability, but can at best temper the degree of insecurity.

Everyday Insecurities

This section discusses three types of insecurity experienced by local residents living in gang-controlled neighborhoods. Residents reported that they felt high levels of insecurity and anxiety (*zozobra*), characterizing it as a situation of "enormous gang control." Although in 2017–2018 the extraordinary measures taken against gangs and the ongoing police operations had led to the diminishing visibility of the gangs in many neighborhoods, residents reported that the gangs had not disappeared but had instead adapted to the new context, calling it "an apparent peace." The capacity of the police (and military) to establish more sustainable forms of territorial and social control were, however, very limited and often led to fear of the police, not least in the neighborhoods with a strong gang presence. Local cliques remained the dominant armed actors that residents needed to deal with and to which they needed to adapt. The use of violence by gangs, or the threat of doing so, together with the unpredictability of why, when, and where violence would be used (by gangs as well as by police and military) is key to understanding the insecurity of civilians. Living in potentially insecure places leads to a state of constant alertness and suspicion, not only toward enemies but toward friends as well (Vigh 2018: 499). Below, I discuss the situations in the public sphere where civilians are most vulnerable, making a distinction between three types of insecurities: the access to territory and space, the payment of extortion money, and the relations with armed actors.[16]

Access to Territory

Many interviewees reported the problem of entering "territories" that were controlled by a different gang than the one that controlled their own neighborhood. Most interviewees did not visit these territories, and all reported that entering these territories had become significantly more dangerous (life-threatening). The lack of access led to different types of restrictions. Interviewees reported, for example, that they had not been able to visit the communal celebrations (*fiestas patronales*) and the city hall because these were located in neighborhoods controlled by an "opposite" gang. Others were not able to visit certain markets or shops. One person reported the restrictions involved in visiting a graveyard, because it was in gang-controlled territory. A procession of a local Catholic church was not allowed to cross the "invisible frontier" between different gang territories (Diario1.com 2016). The accessibility of schools, as well as hospitals, that were located in the territory of the opposite gang, or that were at the border between two territories, was often mentioned as a major problem. One medical doctor working in a clinic on a border between two gang territories mentioned that only the residents from a part of one neighborhood, controlled by one of the gangs, could visit the clinic, while the clinic itself had been attacked several times.

Many of the limitations and problems that residents experienced were related to the presence and possible threats of gangs, but the police and military were also held responsible. As mentioned above, during police operations local residents that had no ties with the gang experienced serious problems and harassments from the police. Many residents and local government staff referred to awkward experiences with the police when asked to show their ID cards, which led to an interrogation about their relations with gangs (gang members can also ask for the ID cards of visitors that they suspect, and interrogate them). One local promoter explained that when she was asked to show her document the police officer said to a colleague "Look, she lives in that neighborhood," and next asked her if she knew a particular gang member from that neighborhood. This situation generally contributes to a feeling of being stuck in the middle.

Gangs do not want local residents to talk to the police, but not giving information to the police also leads to accusations by the police of collaboration with the gangs.

Extortion and Property

The key source of income for Salvadoran street gangs comes from the extortion of businesses and local residents (Gomez Hecht 2013; ICG 2017). There is variety in the ways gangs extort local businesses and residents (InSight Crime 2020; Moncada 2019; Wolf 2020), and the experiences of my interviewees with extortion varied. All of them reported that businesses were extorted in most places, including local market vendors, shop-owners, bus drivers and owners, the Coca-Cola Company (trucks), and gas delivery persons. In these cases, extortion usually took place on a regular basis, with daily, weekly, or monthly payments, depending on the capacity and stability of the local clique. In addition, there were also reports of gang members "asking" shopkeepers for food and drinks. In addition, apart from the stress of having to pay (on time, and/or to deal with increases in the amount they have to pay), some residents reported the risks involved in having to collect the tributes of colleagues (e.g., market vendors), which might lead to suspicions and allegations of cooperation with the gang, and even to formal indictments.

