Containing Violence in El Salvador: Community Organization, Transnational Networks and State-Society Relations

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Containing Violence in El Salvador: Community Organization, Transnational Networks and State–Society Relations

Viviana García Pinzón

ABSTRACT

Extant research has analysed the impact of security policies, truces and informal agreements on both the dynamics and traits of organized violence in El Salvador. However, less is understood about variation in the levels of lethal violence across subnational units. This article contributes to filling this gap. Based on a case study of the municipality of Chalatenango, the analysis shows that community organization and translocal dynamics are crucial to explaining violence containment. Local communities have managed to control the levels of lethal violence and deter criminal actors amid a national context characterized by state neglect and chronic violence. Community organization is not territorially bound but extends across transnational networks. Migrants are a source of livelihoods for the local population; they also contribute to providing public goods and participate in local forms of organization. Transnational networks have forged a migration corridor that enables immigration to the United States. In addition, community organization informally contributes to the capacity of the local state to perform its functions, thereby shaping cooperative state–society relations. This analysis sheds new light on the conditions shaping the variation in levels of violence at the subnational level and local governance dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a peace process that marked the end of almost 12 years of civil war (1980–92) and established a formal democracy, violence in El Salvador has by no means come to a halt. State-sponsored and gender-based violence, organized crime, as well as street gangs are the main expressions of the multiple forms of violence which occur in the country (Cantor, 2014; Cruz, 2011; Hume, 2008; Montoya, 2018; Pearce and Perea, 2019; Wolf, 2017). In addition, security policies have emphasized suppression and heavy-handed measures (Aguilar, 2019; Hume, 2007; Wolf, 2017).

Maras (street gangs) are a permanent fixture of Salvadoran society; they constitute political authorities and purveyors of criminal governance[1] in marginalized urban and rural areas. Gangs are regarded as a threat to the Salvadoran state and society (García Pinzón and Rojas Ospina, 2020; Hume, 2007; Wolf, 2017) and they are, therefore, the main target of state security efforts. The fight against gangs has led to the militarization of public security, with a subsequent increase in violence perpetrated by members of state security forces and human rights abuses (Aguilar, 2019; Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, 2019); it has also led to the strengthening of the gangs (Reyna, 2017). Meanwhile, successive governments have failed to improve the living conditions of the population and to transform the structural exclusion and inequality behind the (re)production of violence.

Violence in El Salvador exhibits significant variations across time and space (Bergmann, 2020). Much of the literature on violence in El Salvador addresses the effects of security policies (e.g. Bergmann, 2020; Carranza, 2004; Schuberth, 2016; Wolf, 2017; Yashar, 2019). Other analyses have explored the changing geographies of gangs' presence and territorial control (Segovia et al., 2016). Another strand of scholarship has examined the connection between transnational and domestic conditions in shaping contexts favourable to the expansion of maras and the strengthening of criminal governance (Ambrosius, 2021; Cruz, 2005, 2013; Zinecker, 2014). More recently, analyses have addressed the increasing concentration of organized violence and the role of informal agreements as the main drivers of the dramatic rise and fall, respectively, in homicide rates (Bergmann, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020). The contributions of these works notwithstanding, very little is known about the areas that exhibit relatively lower levels of violence. Previous studies suggest that while state presence does not necessarily translate into lower levels of violence and crime (Cruz and Vorobyeva, 2021), community-based organizations (Pearce, 2016) and informal security providers, such as vigilantes and other groups (Cruz and Vorobyeva, 2021), may explain the containment of violence and resistance to criminal governance. Similarly, a few journalistic chronicles have noted the relevance

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1. Following the definition of Lessing (2021: 856), I understand criminal governance as 'the imposition of rules or restrictions on behavior by a criminal organization'.

Figure 1. El Salvador and Chalatenango (Department and City)
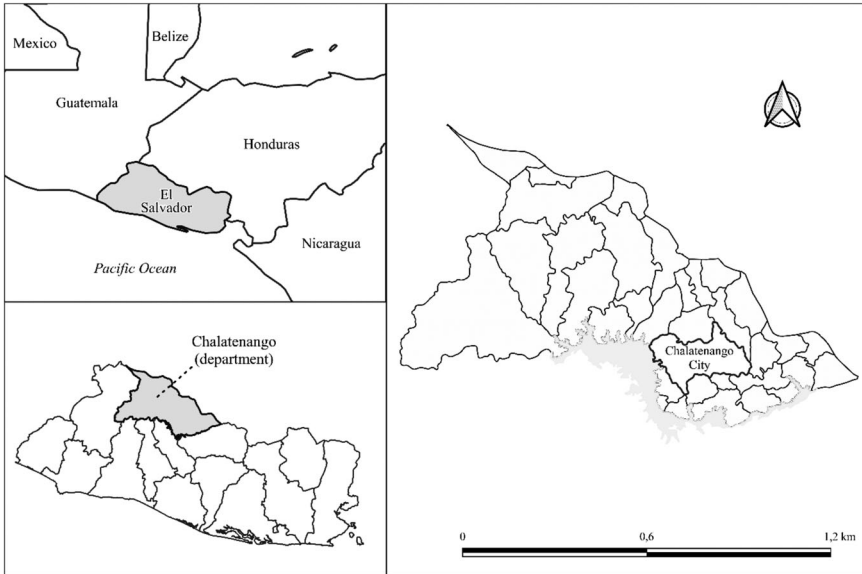
Source: Author's design.

of social cohesion and youth programmes (Valencia, 2015). However, these publications aside, a more systematic analysis is still lacking.

   Based on the study of Chalatenango, a small municipality in the northwest of El Salvador and the capital of the homonymous department (a first-tier subnational unit; see Figure 1 below), this article explores the conditions underpinning relatively lower levels of lethal violence and resistance to criminal governance. By approaching the case study as a 'plausibility probe', an argument is made that (relatively) lower levels of violence in this small city result from the combination of community organization and the dynamics of transnational migration. Chalatenango constitutes a translocal order wherein activities by on-site communities combine with the efforts of transnational migrants to secure the provision of livelihoods, collective goods and informal control. Community organization informally provides resources for the state to fulfil its governance functions, thereby improving state–society relations. Furthermore, transnational networks have forged a migration corridor that enables immigration to the United States. Thus, out-migration has worked as a safety valve that relieves social tensions and reduces grievances. Despite managing to keep criminal actors and violence at bay, the narratives of Chalatenango's residents make apparent the clashes, inequalities and contradictions regarding local politics, citizenship and community making.

