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WHERE IS HOME? A MULTIMEDIA VIEW  
OF THE LIVES OF EL SALVADOR'S  
ORPHANED CHILDREN, AND FLAWS  
WITHIN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM OF  
THE WORLD'S MURDER CAPITAL

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CHILDREN, AND FLAWS WITHIN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM OF THE  
WORLD'S MURDER CAPITAL

by  
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B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2014

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 2016



# RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial  
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Approved by:  
William Freivogel, J.D., Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF:

KAYLI PLOTNER, for the Master of Science degree in MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA ARTS, presented on April 14, 2016, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: WHERE IS HOME?

A MULTIMEDIA VIEW OF THE LIVES OF EL SALVADOR'S ORPHANED CHILDREN, AND FLAWS WITHIN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM OF THE WORLD'S MURDER CAPITAL

MAJOR PROFESSOR: William Freivogel

In a country the size of Massachusetts, live 6.4 million people attempting to recover from a civil war that ended more than 20 years ago. Recently named the most murderous country in the world, El Salvador is still fighting to recover from war times both economically and socially. More than [one third](#) of the population fall beneath the poverty line, leaving many children to join their families in the work force. In a country where only 3 percent of the public expenditures are put toward education, at least one-third of children drop out of school by fifth grade.

As of January 2016, El Salvador has a homicide rate of [104 people per 100,000](#), the highest of any country in nearly 20 years. Following the violence is an after effect often missed: what is happening to El Salvador's children. Many flee north, fall victim to gang activity, or end up in orphanages.

This paper supplements the multi-media package "Where is Home." Information was collected by on-camera interviews with subjects during field work, both by verbal and visual reporting in written and multimedia formats, including still images, and video recordings. In a three-week reporting trip in 2015-16, I found that many families suffer from extreme poverty,

malnourishment, lack of education and domestic violence. In response to these conditions, many children end up in government operated orphanages, or privately owned children's homes. The country's sole child protection law, LEPINA, passed in 2010, although a good start, leaves much to be desired in regards to interpretation, implementation, and acceptance into society.

This paper concludes with a reflection on the process of foreign reporting, and my plans to travel abroad and produce pieces such as this in the future.

Included Media: "[Where is Home](#)" (.mov file).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the groups who made this project possible. Without the support of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting and the SIU School of Mass Communication and Media Arts, this project would not have happened. I would also like to thank Anna Spoerre, Luke Nozicka, and Jennifer Gonzalez, whose support and guidance have been irreplaceable. To my committee chair and mentor William Freivogel, thank you for your endless encouragement, support and advice. This project would not be possible without your commitment to my academic success, and the success of journalism as a whole.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	v
CHAPTER 1: Artist Statement .....	1
CHAPTER 2: Text: Broken Homes, Broken Country.....	2
CHAPTER 3: Text: Children’s Rights in El Salvador .....	7
CHAPTER 4: Photos and Captions.....	11
CHAPTER 5: Concluding Thoughts .....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	20
VITA .....	21

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Figure 1. El Tanque .....	11
Figure 2. Water .....	12
Figure 3. Teens .....	13
Figure 4. Beth .....	14
Figure 5. Lisa .....	15
Figure 6. Darlene .....	16
Figure 7. Mateo .....	17
Figure 8. Santa Ana .....	18

## CHAPTER 1

### ARTIST STATEMENT

I am often asked, “Why El Salvador? Why not somewhere prettier, or safer?” And the answer can be addressed in one word: Osmar.

In 2014 when I randomly chose to sponsor a child of any age, gender or nationality, Osmar was chosen for me. The only box I checked was “orphan” – and three months later an envelope with a photo of five-year old little boy, and information about what his life in El Salvador was like arrived at my door.

From that moment I knew El Salvador would be the focus of this project – and the lives of children similar to Osmar would be the stories I would tell.

## CHAPTER 2

### BROKEN HOMES, BROKEN COUNTRY

On one side of the highway sits a three-story mall, housing the high-end retail stores and chain restaurants found around the world. On the other side of the street a little girl, no more than four years old, barefoot in a dirty yellow dress, wanders from tin shack to tin shack.

Across town 18-year-old Yasmin waits tables at a local restaurant—her dark brown hair tied back in a bun, her black apron stocked with straws. She greets each customer with a smile.

Before police found her on the street three years ago, Yasmin's life was much like that of the little girl in the yellow dress and so many other street children. That was before Yasim entered one of the dozens of orphanages operated by the government.

These orphanages provide refuge for the endangered children of El Salvador, a nation the size of New Jersey where [a third of the six million](#) people are in poverty.