While the extortion of local businesses is quite common, the experiences with practices of extortion toward residents are diverse and can change over time. In some neighborhoods with a historical gang presence, it was reported that the gangs did not extort residents in their "own" neighborhood. However, there were also reports of residents that had been extorted or car owners who had been "taxed" by the gang. One interviewee said that, as of 2014, everybody in his neighborhood had to pay each week, and that the amount depended on one's socioeconomic status: "Gangs know what you can pay. They have mapped the entire neighborhood and have more information than the police. . . . Not paying is simply no option."[17] There were also reports of residents that had to make one-off payments to gangs. One interviewee explained that he had paid $2,000 for which he had to take a loan from the bank ("We pay $49.50 per month"). In this particular case, the extortion was preceded by local gang members intimidating and harassing the family, while later a call from an imprisoned gang leader followed about the payment they had to make. When the resident obeyed (refusing was not an option), the harassments stopped.[18]

In addition, a number of interviewees reported infringements on the property rights of residents. Some said that the local clique took the houses of people that left the neighborhood or were told to leave. While local cliques can benefit from this themselves (it provides them with places to live or to hang out), it is also an effort to control the population living in and entering the neighborhoods. In most cases, interviewees described how the clique had to be informed about (and approve) the arrival of newcomers to the neighborhood. One interviewee said that if you want to sell your house you have to do so silently. In some cases, people had decided to leave their houses out of fear and thus lost their property because of increased gang activity around their house or in their neighborhood.

Relations and Interactions with Gangs

Residents of gang-controlled neighborhoods interact almost on a daily basis with gangs. This includes considerations about how to dress, how to behave, how to greet, but also how to deal with harassment, demands, and pressures from the gang. There are serious restrictions as to what residents are supposed to say, and the freedom to speak has strong limitations in a context where the code is to hear nothing, see nothing, and say nothing. The rule is that you are not supposed to talk about the gang or any practices that might provide information about their

whereabouts.[19] Several residents acknowledged that there was a lot of fear of talking about the gang, the violence that the gang uses, and the control they have. The fear of openly talking has been internalized, and in many cases has become the "new normal." When I asked about the possibilities to interview people in certain neighborhoods, one interviewee answered: "There is a lot of fear. People may talk about it in private. But they see it [gang presence] as a fact, the way it is, and it will not end. It is better to adapt and no longer to see it as a problem."

Even when complying with the rule to remain silent, people can still fear witnessing illicit acts that they were not supposed to see. One interviewee explained the fear she had felt after witnessing a murder: "They might think you have seen the murderer." Avoiding suspicion (making sure that you, as a resident, are not suspected by the gang) is therefore an important practice used by residents to prevent being suspected by the gang. When arriving home late by car, the rule is to leave the windows open and the lights off, so that gangs can see who is in the car. Moreover, it is not accepted by the gangs that local residents are in touch with the police, and even government agencies allowed to work in the neighborhood are usually asked to not "bring" the police.

More complicated are the suspicions by gangs that local residents (e.g., from local community organizations) cooperate with the police or share information with another clique. Residents in gang-controlled areas that work with the police or the army face particular challenges and typically do not share this information with others. One interviewee said that he met a girl from the neighborhood at a seminar. She appeared to be a police officer, which was unknown in the neighborhood.[20] Another interviewee talked about a friend of his working with the army, who used to dress in his uniform when leaving home but who no longer did so for security reasons.

Many everyday practices are informed by security considerations. Interviewees reported that it matters whether and how you greet, how you dress (the shoes you wear, the way you tie your shoelaces), what your haircut is, and how you talk. One man visiting the local market was told by a young gang member that he was not allowed to wear a shirt (which had been sent to him by family residing in the United States), which had a number on it representing a rival gang. He had to take the shirt off immediately. One young woman explained that you have to be very careful in the way you talk, who you talk to, and who you greet. She gave the example of witnessing local family of gang members who were insulting the police, and she felt she had no other choice but to smile and participate a little bit. Individual security also implies self-imposed restrictions such as keeping children at home and not sharing personal information (telephone numbers, Facebook accounts).