Altogether, local order in Chalatenango illustrates the configuration of 'adaptive citizenship' (Montoya, 2018: 226), defined as the practices of Salvadorans 'not necessarily oriented toward the subversion or erosion of structural or entrenched exclusions that reproduce inequality but certainly toward a search for creative ways to manage those exclusions' (ibid.). Adaptive refers here to a form of 'citizenship based on survival' (ibid.: 232). Containing violence in Chalatenango is the corollary of a set of practices oriented towards the adaptation to an adverse context of persistent public and economic insecurity. Aware of the uncaring character of the Salvadoran state, communities have taken a pragmatic approach and developed their own mechanisms to safeguard their livelihoods and to deal with multiple insecurities. Utilizing self-help strategies and societal networks is often regarded as more reliable and effective than the means provided by the state.

The article is organized as follows. The following subsection introduces the research design. The next two sections then lay out an analytical framework on community organization and migrant transnationalism in relation to criminal violence. We then turn to the case of Chalatenango, first providing a brief background to Chalatenango's historical context and sources of violence and insecurity, before disentangling the mechanisms underlying the containment of violence and addressing how community organization shapes state practices and the state's relationship with communities. In addition, this section briefly discusses the politics of local citizenship and community making. The final section discusses the implications of this study for our understanding of violence, local orders and citizenship within the context of chronic violence (Pearce, 2007) in contemporary Latin America. It concludes that the case of the municipality of Chalatenango illustrates the central role played by community organization in shaping patterns and levels of lethal violence and dynamics of criminal governance at the subnational level. The (trans)local traits of the community also draw attention to the fact, that rather than being restricted to a bounded space, communities and local orders are shaped by multi-scalar and transnational actors and networks.

Methodology

This article approaches the case of Chalatenango as a 'plausibility probe' (Levy, 2008: 6–7) in order to identify the conditions accounting for the relatively lower levels of violence witnessed in this municipality. Plausibility probes play a relevant role in theory development because they are used to generate and test hypotheses. Building on illustrative case studies, plausibility probes 'shed light on a broader theoretical argument' (ibid.: 6). This analysis is based on qualitative data collected from direct observation, informal conversations and 23 in-depth interviews during two fieldwork visits in 2017 and 2019. For the interviews, I used a combination of purposive and

Table 1. National Homicide Rate and Rate per Department in El Salvador 2010–17 (per 100,000 Inhabitants)

| Year/ Department	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Average Homicide Rate 2010–17
Ahuachapán	43.9	41.4	28.5	27.3	37.0	56.0	48.7	21.2	38.0
Cabañas	45.3	52.6	39.0	53.0	77.8	87.4	52.0	6.6	51.7
Chalatenango	45.8	33.5	27.8	27.2	47.0	50.1	29.5	5.4	33.3
Cuscatlán	49.5	44.9	36.3	57.6	114.6	179.0	109.1	28.9	77.5
La Libertad	78.5	70.4	36.3	30.7	47.4	86.4	47.3	22.8	52.5
La Paz	56.9	65.4	46.0	55.3	84.1	132.8	59.5	23.4	65.4
La Unión	47.6	64.3	50.3	46.5	48.8	100.0	55.4	25.7	54.8
Morazán	21.1	29.8	26.9	21.0	22.8	60.8	50.2	18.7	31.4
San Miguel	61.9	62.1	40.4	30.6	44.8	89.7	59.2	24.2	51.6
San Salvador	78.5	84.3	43.4	45.1	70.8	122.2	18.7	33.7	62.1
San Vicente	38.3	79.6	49.2	43.6	46.0	108.7	87.3	28.2	60.1
Santa Ana	68.6	79.0	45.7	31.4	40.9	75.6	38.8	19.9	50.0
Sonsonate	85.0	105.2	49.4	36.9	60.9	97.8	58.6	20.9	64.3
Usulután	39.3	48.0	41.3	49.0	93.3	143.3	88.6	32.3	66.9
National	64.7	70.1	41.2	39.4	61.1	103.0	81.0	60.0	65.1

Source: Author's calculations, based on reports by DIGESTYC (2014) and the National Civil Police (2018).

snowball-sampling techniques. Initially, I interviewed community leaders and residents in rural and urban areas of Chalatenango City as well as local authorities, civil servants from different government branches, NGO staff and church leaders. Their insights prompted me to interview members of hometown associations (HTAs) in the US cities of Houston and Los Angeles as part of the research. Primary data was triangulated and complemented with process-generated data (Baur, 2009), such as official and NGO reports, censuses, criminal justice data and secondary literature.

For the case selection, I analysed subnational patterns of violence across departments in El Salvador and drew on time-series disaggregated data on homicide rates (see Table 1). The data showed that Chalatenango has one of the lowest levels of lethal violence nationwide. From 2010 to 2017 the average homicide rate was 33.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in Chalatenango, while the national figure for the same period was 65.1. Compared to the global average of 6.1 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017 (UNODC, 2019), the department of Chalatenango is undoubtedly far from peaceful. However, the situation there is better than elsewhere in El Salvador.

Within Chalatenango Department there is a geographical pattern to homicide rates. Approximately 50 per cent of the homicides are concentrated in three municipalities in the west: El Paraiso, Nueva Concepción and Tejutla. Meanwhile, most municipalities with lower homicide rates are in the eastern part of the department (see Figure 2). Taking this into consideration, I selected the municipality; I chose Chalatenango because it is one of the urban and administrative centres of the department, it is well connected to the

Figure 2. Homicide Rate per Municipality in Chalatenango Department 2010–17 (per 10,000 Inhabitants)
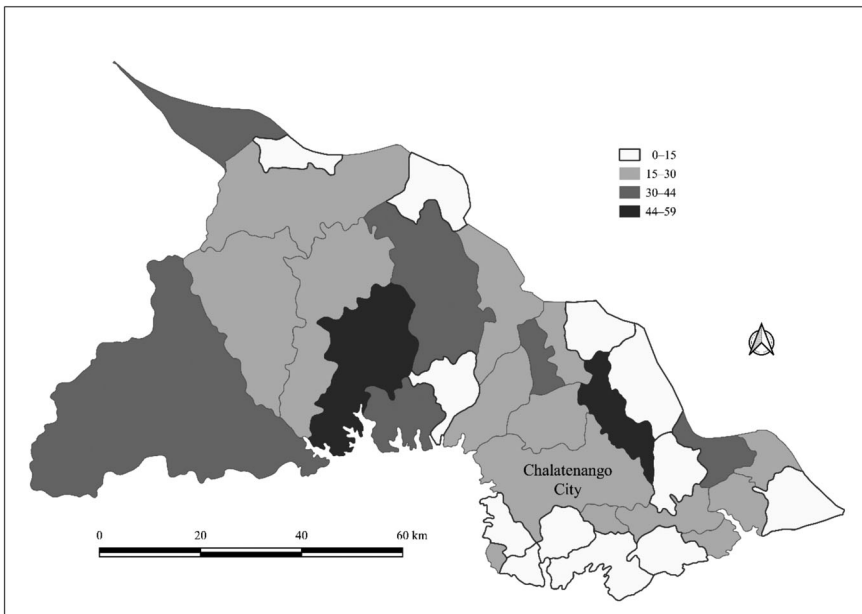
Source: Author's calculations based upon reports by the National Civil Police (2018).