More than two decades after the end of a civil war, this country has the highest murder rate in the world. As of January 2016, the homicide rate was [104 people per 100,000](#).

For boys 15-19 the risk is even higher with [157 deaths per 100,000](#). But adolescent girls—with a homicide rate of 26 per 100,000—are at risk as well—not just from homicide but from their vulnerability to sexual crimes and gangs.

Many of the children of El Salvador flee north. Others fall victim to gang activity. Others, like Yasmin, end up in orphanages where they have a chance at education and training.

Yasmin entered a government-operated orphanage when the police found her on the street at age 15.



“My mom was never home or spent a lot of time with me. I never felt important to her. I just wanted her there, to hug me,” she said. “That really affected me because I wanted to be close to my mom, but I started to resent her and it made me feel bad. So I figured if I ran away, it would end my problems.”

Rosa, 14, lives in the same orphanage in El Salvador’s capital city of San Salvador. Prior to coming to the orphanage she was homeless, by choice.

“My life was living in the street, high on drugs, because I was living with my mother and she didn’t want me,” she said. “So for me happiness was living outside with my friends.”

Rosa is one of 73 children currently living in the orphanage. However most of the people who work with children prefer to call the facility a children’s home, rather than an orphanage. The children are not true orphans. Most have families unable to care for them.

“One hundred percent of the kids here, their rights have been violated,” said Ricardo Lazo, director of the home. “They just get stuck in the cycle of violence. They are readmitted by El Salvador’s system of CONNA, child protective services.”

The government-operated children’s home is set up like a tiny village. There is a clinic with two nurses, a large kitchen where the meals—often rice and meats—are prepared. There is a workshop where the children learn employable skills such as sewing, baking, and piñata making.

Two large buildings have separate wings for young boys or girls, and teenage boys and girls. Attached to the girl’s building is another wing for teenage mothers and their young children. In the middle is a basketball court, a playground and picnic tables. But around the perimeter of the property is a 12-foot tall wall.

Many murders in El Salvador are attributed to gang violence, as the truce between the

country's two major gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha (las maras) and the Barrio 18 (el diez y ochos) has crumbled over the last few years.

El Salvador's gang activity does not stop at the gates of the home. Elizabeth Flores supervises the seven caretakers who attend to the children. She says far too often girls will come to the facility to recruit other girls by making friends with them, and then convincing them to escape.

"Sometimes the girls just want to go back to their family. They don't want to be here anymore. They want to go see their mothers, and fathers, their aunts and uncles. Other girls, they've done some bad things, and they want to go back to doing that," she said. "When that happens, we get the counselor to talk to them and explain why they don't want to do that. We try to utilize every method possible to keep the girls from leaving. We want to keep the idea in their minds of them staying here because there is no danger for them here, but out there, there is."

"In some cases the social risks, especially with girls, in this country there are gangs, the "maras" and the "18s," they have had a connection with her, and they're instructing them what to do," Lazo said. "The girls aren't criminals, the girls we have here. But there is a risk because they are girls. They're very innocent and they're very pretty, the gang members want them."

Gang violence is not the only type of trauma Salvadorian children endure. [According to a 2009 report from UNICEF](#), 40 million children in Latin America under the age of 15 face abuse and neglect. Domestic abuse among Salvadorians is most often directed at women.

Marina was 15 when she and her twin sister left their father and voluntarily went to a children's home.

"When I was nine years old my mother abandoned me, so when she decided to leave my father became responsible for us. Dad liked to drink alcohol. My dad caused a lot of problems," she

said. “So me and my sister, I’m a twin, we talked about it, and decided to go to the police to make a case that we were suffering because my father really didn’t take care of us.”

Marina is one of the many children whose home life affected her education. Since 2010, [between 30 and 40 percent](#) of the population fall beneath the poverty line, leaving many children to join their families in the work force. In a country where only [3 percent](#) of the public expenditures are put towards education—the U.S. spent 6 percent in 2010—the average Salvadorian child will drop out of school by [fifth grade](#).

“When I got to [the home], I only had a third grade education, and I was 16,” Marina said. “I felt embarrassed, but they helped me. In one year I went up three grade levels, fourth fifth and sixth. This past year, 2015, I went up another three grade levels, seventh eighth ninth.”

Marina attributes her success to the children’s home she lived in and the transition house she moved into after turning 18. Under Salvadorian law, once a child is 18, he or she is a legal adult and can no longer be cared for by a government-operated children’s home. In response, many missionary agencies have facilitated what they call transition homes.

Alexandra is 19, and lived in a children’s home for the majority of her life, first in San Salvador at 11 months old, then in Santa Ana at age 3.