The challenges faced by children and teenagers are particularly strong.[21] Parents may tell their young children to stay home, not only because they might get in touch with gangs, but out of their fear of "negative influences" affecting them on the street (Savenije and Van der Borgh 2004). For teenagers in gang-controlled neighborhoods who are not related to the gang, the challenge is how to relate to the gang and to the police. As discussed above, police may accuse youth of collaboration with gangs or ask them for information.[22] In relation to gangs, it is important to be polite while at the same time keeping a distance from gang members (Savenije and Van der Borgh 2015: 103). However, this is no guarantee that adolescents can move around freely. For young women, the situation often is extremely difficult. Many residents disclosed that they did not want their daughters to hang out on the street, as the situation can become very complicated when gang members want to date them (or simply claim them).[23] A mother who had two daughters in their twenties said that they always stay at home, never hanging out on the street, and that their social life was limited to the university.

Importantly, local residents were concerned about their relationship with other residents who had previous contact with gangs (e.g., family members, local politicians, representatives of local organizations, police, or businessmen), or in cases where allegations and rumors about

such contacts existed. One interviewee said to me that he had a conflict with a local councilman and that this person had threatened him in a text message, which he found threatening because it was rumored that this person maintained contact with gangs. As a result, many people only interact and communicate with persons who they can be sure have no contacts with gangs, a state of affairs that has severe consequences on local social community relations and trust.

While most residents in gang-controlled neighborhoods experience similar insecurities, there are marked differences between and within neighborhoods. A deeper analysis of these differences is beyond the scope of this article, but several factors seem to influence the (in)security experiences of local residents. First, the type of local gang presence (more aggressive leadership; higher levels of conflict and violence between gangs or cliques; fragmentation of local gangs) seems to have a negative impact on local security experiences. Second, several personal factors seem to affect the everyday experience of insecurity, particularly the combination of age and gender (young men and young women face specific, and different, insecurities in dealings with gangs and police). Furthermore, occupation matters. Businessmen and businesswomen, government employees, police, and religious leaders face specific challenges and demands from gangs. Third, access to important resources and networks (relations in and beyond the neighborhood) is an important factor. And last is the skill to choose and combine different tactics to deal with gangs, a factor that will be discussed in the next section.

Everyday Security Practices

It is fair to say that in the period under study residents that live in neighborhoods with a strong gang presence looked after their own security and developed strategies to deal with the presence of armed actors. The options to deal with perceived threats are limited. Contracting private security or fencing off a street or a neighborhood (which is the case in a large number of middle-class neighborhoods) is not only expensive, but almost impossible in neighborhoods where gangs are already present. There were numerous reports of residents who had left their neighborhoods and homes. Municipal grassroots workers reported that in some neighborhoods many houses had been abandoned and that parents had sent their children to other places. A number of people moved to other neighborhoods because of growing tensions or violence. This can, however, cause new problems with local gangs and may be like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire, causing many Salvadorans to leave the country (MSF 2020; Wolf 2020). For those staying in gang-controlled neighborhoods, there is little choice other than to accept the restrictions and find pragmatic solutions to them. Below, four types of the more common responses are discussed: compliance and adaptation; mapping, avoidance, and prevention; contact and negotiation; and resorting to safe spaces. In the last section, a few examples will be given of how these responses are combined in different ways, depending on positionality, time, and place.