capital San Salvador and it is home to several businesses. Thus, compared to the surrounding predominantly rural municipalities, Chalatenango City offers a context more amenable to the expansion of criminal actors. Chalatenango City is home to an estimated 32,000 inhabitants (DIGESTYC, 2014). According to its socio-economic conditions, the municipality is classified as 'low extreme poverty'. The nationally representative household survey 'Encuesta de hogares de propósitos múltiples' (EHPM) reported that almost 31 per cent of the population are beneficiaries of remittances (DIGESTYC, 2016).

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AND CONTROL OF VIOLENCE

The literature on the dynamics of collective organized violence has drawn attention to the crucial roles of communities and civilians in shaping patterns of violence, victimization and the behaviour of armed actors (Arjona, 2016; Berg and Carranza, 2018; Kaplan, 2017; Ley et al., 2019; Mouly and Hernández Delgado, 2019). Rather than just being the product of the interaction between the state and armed groups, levels of violence are extensively affected by communities. Similarly, the characteristics of

communities, social ties and cohesion have a central place in criminology theories which explain variations in levels of crime (Doucet and Lee, 2015; Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003; Kubrin and Wo, 2016; Lederman et al., 2002; Sampson and Groves, 1989). Whether amid civil war, in contexts of widespread criminal violence, or in urban settings affected by crime, communities are not just passive victims; often they organize and mobilize to protect themselves against violence, to limit the inroads of armed groups and to rein in rebel or criminal governance. Building on the intersection of these strands of scholarship, I posit that community organization can affect the geographic variation of organized violent crimes and can enable citizens to contain violence and criminal governance in national contexts affected by violence and state neglect.

I understand a community to be 'the people who inhabit a given local territory and interact directly, frequently, and in multifaceted ways' (Arjona, 2016: 23).[2] Localness, however, should not be equated with bounded space. Communities can be either 'physically located in a locale or transnationally networked' (Mac Ginty, 2015: 850), so that people may not reside in a place but may be part of the networks comprising a community (Bradshaw, 2008). Community organization refers to the capacity of a community to solve common problems and overcome the limitations posed by an adverse environment; it results from the combination of social capital and collective efficacy (Berg and Carranza, 2018; Drakulich, 2014; Villarreal and Silva, 2006). Social capital is an umbrella term that refers to a set of resources including reciprocity, norms, obligations and trustworthiness embedded in the structure of relations among and between actors that facilitate the achievement of individual or collective goals (Coleman, 1988; Lederman et al., 2002). Social capital enhances the cooperation and trust necessary to solve collective-action problems (Ostrom and Ahn, 2009). It does not exist in isolation but needs to be considered in interaction with other forms of capital, particularly economic capital, and power relations (Arriagada, 2003; Ostrom and Ahn, 2009).

Whereas social capital is a resource that holds potential for collective action,[3] collective efficacy is 'the ability of a group to draw on this resource to recognize common interests and achieve specific tasks related to social

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2. While this definition is straightforward, I acknowledge that community is a contested concept and should not be taken for granted as a unit of analysis. Social change, reconfiguration and disruptions in the midst of globalization and transnational processes have brought into question conventional conceptualizations of community in relation to identity politics and place (Amit and Rapport, 2002; Bradshaw, 2008).

3. Research on crime and violence at the neighbourhood level has found that high social capital, concrete, dense social ties and trust are positively associated with the ability of communities to organize and prevent crime through effective informal control (Lederman et al., 2002; Sabol et al., 2004; Vilalta et al., 2016). However, the relationship between social capital and violence and crime is ambiguous. The structure of social relations can also be exploited to engage in criminal activity (Rubio, 1997). In addition, criminality — particularly organized crime — is entangled with social networks and high capabilities for collective action. Criminal organizations engage in governance arrangements and the production

control' (Drakulich, 2014: 4891). According to Sampson et al. (1997: 918), social control 'refers to the capacity of a group to regulate its members according to desired principles'. Collective efficacy involves the members of the community and neighbours agreeing on the common goal of maintaining the safety of the community or neighbourhood and the shared expectation of collectively acting to achieve this goal (Drakulich, 2014; Sampson, 2008; Sampson et al., 1997). Beyond crime and violence prevention, the notion of collective efficacy highlights the capacity of communities to tackle issues affecting their well-being (Sampson et al., 1997). Through various arrangements established between civic groups, local authorities and businesses, communities can develop informal systems of governance and coping mechanisms in contexts of state neglect or absence, marginalization and pervasive violence.

Conventionally, scholarship on social capital and collective efficacy in relation to violence and crime builds on a bounded notion of territoriality — one mainly focused on the neighbourhood level. In contrast, I recognize the embeddedness of local social networks at multiple scales. Hence, social capital and social bonds encompass actors and resources that may be physically located in a given place or may span multiple networks and scales, from personal immediacy to the transnational realm (Mac Ginty, 2015: 848–50). Local order is hence understood to be composed of a lattice of multiple actors across different scales, transnational migrants among them.

MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

Migration has profound impacts on all aspects of collective life in communities of origin. Transnational networks are arenas wherein economic, social and political capital are exchanged. Migrants engage with different forms of collective action and partake in societal organization and politics in the place of origin (Coutin, 2007). Besides individual remittances, groups of migrants sometimes organize themselves to collect and send money for community projects, provide public goods, offer disaster relief and engage in philanthropic initiatives (Orozco, 2002; Sanabria and Mojica, 2003; UNDP, 2005). Collective remittances constitute only a small share of the total flow of remittances (Flores-Macías, 2012); nonetheless, they have significant effects on recipient communities. They also open up avenues for the engagement and empowerment of transnational migrants in the political and social affairs of their communities of origin, thereby creating an extraterritorial sphere of political participation and governance (Burgess, 2012; Duquette-Rury,

of social control and order (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza, 2014; Arias and Barnes, 2017; Lessing, 2021). It follows that social capital is not enough to explain the differential abilities of certain communities to control violence and crime or not. Dense social networks do not imply the existence of mechanisms of effective social control (Morenoff et al., 2001; Sampson, 2008).