“When my mother was 14 years old, she was a prostitute, and my grandmother got tired of seeing us on the street,” she said. “I have four older brothers, my mother was tired, and my grandmother was tired. So she filed the papers.”

She now lives in a transition house as well.

“For me, it was a great opportunity, they kind of reinvent the kids. They teach us how to live on our own.”

She said she can't imagine where her life would be had she not been put in a children's home.

"The truth is, where my mom lives, there are gangs. I would have been lost; I wouldn't have had a place in the world. I wouldn't have had principles or values."

A law passed in 2010, Ley De Protección Integral De La Niñez Y Adolescencia (LEPINA), guarantees that all children are born with unalienable rights, and when those rights are violated, they can go to the local government in order to demand them. Yet society has been slow to catch on and few children take advantage of the law.

Mario Mena lives in Santa Ana, El Salvador, has practiced law in the realm of children's rights for nearly 20 years, and was helped write the first round of revisions of the LEPINA law.

"The principal benefit of the law is that it demands to have a place in the country. In a country where kids only serve as an ornament for a family photo, it's a big achievement," he said. "It's a matter of visualization, because in human rights we say what you can't see doesn't have rights." While LEPINA has brought the idea of children's rights to the political forefront, the issue at hand is a lack of social integration.

"The problem with LEPINA—I utilize this saying, LEPINA is wet gun-powder," he said. "We can achieve big changes, the country has the capability of doing so, but we don't know how to use it yet. As a country, we don't know how to utilize it."

*(The names of the girls interviewed for this story were changed to protect their identity, in accord with El Salvador's LEPINA law.)*

## CHAPTER 3

### CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN EL SALVADOR

At age five, her father sold their house. At age nine, her mother abandoned their family. By age fifteen, her father was an abusive alcoholic, and Marina and her twin sister went to the police and asked to be put in a children's home. Fifteen days later their mother showed up.

“My mom told us a lot of things that she was going to change,” Marina said. “It wasn't going to be the same, she was going to give us love and everything. That was a lie. She only wanted to use us to serve her.”

After suffering abuse from her mother, Marina and her sister returned to live with their father, where they again faced physical and mental abuse.

“I didn't have anything to eat, I was practically nude, didn't have clothes or a proper house—my dad still doesn't have one,” she said.

Marina and her sister returned to the police and asked to be put in a children's home—again.

But why couldn't they just stay in the home in the first place? Because LEPINA.

“Because LEPINA,” is a phrase heard for multiple reasons in every children's home in El Salvador—public or privately owned.

Passed in 2010, Ley De Protección Integral De La Niñez Y Adolescencia (the Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents - LEPINA) has had both a positive and negative effect on El Salvador's children. The law states that all children are born with unalienable rights, and when those rights are violated, they can go to the local government in order to demand them.

Mario Mena, of Santa Ana, El Salvador, has studied children's rights for nearly 20 years and has followed the developments of the LEPINA law since its inception.

"[It] is the responsibility of the state to exercise the rights, a commitment to the development of the children's autonomy, although limited," he said. "And the possibility that when these rights cannot be exercised we can go through the court to claim those rights."

However, LEPINA also has its flaws when interpreted certain ways by the justice system. The law states that children have a right to biological family, and a right not to be institutionalized. When combined with Articles 9, 12, and 40, the law is often interpreted to mean a child belongs with his or her family, not in a children's home.

Mena said there is a misunderstanding of what family means, and nowhere in the law is the meaning of family defined.

"I've heard of politicians saying that single people who want to have kids, that's not a family. That's stupid," he said. "At this moment, in any country in the world, the notion of family, the typical nuclear family, it's no longer the dominant notion. So someone can have the illusion that they're going to solve all the problems by tying the hands and restricting the person who is applicable."

This right to family becomes a problem when the court system stops its interpretation at just that point, rather than considering the long-term effects of constantly bringing children out of the home and putting them back in.

Rachel Klubnik founded a private children's home in La Libertad, El Salvador, in 2002. She says the new law and the child's right to live with a biological family member make it difficult to give these children a home because the government sees a children's home as a last resort.

"So what that means for children's homes is that kids come in and kids are returned to family

very quickly, ... because we would love to see them come and sort of plant their roots, and it's not that we wouldn't want to see them go back to their biological family when that's possible," she said. "We very much believe that the best place for a child is with their family, when that is a safe place for them. But a lot of times we've seen kids be given back to biological families when it's not a safe place and it's not the best thing for them."

CONNA (El Consejo Nacional de la Niñez y de la Adolescencia) provides studies and builds case files for children within 30 days. The children's home can make a recommendation on what is best for the child, but the judge is under no obligation to adhere to it.