The first response is to comply with demands and rules of the gang, and to adapt creatively to the reality of local gang power. This includes paying extortion money, sticking to the rule to hear, see, and say nothing, and to show respect in day-to-day encounters with gang members. The essence of compliance is to respect the gang and to adapt one's behavior to reduce the chances of being confronted with aggression or pressures. However, in places where the gang presence is unstable and the behavior of its members unpredictable, or in places with high levels of conflict (between and within gangs, and/or with police) it may be hard or even impossible to comply with and adapt to ongoing and unpredictable demands and threats. In places where gangs have developed more stable structures and where they are less aggressive toward local residents, a degree of clarity and predictability about their relations with local actors and residents

has come into existence, making life somewhat easier. In all cases, the question of how to comply and adapt is a continuous balancing act.

The second response consists of avoiding contacts or problems with gangs and to avoid possible demands and suspicions from gangs. These practices include staying at home, being careful with or even avoiding contacts with other residents out of fear that they may have links with gangs, and to stop sending children to school. Strategies of avoidance are more important in contexts where the situation is very unpredictable and gangs show no respect for local residents. A vital component of this strategy is the constant mapping of how local gang structures evolve and to what threats this may lead in different local spaces. As one NGO worker noted: "The local context changes every week, every month. The local leadership can change all of a sudden."[24] A promoter working for the local government explained that in her area people informed her about changes within the neighborhood and about places and streets that she should avoid.[25] Most interviewees had detailed knowledge about the areas where they could (not) go (including the zones that were contested, dangerous borders, and neutral areas), and constantly mapped and remapped their neighborhood. However, the avoidance of contacts and problems with gangs can be extremely difficult, as gangs can force local residents into different types of collaboration, which can be a reason to leave the neighborhood or country (Wolf 2020: 43–46).

Third, there were many examples of residents contacting local gang members, directly or indirectly, when they experienced a problem with the gang—for instance, when they had been asked to pay a tribute, which they felt was unfair, or when they had been told to leave the neighborhood. The possibilities for contacting gang members differ, one important factor being the accessibility of and previous contact with the local clique. Local residents do not necessarily contact gangs themselves, but may ask intermediaries that are known to have access to gangs (e.g., religious leaders, community leaders, and family of gang members). Some of the contacts have the objective of informing gang members about and asking for permission regarding visits (of family members, or government agencies) or projects in the neighborhood. Residents also said they had talked with the local cliques or prison gangs about the amount of money they paid. One interviewee had hired gang members to protect his property (rather than pay extortion money). One shopkeeper said that the family of gang members did not pay in his shop, which stopped after he contacted a local gang leader. However, the possibilities of contact and negotiation depend on the local context and can change from one day to another. Another shopkeeper stated that after the local gang leaders had been arrested he explained to the new local representatives of the gang what agreements he had made with prison leadership about the amount of his tribute and the exact dates of collection, and he suggested their continuance. These cases show how civilians deal with the unpredictability of gang presence and how they become complicit in reinforcing agreements made earlier. By doing so, they hope to develop predictable local rules about extortion (while still rejecting the practice).

In addition, residents also referred to strategically interacting with gang members to prevent future problems, for instance doing little favors for them. A taxi driver spoke of voluntarily giving a few dollars to a local gang leader every once in a while. He reported that he stopped his taxi, called the local chief, and handed over some money: "We have to live together. . . . You shouldn't be their friend or their enemy."[26] A street vendor said that he always gave coffee and a sandwich to a local gang member. Another taxi driver said he had transported an injured gang member, something he felt he could not refuse when he was asked, although he got paid for it.[27] This person, as well as other interviewees, reported that this gave them credits (*puntos*), and that the local gang was aware of these forms of "cooperation."