2016). Through different forms of material capital, such as individual and collective remittances, and immaterial capital, such as participation in politics and local instances of community organization, transnational migrants can contribute to fulfilling the needs of, and strengthening, community organizations in their places of origin. However, scholarship has demonstrated that the relationship of migration to cohesion and organization in communities of origin is not straightforward and it is influenced by several factors (Catrinescu et al., 2009; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2010, Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Orozco, 2002; Vila Freyer, 2020).

Regarding violence, the relationship with migration is multifaceted, involving several mechanisms and trajectories. As transnational migration constitutes a defining feature of society in Central America, there has been considerable research into its relationship with violence. A salient strand of the literature addresses the role of immigrants forcibly deported from the US in the diffusion of street gangs in the region and the transnational character of violence (Ambrosius, 2021; Cruz, 2013; Savenije, 2007; Winton, 2012). Existing literature has also examined other facets of the process, such as the roles of post-conflict violence and economic hardship as drivers of transnational migration (Bergmann, 2019; Garni, 2010; Haaß et al., 2016; Jiménez, 2017; Marroquín Parducci, 2014). Deteriorating economic, political, security and social conditions in sending societies have not only perpetuated migration corridors established in the 1970s and 1980s, but they have also fuelled massive migration from Central America to the US in the years since then (Bergmann, 2019; Garni, 2010).

The attention devoted to the analysis of the feedback loop between violence and migration, that is, violence as a driver of migration and, conversely, the effects of migration on the transmission of violence, contrasts with the few references to migration's potential contribution to deterring violence and crime. Earlier research has hinted at the existence of such a connection: for instance, in his ethnography on gangs in Nicaragua, Rodgers (2006) notes that, despite extreme poverty levels and a large youth population, one of the neighbourhoods in a crime-ridden area of Managua does not have a gang. He attributes this to a pattern of circular labour migration between Managua and a community of former inhabitants of the neighbourhood now living in Toronto, Canada, which offers viable work opportunities to the youth population. Hence, migration corridors may operate as an outlet for social tensions and offset the lack of opportunities for social mobility, thereby reducing the incentives to engage in violence and with criminal actors in the migrant-sending communities.

CHALATENANGO: WAR LEGACIES AND LOCAL POLITICS

In the 1970s, a peasant movement emerged in the department of Chalatenango. *Campesino* communities in this region joined the Union of Rural Workers (Unión de Trabajadores del Campo or UTC) (Pearce, 1986).

Although the UTC encountered state repression, it rapidly expanded across peasant communities in several municipalities of Chalatenango, becoming the backbone of a peasant organization in this territory. The UTC joined the Christian Federation of Salvadoran Peasants (Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños or FECCAS) to form the Federation of Rural Workers (Federación de Trabajadores del Campo or FTC) in 1976. The FTC was 'the most combative peasant organization the country had ever known' (ibid.: 159).

The process of peasant mobilization was entwined with the path of rebel groups or 'political-military organizations' (Sprenkels, 2014, 2018). Chalatenango became a guerrilla bulwark and the stage for the unfolding of popular forms of local governance on both the eve of and during the civil war (Pearce, 1986). The Popular Forces for Liberation (Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundó Martí or FPL)[4] was the dominant political-military organization in the department. Created in 1971 by former members of the Communist Party, the FPL started as an organization with a relatively urban profile that later shifted the focus of its political practice to conduct 'mass work' in rural El Salvador. Van der Borgh (2003) argues that the FPL managed to infiltrate the social organizations present in Chalatenango and to build support networks with them — a mutually beneficial relationship. The support of some factions of the Catholic Church for the rebel cause was crucial to secure the backing of a peasant constituency to the insurgency (Sprenkels, 2014). The revolutionary organization had a significant influence in shaping the forms of organization, and several leaders of the peasant movement joined the FPL. The linkages between the UTC and the FPL facilitated the insertion of the guerrilla group in the communities of Chalatenango. During the civil war, guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Salvadoran army fought each other for control over Chalatenango. Armed forces engaged in a counter-insurgency campaign including numerous attacks and sweeps through these zones and, from 1984 onwards, air raids. Military action had a major impact on the local population.

One of the effects of the civil war was the militarization of local governance, meaning 'the supplanting of local forms of governance with new forms that reflect the influence of armed actors' (Wood, 2008: 550). In Chalatenango, the fight for territorial control between the FMLN and the army led to the configuration of 'two Chalatenangos' (van der Borgh, 2003: 175–208). Whereas the guerrillas maintained their authority in the eastern zone of the department, which consequently became one of the main areas of conflict, the southern part of the department remained under the control of the Salvadoran military. The fact that the population in the area did not support the guerrillas does not mean, however, that they sympathized with the

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4. The FPL was the largest of five political-military organizations making up the guerrilla organization Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

army. While the Salvadoran military managed to block the advancement of the FMLN towards this territory it never enjoyed the active backing of the local population (van der Borgh, 2003).

The population of Chalatenango municipality reflects this division into 'two Chalatenangos'. On the one hand, a group of its inhabitants did not engage with the guerrillas and, because of the territorial patterns of the confrontations, did not experience the violence of war in the same way that the rural base of the FMLN did. On the other hand, another share of the population is made up of former FMLN combatants and the rural base of the insurgency. Most of them arrived in the municipality under a national repatriation initiative whereby refugees returned from Honduras and were relocated in rural resettlements (*repoblaciones*). The villages of Guarjila (in 1987), Guancora and Ignacio Ellacuría (in 1989), and Las Minas (in 1991) have their origins in this process.

The divisions born of war still traverse the municipality of Chalatenango today. Political allegiances, networks, the lived experiences of and meanings attributed to the civil war differ across the two populations. Local politics mirrors the accumulated experience of pro-insurgency and counter-insurgency political subcultures and patronage networks. The FMLN and the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) parties have been the main political actors in the city, and the leading intermediaries between the state and the citizenry — at least until the election of Nayib Bukele as President of El Salvador in 2019. Patron–client networks constitute a central feature of the relationship between the parties and their constituencies. In this regard, the provision of selective public utilities and investment in Chalatenango is largely contingent on supporting the political party of the incumbent mayor.

The patronage networks and clientelism that characterize local politics in Chalatenango — as well as much of politics in El Salvador — interact in complex ways with the historical trajectory of grassroots organization (van der Borgh, 2000; Pearce, 1986, 2019; Smith-Nonini, 1997; Sprenkels, 2018). Dynamics of post-war politics, the manifold impacts of neo-liberalism, and migration flows have all undermined the tenets and the revolutionary character at the base of initiatives of pre-war and wartime local popular organization, resistance and collective solidarity (Binford, 2010; Silber, 2011; Sprenkels, 2018). Yet, the data elicited by this research indicate that the idea of social organization as a key element to confront an adverse context of poverty, exclusion and state neglect continues to be central for many of the municipality's residents. Such a notion shapes many of the practices for coping with violence, as this article will examine below.