Ricardo Lazo, director of a government-operated children's home in the capital city of San Salvador, said if CONNA determines a child should return to their family and the child objects, that's when CONNA matches them up with a judge.

"In some cases the child does go back to the family because they make peace or come to an agreement. Other times that is not the case," he said. "CONNA has their teams that investigate, each case, and if they determine that they should go back, we have no say and the child has no say. They would have to go back."

Mena said not questioning the judges is part of the problem with the way society interprets the law. There is an appeal process to be followed if people are willing to fight for one.

"It is sensible for people to say, 'here the one who makes decisions is a judge.' But the judge might be wrong, so an appeal is a way to revise that decision to see if the decision was right or wrong," he said. "We don't have that kind of culture. We don't have a culture that questions politicians."

Rachel's husband Justin Klubnik, who works at the private children's home as well, says the

children's home staff don't mind disagreeing with the judge because what they are fighting for is not to end the case quickly, but rather to give young people a childhood free of abuse and poverty and to create a substitute family within the children's home.

“If I was in that position, I would want someone to fight for me. I would want someone to put it all on the line, or to give it everything they have,” he said. “We can see that if we don't fight for them nobody will—because they can't fight for themselves, and the government's not going to fight for them.”

*(An El Salvadorian children's rights judge was contacted for this story but did not want to be interviewed. Her name is being withheld to protect those children whose cases she oversees.)*



## CHAPTER 4

## PRINT EXHIBITS AND CAPTIONS



*Figure 1. Laundry hangs to dry in the street in the gang-controlled urban village of El Tanque, in San Salvador, El Salvador.*





*Figure 2. Trash lines the river bank that flows through the urban village of El Tanque in San Salvador, El Salvador. The unclean drinking water, combined with a lack of running water in most homes results in a majority of the population having water delivered in 5 gallon jugs.*





*Figure 3. A group of teenage girls sit in the corner of a basketball court on January 4, 2016 at a government-operated children's home in San Salvador, El Salvador. Ricardo, the director of the home, said girls make up the majority of their population. "In some cases there are social risks, especially with girls, in this country there are gangs, they have had a connection with her, and they're instructing them what to do," he said. "The girls aren't criminals, the girls we have here. But there is a risk because they are girls. They're very innocent and they're very pretty, the gang members want them."*





*Figure 4. Sixteen year old "Beth" surfs instagram on the family ipad in her room at a private children's home in La Libertad, El Salvador. Beth has lived in the home since 2004 along with her three younger brothers. "When my twins were born, my dad left us, and my mom used to work all the time, so I used to take care of them. I was like four years old." The private home Beth lives in encourages visits from biological family members, and even home-visits if it is safe for the children. "I'm happy here because I can feel comfortable, and there when I go to visit her, I don't like the place, plus the people living there, and I think more about my brothers. They don't like it ... It's dangerous, mostly because of the guys there. They just come in the house and start talking to the person in there. My twins, my brothers, they hate when guys go there because like, I'm the girl, and they're protective in that way."*





*Figure 5. Caregiver Veronica brushes the hair of 14 year old "Lisa" at the front of the private children's home where she lives in La Libertad, El Salvador. Lisa celebrated her quincineara later in the week with all of her brothers and sisters from the home.*





*Figure 6. Darlene, 10, poses for a photo in her home community of El Tanque, a gang controlled urban village in San Salvador. Most residents found in children's homes are young girls in Darlene's age group.*





*Figure 7. Mateo, 5, participates in a craft project with a missionary volunteer from Ohio in the gang-controlled rural village of El Tanque, in San Salvador, El Salvador. The volunteers brought pizza and juice boxes to the members of the village, as well as participated in games and crafts with the children.*





*Figure 8. Women and children sell fruit and bundles of socks on the sidewalk in Santa Ana, El Salvador. With minimum wage at just above \$1, many people take to the streets selling small items in hopes to turn a profit. Children of all ages accompany their guardians in the street markets.*



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As someone who has lost two parents, who grew up in American poverty, I thought perhaps these qualities would in some way help me to connect with the children I interviewed. As it turns out, neither of those qualities was required. These children do not see themselves as victims. They do not consider themselves unlucky. They do not lose faith that they will have a successful life. And they credit that faith to the children's homes, both public and private, where they have found safety and support.

While geographically beautiful, El Salvador has a very broken culture. Having never left the country, never witnessed true poverty, this project was harder than I could have imagined – and I did it alone. Because of this project, I have grown as a journalist, and as a person, far more than I ever knew to be possible.

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