Fourth, local residents turn to spaces that are not controlled by gangs, which can be important "havens" for them. Three spaces seem to be of particular importance. First, shopping malls

(with private security) are often considered neutral spaces, where residents can meet family or friends residing in neighborhoods controlled by other gangs. Second, the only institutions that are respected by gangs are churches (Brenneman 2012; Moody 2020). Although evangelical pastors interviewed for this study stressed that being a pastor in gang-controlled neighborhoods could be very challenging, they can often operate more freely in these neighborhoods (stressing that the gang is "the authority"). However, while evangelical churches are often considered "neutral," the entanglements between gangs and churches and even some similarities between both structures have been stressed in recent literature (Offutt 2020). Third, some of the more successful social and preventive programs (of local governments and NGOs) created spaces (for sports, education, or cultural activities) that were not controlled by gangs. For instance, afternoon classes were given by evangelical churches to children, including those of gang members who respected the initiative (Van der Borgh 2021b). In one case, a large sports complex was opened by a municipality that cooperated with local churches that worked in the field of education. The sports complex was built just beside a gang-controlled neighborhood. It was protected by the municipal police, and (former) gang members took part in some of the activities. This shows that it is possible to create spaces where norms and values are promoted that are at odds with those of the local gang.[28]

Civilians will use a combination of the above-mentioned practices, depending on the local context and on their personal situations. The bottom line is to comply and adapt to the rules of the local gang. For residents living in a (part of the) neighborhood where gangs have a weaker presence, it may suffice to follow the golden rule to hear, see, and say nothing, to pay (if applicable), and to avoid contact with gangs. However, avoidance may also imply a high level of isolation, a voluntary lockdown. Moreover, in many neighborhoods with a strong gang presence it is impossible to avoid contact with gangs, for instance with kids on the streets or at school or with adults that are asked for favors by the gang. Also, the demands and reactions of gang members can be unpredictable and quickly change. Thus, the practices discussed reflect the options to deal with situations and offer no guarantees for success. When residents face unreasonable demands or strong pressures, the only way out can be to "give in," to try and negotiate, or, eventually, to leave.

Conclusion

This article analyzed the ways in which local residents of San Salvador dealt with everyday insecurities in neighborhoods that were characterized by high rates of violence, and unstable and contested relations between gangs and law enforcement agents, during the years 2017 and 2018. In these violent and unpredictable local orders, the idea of "security provision" is problematic, as both gangs and law enforcement officials are mainly concerned about their own security and are partly responsible for insecurities and threats that many residents experience. While the territorial control of gangs is challenged by security forces, it is much more difficult for them to break the power of gangs over local residents. In most cases, local collective actors—such as local government staff, religious leaders, and community leaders—developed strategies to deal with (rather than resist) gang power. While these practices can create a degree of predictability in the dealings with local gangs (such as the spaces created by churches, NGOs, and governments), it is largely up to local residents to develop responses to deal with threats and uncertainties. Their everyday security practices are concrete and pragmatic responses to experienced or perceived insecurities. They are very much about survival, and not about the transformation of the local order, as they focus on coping (compliance and adaptation; mapping, avoidance,

and prevention), careful contact with gangs (either directly or indirectly), and the use of spaces where gang presence or control is absent or contained (malls, churches, and certain sport and education facilities).

Everyday security practices emerge in and partly reproduce unstable and violent local orders. However, it is the strategies of armed actors that are key in explaining the unpredictability of the local order and the high levels of uncertainty and insecurity experienced by local residents. This confirms the idea that the higher levels of cohesion of criminal organizations and the higher levels of collusion between these organizations and state agents generally lead to more stability and order (Arias 2017). Applied to the Salvadoran context in the period under study, this implies that the gangs (both national and local) are strong in terms of their capacity to survive, but in most places their structure is rather fragmented and fluid, despite the capacity of high-level leaders to act in unison and interact strategically. The relations and collusion between government and gangs are varied and complex. In the period studied, confrontation with law enforcement agencies was rife, but different types of collusion or coordination existed at the local level. However, in many places government agents and community leaders had little other choice than to abide by the "rules" of the gang and carving out their—often very limited—room to maneuver. This did not lead to a stable and predictable local order.