Violence, Insecurity and Criminal Actors

The accounts of Chalatenango City's inhabitants regarding violence and sources of insecurity highlight two key aspects: first, the efforts of street

gangs to expand and gain territorial control in the city; and, second, the deleterious effects of state policies for the security of the general population. In interviews, many respondents recalled that the presence of street gangs and associated violence became more visible in the early 2000s. Both the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs[5] were present in the city and tried to recruit young men. According to participants' accounts, some of the gang members in the city have been deported from the US, while others have joined the gangs from elsewhere in El Salvador. However, participants also emphasized that, although still present, street gangs have not managed to take root there.

The capacity of the city to deter criminal actors notwithstanding, the decision of the central government to relocate members of street gangs from different prisons to the penitentiary of Chalatenango affected the security dynamics of the city. Inhabitants, local police and the Ombudsman Office all emphasized gang members' arrival at the prison, and particularly the presence of people related to them in the city, as a source of insecurity. More than 19 per cent (22 out of 111) of the city's homicides between 2003 and 2017 took place in the prison itself. The relocation of gang-affiliated inmates meant an influx of individuals related to criminal structures. Robberies and extortion attempts increased, and a drug retail market flourished around the jail. Both the presence of outsiders, particularly in the surroundings of the penitentiary facility, and the security forces' handling of these circumstances, transformed La Sierpe, the neighbourhood where the prison is located, into a 'no-go' zone.

For residents, the problem was not only the presence of gang members. The arrival of those who were visiting inmates was also regarded as a source of insecurity. This demonstrates the extent to which the dominant national discourse portraying the gangs, their relatives and communities under their control as a security threat has percolated through Chalatenango's

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5. The origins of current street gangs in Central America are rooted in the US, more concretely in the Los Angeles-based 18th Street gang, founded by Mexican migrants in the 1960s. During the late 1970s and 1980s, the 18th Street gang grew, due mostly to the inflow of Central American refugees fleeing civil war and poverty, notably Salvadorans and Guatemalans. In the 1980s, a group of Salvadorans created a new gang, the *Mara Salvatrucha*. The 18th Street and *Mara Salvatrucha* gangs soon became rivals (Rodgers and Muggah, 2009; Savenije, 2007). In the face of increasing gang-related violence and amid changes in immigration policy, US authorities passed a series of laws allowing the repatriation of non-US citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison to their countries of origin. Thousands of people were expelled and returned to Central America between 1998 and 2005. It is estimated that El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras received more than 90 per cent of the deportees from the US (Rodgers and Muggah, 2009). There is evidence of the existence of youth gangs in Salvadoran cities since at least the 1980s (Cruz, 2010), but the phenomenon gained visibility after the arrival of Salvadoran deportees with experience of the US street gang culture. Marginalized communities with limited state presence and vulnerable socio-economic conditions provided contexts favourable to the spread of street gangs (Carranza, 2004; Rodgers and Baird, 2015).

population, shaping their worldviews regarding social order, violence and insecurity (García Pinzón and Rojas Ospina, 2020; Huhn et al., 2006; Wolf, 2017). The implementation of so-called extraordinary measures as part of the security policy of the government of Salvador Sánchez Céren (2014–19) included a ban on visits to imprisoned gang members as well as stricter restrictions on communications between inmates and people outside. With the implementation of these measures, the circulation of outsiders in the city diminished. In December 2019, Chalatenango's penitentiary closed following a decision taken by the current government of Nayib Bukele.

The construction of the Northern Longitudinal Highway (CLN) constitutes another instance of how national government plans have brought new sources of insecurity to the city. Covering just over 290 km, the project consisted of the building or rehabilitation of a road crossing the north of the country and connecting to a network of rural roads within El Salvador as well as to neighbouring Guatemala and Honduras. Yet construction of the highway encountered several problems, from the opposition of local communities to severe breaches and delays by the contractors. While most of the CLN was built, the network of rural roads to which it was supposed to connect was never fully realized. Ultimately, the CLN turned out to be an infrastructural white elephant.

Although the CLN failed to fulfil its promise to connect rural economies, the opening of the road in 2012 did facilitate the circulation of illegal goods throughout the country (*La Prensa Gráfica*, 2013). The CLN became a corridor for *transportistas* (transnational trafficking networks) to smuggle drugs, weapons and other goods from Honduras to Guatemala through El Salvador.[6] The CLN passes through several villages within the municipality of Chalatenango. For the city's residents, the road has been of benefit only to the illegal narcotics traders or *narcos*. At the same time, it has undermined the mechanisms of informal control and protection of the communities. As one government official observed: 'The opening of the CLN has been a problem. Before, for example, those of us who lived in Chalatenango could see and recognize the vehicles entering Chalate [as the city is known to locals]. Now with the CLN, we cannot really know how many and what people are coming; we do not know all the cars that pass'.[7]

Although residents complained about the road and drug trafficking, I found no evidence suggesting either the penetration of organized criminal organizations into local communities or the development of forms of criminal governance. The city's territory is certainly part of a corridor for migrants as well as for the smuggling of illegal commodities. However, in contrast to the gangs and drug dealers, the activities of the transportistas are

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6. 'Trafficking groups are hardly any groups at all, but rather networks of suppliers, transporters, and receivers that would be encountered in any illicit supply chain' (UNODC, 2012: 21).

7. Interview, official from the Mayor's Office, Chalatenango City, November 2017.

not tied to the territorial control of communities. Transportistas do not necessarily engage with the governance of communities, and, unlike criminal gangs, they generally do not involve themselves in rent seeking from the local population, for example, via extortion (Blume, 2021).

RESISTING VIOLENCE: COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS AND STATE–SOCIETY RELATIONS

Participants' accounts of the patterns of violence and dynamics of (in)security in Chalatenango demonstrate that the city has not remained unscathed when it comes to the violence and criminality affecting El Salvador as a whole. However, the city has managed to avoid gangs taking root in its communities and the establishment of criminal governance. My argument here is that societal traits explain the relatively lower levels of violence in Chalatenango — specifically, the interaction between the effects of community organization and the dynamics of transnational migration and networks. First, community organization has enabled the local population to implement mechanisms of informal control and protection. This has a transnational dimension to it: migrant organizations provide public goods and utilities, some of which are connected to violence prevention. Some migrant groups also participate directly in communal-based initiatives on security. Second, outmigration works as a safety valve vis-à-vis the lack of job opportunities and accompanying poverty in Chalatenango, thus reducing social tensions. Finally, community organization heavily influences state–society relations; there is collaboration between local communities and the state, particularly with the police and the army.

Community Organization

Taking account of the historical background of Chalatenango, this analysis is informed by data collected in communities created as part of the process of relocation resulting from the civil war, as well as erstwhile residents who remained under the authority of the Salvadoran army, from both the urban centre and rural areas of the municipality. In addition, I elicited information from people either working or living in the centre of the city (at a school, the city market and state entities) as well as members of migrant organizations in the US. Hence, instead of being informed by the experience of a specific neighbourhood or village, the conclusions I draw are predicated on the commonalities found among several communities.

Two aspects are shared across the participants' accounts: first, the description of Chalatenango as a safe municipality and, second, the identification of violence and criminal actors — concretely, street gangs — as a common threat to the safety of the communities. As for the first, a frequent

adjective used by residents to describe the city is *tranquila* ('tranquil').
They frequently remarked on the Chalatenango's low levels of violence and
the absence of territorial control by street gangs. This notion is intertwined
with the concerns expressed regarding street gangs and the possibility of
their diffusion across the city. The pastor of a local church explained:

> The insecurity we have, more than anything else, there is a fear that people who are involved
> in gangs from other municipalities or other departments may immigrate. Whether we want
> it or not, they are spreading across the country, and there is a fear of gangs here. The city is
> safe, but people are still coming, small groups coming from other places, and they come and
> want to organize *pandillas* [gangs] here.[8]

Within this context, social life in Chalatenango's neighbourhoods and
hamlets is shaped by a plethora of unwritten rules. Research revealed that
communities have put in motion several mechanisms of informal social con-
trol with the aim of keeping the gangs out. Such measures are based on
residents' perception of the existence of an imminent threat to their safety
on the one hand, and the consideration that the local state is incapable of
protecting them on the other. With some variations in the type of measures
implemented, informal control is a common feature among the communities
examined, regardless of the historical and political differences within local
Chalatenango society. This involves maintaining control over who lives in
the neighbourhood or the village, monitoring the presence of outsiders or
suspicious situations, and keeping an eye on the conduct of neighbours —
particularly youngsters. As a village resident of Upatoro, in the municipality
of Chalatenango, elaborated:

> Everyone sees what they can do for their community, to protect ourselves here. Not using
> violence but taking care of ourselves. There is a special trait in this hamlet and that is that
> young people are involved in the ADESCO.[9] Many of them are young people and they are
> the ones who are watching out for people who come and enter, strangers. They call me, 'Don
> Rafael, look, there is a car under there, we have never seen it before'. We stop the car and if
> it has tinted windows, we force the driver to open the car and we tell them 'This is not the
> way to enter into the hamlet'. Not because we are going to do something harmful to them,
> but because we want the people to enter with the windows down, we want to see who the
> person is.[10]

In addition to setting rules regarding transit through the territory and
keeping an eye on the movements of outsiders, another control mechanism
concerns the profile of inhabitants in the *colonia* or *cantón*. Participants re-
ported that informal agreements are made between residents such as not
renting houses or even rooms to people without previously researching their

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8. Interview, local church pastor, Chalatenango, November 2017.
9. ADESCO is the basic unit of state-recognized community organization. Each neighbour-
   hood (*colonia*) in urban areas and hamlet (*cantón*) in rural areas in El Salvador has one.
   They comprise up to 25 members, who represent the interests of the community before
   local authorities.
10. Interview, villager, Upatoro, October 2017.

origins and their motives for moving in. Whereas in some communities it is enough to provide general information and possibly some references from people familiar with the renter(s), others follow a stricter process, involving a meeting of the newcomers with the ADESCO. Likewise, neighbours are expected to share information about visitors they receive, including the length of their stay. The main goal of such rules is to avoid gang members or people related to them coming into the community. At the time of the research (2017–19), concerns regarding the in-migration of gang members and their families to Chalatenango were being exacerbated by the impact of security policies implemented in violence-ridden areas of the country. Such fears were not baseless; analyses on territorial patterns of gangs in El Salvador suggest that heavy-handed measures prompted a sort of balloon effect whereby gang members move out of the areas prioritized by security policies to avoid law enforcement. A notable result of this was an increase in the reported presence of gangs in rural areas (Segovia et al., 2016).

Against this background, one politician (a member of the National Congress by that time) who was a resident of Chalatenango City commented on the importance of keeping an eye on people living in the area and supervising the local youth:

> We think that prevention is fundamental, because even if the *mareros* [gang members] move, if you have somehow control, control over the family, over the children, control of the community, I mean over those who live in the community, then that is going to be beneficial. How come that you are not able to identify in your neighbourhood who has arrived and who is not from there? I can easily identify someone in my block and my area who does not come from here. Then one investigates, one asks people if they know about the person, what does he or she do, who does he or she live with, where do they come from. But there must be a social concern for control.[11]

Central to informal control efforts is the monitoring of young people's behaviour. The idea that they need protection while at the same time they represent a potential problem for local society is widespread in the narratives shared. The responsibility for controlling youngsters' activities falls primarily on their parents' and relatives' shoulders and, second, on those of the community. As a village resident of Guarjila elaborated:

> Here in the community, there have been some gang members who come to try to organize some youth males [*bichos*] to work for them, but they never succeed because the ADESCO constantly holds assemblies to tell parents that they have to keep their children under surveillance and that they should not allow them to join gangs. There have been some cases when the family did not pay attention, and then the ADESCO talked to them warning that if they did not do something, then the community would intervene.[12]

In addition to stressing the importance of community organization in the present, historical accounts of some residents highlighted the contribution of community organization to disrupting the activities of gangs that had taken

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11. Interview, politician, Chalatenango City, November 2017.
12. Interview, villager, Guarjila, October 2017.

root and become problematic in a few neighbourhoods. I encountered similar remarks when talking with teachers at a local school. According to their accounts, more than 10 years ago some students had engaged with street gangs and were trying to recruit their peers. As the problem became more salient, the schools decided to implement certain measures including the involvement of students' relatives, the creation of a set of extracurricular activities, and the expulsion of those students who allegedly had close links to the gangs. The teachers proudly told me about how they addressed this situation and how, ever since, they have managed to keep gangs at bay.[13]

While central to preventing gangs from becoming entrenched in local society, the community has also relied on its collective efficacy to address other security problems. Cattle rustling is an issue of great concern in Chalatenango. Groups of men steal livestock from the pastures during the night and then sell the meat in the markets of other cities, mostly in San Salvador. Residents described how neighbours have organized themselves to patrol the fields and to stop the thefts. One participant noted: 'Here in the hamlet, people have organized and created groups to patrol, but only at times, when they see that it is getting bad. They do this at night, and the problem subsides'.[14]

These accounts highlight that living in communities where 'everyone knows each other' facilitates collective endeavours that help improve local security. Whereas out-migration is a notable phenomenon in Chalatenango, the city does not receive significant inflows of people. This pattern of human mobility contributes to maintaining residential stability, thereby fostering the endurance of social ties and interpersonal connections. By the same token, participants reported the development of communal initiatives, such as cultural and sports activities, which contribute to reinforcing social bonds and shared goals.