While the strategies of more powerful actors are essential to explain the reason why unstable and more disorderly urban spaces emerge, a "view from below" provides insight into (in) security experiences in disorderly orders where, despite certain efforts and instances of "security provision" by police, gangs, and other local non-state actors, there are no predictable patterns of security. Zooming in on the ways in which residents "do security themselves" improves our understanding of the ways in which residents are key actors in the local mechanisms of "ordering," however unstable these efforts are. It shows that in disorderly orders where armed actors are not able or willing to create effective security arrangements with clear responsibilities and entitlements, everyday practices are key in providing a minimal degree of order. These are primarily ways to cope with threats in adverse and violent contexts, and it is very unlikely they will lead to something more than a situation that is "contradictory and ambivalent, safe and dangerous, familiar and unpredictable" (Pengalese 2014: 6). Attention to everyday practices is particularly important in unstable and unpredictable local orders. It can be expected that, when the predictability of the behavior of local armed actors increases, the perceived insecurities of residents will diminish and the importance of navigation tactics as a strategy to "self-provide" security—although still relevant—will likewise diminish.

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■ NOTES

1. The distinction is based on the distinctions made by Robin Luckham and Tom Kirk (2013: 4), who differentiate between supply and demand of security, and Ben Pengalese (2014), who uses De Certeau's (1988) distinction between strategy and tactics.
2. Ana Arjona (2016) makes a distinction between types of rebel rule on the one hand, and disorder on the other. Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley (2020: 64) refer to different types of subnational criminal governance regimes, while Arias identifies four subtypes of "micro-level armed regimes" (2017: 24).
3. A higher level of predictability of the rules of the game does, however, not necessarily mean that the local order is perceived as just by local residents, and residents can still be fearful.
4. These factors are based on a review of the academic literature, in particular of Arjona (2016) and Arias (2017).
5. Jeremy Weinstein (2007: 61–95) argues that there is a variety of types of insurgent groups, and this is obviously also the case with criminal groups. For examples of the diversity of types of gangs, see the recent volume on gangs by David Brotherton and Rafael Gude (2021).
6. The municipalities included Ilopango, Soyapango, Mejicanos, San Salvador, Ciudad Delgado, Auyxtepeque, San Marcos (about 70 percent of the interviews were conducted in the first three municipalities).
7. A selection of 131 Salvadoran newspaper articles (2014–2017) about different types of security problems in AMSS was analyzed by Michelle Melara.
8. In this article, I use the term "local clique."
9. Jose Cruz and colleagues (2017b: 13) estimated that in 2012 the MS13 gang counted 12,000 members and the 18th Street Gang 8,000. In 2013, Ana Tager and Isabel Umana (2013: 5) estimate that there were 60,000 gang members, plus another 10,000 in prison.
10. Interview, July 2017.
11. See also Moncada (2016: 330–331) for a discussion of state-led vigilantism (cooperation between local businesses and local police) in the area of San Miguel.
12. Similar comments were made in most interviews. In addition, several interviewees emphasized that the majority of the people do not file complaints about issues related to insecurity.
13. Interview, July 2017.
14. Interview, July 2017.
15. Interview, November 2017.
16. I discuss the main types of insecurity that interviewees living in gang-controlled neighborhoods referred to and do not intend to give an exhaustive overview or complete list of all types of insecurity. See Wolf (2020) for an overview of nine types of problems encountered by Central Americans who had no other choice than to leave the country.
17. Interview, July 2015.
18. Interview, February 2015.
19. While this is not a "written" rule, in a number of neighborhoods it is a slogan that is painted on walls in combination with the name or the logo of the gang.
20. Interview, November 2017.
21. For the strategies of non-gang-related youth, see Van der Borgh and Savenije (2015).
22. Especially male youth experience problems in their interactions with police. See, for instance, Cruz (2017a: 7).
23. See Wolf (2020: 46) for examples of the "forced dating" of gang members.
24. Interview, November 2019.
25. Interview, November 2018.

26. Interview, July 2015.
27. Interview, July 2015.
28. Not all sports facilities are spaces where residents feel safe. There were also stories of local soccer pitches that were controlled by the local gang, or where the latter resisted these kinds of projects.

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