Community organization has a transnational dimension to it. Social networks between local residents and migrants living in the US constitute a source of social capital. Salvadoran migrants are a crucial source of economic livelihood for a significant share of households back home. Furthermore, they act as purveyors of public goods for collective consumption. Although there is significant variation in the levels of organization of migrant groups, and in terms of their engagement with Chalatenango's communities, a common trait among them is the provision of resources for cultural and sports activities. In Guarjila, for example, participants commented that migrants sponsor the celebration of the community anniversary and other major occasions such as Mother's Day. Meanwhile, residents of Reubicaciones reported on the existence of an HTA that, besides supporting cultural activities, also contributes to the building and upgrading of public infrastructure. The resources stemming from HTAs are

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13. Interviews, teachers, local school in Chalatenango City, October 2017.
14. Interview, resident, Chalatenango, October 2017.

usually channelled through the ADESCO. In some cases, the church (either Catholic or Evangelical/Pentecostal) plays a role in receiving funds and helping to implement projects.

Not only can such initiatives contribute indirectly to violence prevention, by fostering social ties among the communities' inhabitants, they can also result in migrants becoming involved in more directly related endeavours. This is the case of the HTA in Reubicaciones, mentioned above, which is part of the local security committee. According to one HTA member living in the US:

> We decided to be part of the committee because we want to contribute to the security of the *colonia*. Gangs are an increasing problem in El Salvador and so far, Chalatenango has remained relatively clean, but it is necessary to act and prevent that these groups spread. That's the reason why we think being part of this committee is very important.[15]

In addition, a group of migrants created and provided the funds for a lunch programme and extracurricular activities at a local school. According to its teachers, such programmes have been of paramount importance in reducing the vulnerability of students to recruitment by street gangs as the former now spend most of the day at school.

Migration and Transnational Ties

Socio-economic conditions are crucial to the emergence of gangs, and more widely to violence and conflict (Buhaug et al., 2014; Cederman et al., 2013; Fox and Hoelscher, 2012; Rodgers, 2010). In accordance with the analytical framework established earlier in this article, I argue that lower levels of violence and the limited reach of street gangs in Chalatenango are partially due to the effects of outward migration. More concretely, emigration serves as a safety valve to offset social grievances and local tensions by offering a socio-economic alternative for the youth population in a local context defined by a scarcity of education and employment opportunities.

Chalatenango has strived to reinvigorate its economy and insert itself in international and national circuits of capital through the implementation of programmes predicated on competitiveness and entrepreneurship (CECADE, 2014). However, such initiatives constitute a sort of 'band-aid' solution with negligible effects on the structural set-ups and living conditions of the population. The main mechanism whereby the city has connected to transnational flows of goods and people has been the provision of cheap migrant labour. Transnational ties with people originally from the area and now living in the US help chart a migrant corridor enabling further outflows, notably of young people. Existing networks involving bonds

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15. Interview, HTA member residing in Houston, TX, April 2019.

of family and friendship make moving to the US a feasible alternative. One participant explained:

> All people in the town have friends or relatives in the US. So, it is relatively easy for people to migrate. At least, you already have a place to go to and they can help you find a job. Also, there are people that went north many years ago, leaving their children with the grandparents or the aunts and now, with the *cipotes* [young men/women] having grown up, their parents want them to live there.[16]

Migration to the US is seen as a normal path to take in the community. The local population acknowledges that it is a viable alternative for many people due to the poor economic outlook at home. Even for individuals who manage to attain a higher education, the lack of employment pushes them to migrate to the US. As another participant noted: 'Some youngsters have managed to obtain their studies with scholarships, but they do not have jobs. Here even the young people who manage to graduate from the university, they emigrate to the US just like anyone else. There are no jobs, there are no options'.[17]

In this regard, out-migration acts as a safety valve that releases the pressures of excess labour, especially for individuals who otherwise would potentially be recruited by gangs or who, in the face of poor economic conditions, might become involved in illegal practices to survive or to achieve social mobility. A local teacher explained: 'The maras are not an issue here. So far, we have managed to control them and regarding the cipotes … well, they are not thinking about that. You know, here the cipotes do not think about joining the maras because what they are thinking about is how to migrate to the States'.[18] Migration provides an alternative to joining gangs, thereby hampering the prospects of the latter spreading and entrenching in local communities.

State–Society Relations and Community Organization

In Chalatenango the state neither holds a monopoly on violence nor can it guarantee the safety of local communities. However, addressing the perceptions of local citizens about the state, namely the police, and its relation to society, is revealing about state–society relations. In the accounts of local residents, grievances related to state neglect intertwine with those that regard the state as well-meaning but incapable. Unlike other local contexts where the state is regarded as a co-producer of violence (Gledhill, 2015), local residents described the relationship between the police and the communities as cooperative in nature. Such a perception was also shared

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16. Interview, pastor of a local church, Chalatenango City, October 2017.
17. Interview, female resident of Guarjila, November 2017.
18. Interview, teacher at a local school, Chalatenango City, October 2017.

by local authorities and officials of other state agencies. Yet, residents also highlighted the lack of state capacity to protect them. In fact, this was frequently mentioned as the reason why communities have been forced to develop their own mechanisms of protection. One villager from Guarjila explained:

> We don't expect help from the police, we trust that God and we ourselves will take care of us. Because if they come to rob us, the police will not be there to protect us, and they will only come to see what happened the next day. The relationship between the ADESCO and the police is very good because they try to do the best they can, but they cannot do much because they do not have the means to travel quickly, to get where they are needed. The police arrive, but very late. They do try to do the best they can, but they cannot do it completely because they lack the resources.[19]

In their analysis of criminal organized violence in Honduras, Berg and Carranza (2018) note that community organization mediates the effects of criminal–state collusion by improving communities' relations to the state. Along similar lines and revealing of the character of the local order in Chalatenango, community organization also comes into play here. Several residents reported that their communities have organized the provision of food for the policemen or soldiers deployed in their villages or neighbourhoods or the funds to improve police facilities. For example, another Guarjila inhabitant[20] told me about the good relationship between the police and the community. He used as an example the fact that people in his community collect money or foodstuff for the police and soldiers stationed there. In his testimony, he also lamented that the security forces lack the resources to fulfil their work, noting that they must travel on foot as they do not have access to vehicles. Therefore, they cannot reach the places where they are needed on time.

The relevance of community organization and the contribution of city residents to the control of violence and to enabling the state to perform its functions were also highlighted in the account of a local government's representative:

> There are communities that are very well organized, where, because of their own organization, they monitor and notice when a person arrives. I mean a person who is not from the community or several people who are not from the community, they are identified and reported to the authorities. In places where there is no coverage of public security, the communities coordinate with us as a municipal government and make arrangements for public security officers to go to those places, even if they do not have a permanent post there, but they arrive there and the communities themselves provide them with a place to stay and sometimes even with food.[21]

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19. Interview, female villager, Guarjila, October 2017.
20. Interview, male villager, Guarjila, October 2017.
21. Interview, local government representative, Chalatenango, November 2017.

By the same token, an officer of the local police command[22] mentioned that some communities contribute money for fuel so the police can reach them. He added that part of these funds comes from migrant organizations. A local resident[23] also told me about the role of migrants in the improvement of the community policy box located in the neighbourhood. Relations between the community and the police, and particularly the role of the communities in offering the means for the provision of state security, represents yet another facet of the local order in Chalatenango.

Entangled in, and contrasting with, the community's perception of the state as incapable of providing safety to its citizens — leading local communities to develop their own mechanisms — is citizens' longing for the state, that is, the 'whirlwind of sometimes disturbing hopes and affects for what is longed for from the state' (Bocarejo, 2015). In the face of the experiences and perceptions of insecurity, and regardless of the state's proven incompetence, residents of Chalatenango city have not renounced the state, but instead claim and aspire to state protection. Their demand for state security provision in the form of the strengthening of security forces' presence and their actions oriented toward the provision of the means for the state to perform its functions are expressions of their longing for the state.

Local Citizenship, Order-making and its Tensions

The analysis of Chalatenango adds further evidence to the literature on the relevance of community organization as a crucial component in explaining variations in levels of lethal violence. However, a critical perspective leads to the recognition that dynamics of community organization and informal security provision are traversed by clashes around local citizenship and the (re)production of boundaries of what is considered part of the community and what are the threats that it faces. In addition, grassroots security practices can be as authoritarian and exclusionary as those of a violent state and criminal actors.[24]

Local citizenship in Chalatenango City is firmly based on a citizenship agenda that regards gang members and people related to them as a threat and unworthy of being considered citizens. Meanwhile, Salvadoran migrants in the US occupy an ambiguous position. In interviews, residents of Chalatenango acknowledged the importance of the migrants and expressed how grateful they were for the efforts of their *hermanos* (brothers), and the

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22. Interview, police officer, National Civil Police PNC, Chalatenango City, November 2017.
23. Interview, resident and local market vendor, Chalatenango City, October 2017.
24. For instance, scholarship on vigilantism in Latin America has shed light on the linkages of this phenomenon with accumulated experiences of state violence, state formation process, exclusion and socialization of citizens into militarized and authoritarian logics of governance (Bateson, 2017; Goldstein, 2012; Gordon, 2020; Kloppe-Santamaría, 2020; Snodgrass Godoy, 2006).

sadness and frustration caused by the fact that they had to migrate and could not remain in the country. This perspective contrasts with the idea, also expressed in the interviews, that there is no place for the migrants back in Chalatenango and that their return would constitute a challenge to the stability of the local order. Paradoxically, in the politics of local citizenship, migrants in the US and the youth at home share the conflicting condition of being considered part of the political community while also positing a potential problem for the local order. In this regard, the youth population straddles an ambiguous position, seen as an object of protection (against being recruited by the gangs), on the one hand, and a potential security threat, on the other.

CONCLUSIONS

This article conducted a plausibility probe case study to explore how local society in Chalatenango City has managed to contain violence and criminal governance. In doing so, it also developed a nuanced analysis on the complex and often contradictory dynamics of community organization, state–society relations and order making. The findings suggest that community organization is a decisive factor in explaining why this region exhibits relatively low levels of both lethal violence and control by gangs. The analysis sheds light on a little-explored facet of community organization; that is, the role of actors and networks at different scales. Community organization in Chalatenango has a transnational dimension, based on the active role that migrants and HTAs play in the local order. Additionally, in the context of a pronounced lack of employment and education opportunities, transnational networks make the option of migrating to the US feasible for the municipality's youth, thereby releasing social tensions and diminishing the number of individuals willing to join gangs.

    The case of Chalatenango demonstrates that local communities are not merely passive entities, but rather are groups of people who may develop tactics to cope with, adapt to, and resist violence and who face insecurity and state neglect. In this regard, Chalatenango is an example of 'adaptive citizenship' (Montoya, 2018: 226). Yet, despite the inefficient nature of the state and the development of individualized strategies to survive amid a context of insecurity, 'Salvadorans have not renounced the state' (ibid.). Communities have developed informal ways of cooperating with the state, contributing the resources that allow the state to fulfil its functions. This finding highlights the need to address state–society relations from a perspective that grasps their complex and often contradictory and ambivalent features.

    The findings of this research add to the literature that explores subnational variation in organized criminal violence. The analysis has shown that besides the capabilities of in-situ communities, translocal networks contribute to collective-action capabilities. This finding resonates with previous analyses of such networks of cooperation and resistance to criminal governance

in the case of Mexico (Ley et al., 2019). Further research should explore the drivers of violence containment in other contexts with low levels of lethal violence in El Salvador, particularly the question of whether community organization also plays a role and the traits thereof. Future analysis could also engage in the study of the politics of community making in those cases where community organization is a decisive factor. While this article has touched upon this, research that delves further into this topic is necessary.

Finally, the article has helped expand our knowledge on the connection between transnational migration and criminal violence. For instance, one salient strand in the literature has addressed the role of deported immigrants and transnational dynamics in both the emergence and spread of street gangs in Central America (Ambrosius, 2021; Cruz, 2013; Winton, 2012). Likewise, recent research has looked into the relationship between violent democracies and transnational migration, drawing on the case of Mexico (López García, 2019; Pérez-Armendáriz, 2021; Pérez-Armendáriz and Duquette-Rury, 2021). By virtue of these works, we have learned how transnational migration is connected to the escalation of violence and the strengthening of non-state armed actors. In contrast, this study has explained how transnational migration can also contribute to ameliorating violence. Theoretically, this finding suggests that the effects of transnational migration on subnational patterns of violence are mediated by contextual aspects. Future research from a comparative perspective could shed further light on the conditions shaping this relationship, and the different outcomes in El Salvador and in other violence-affected settings.

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