

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Imprisonment as State Repression: Recent Carceral Approaches to Gang Violence in Central America

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In some Central American states, gang violence dominates everyday life and causes high homicide rates that sometimes rival those of states actively at war. However, this pattern does not occur in all countries in that region; while gang violence has historically devastated El Salvador and Honduras, gang violence failed to institutionalize itself in a similar way in Nicaragua. Yet, all three states have, in recent years, elected to use carceral policies against their populations for varying reasons. Given the difference in political perspectives between Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele and Honduran President Xiomara Castro and the similarities of the two states to Nicaragua, I sought to investigate the following conundrum: why have both Bukele and Castro chosen to use states of exception and emergency as responses to gang violence whereas Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has not used these strategies to address gang violence? Both El Salvador and Honduras have historically endured gang-related violence since the 1990s and have infrastructurally weak states, leading to both selecting short-sighted policies to respond to gang violence that fail to acknowledge societal inequalities and a lack of state-provided public goods as the root causes of gang violence. Despite its regional similarities to El Salvador and Honduras, Nicaragua has avoided issues with gang violence due to its history of a left-wing government and the legacy that its style of policing left behind. However, despite the lack of gang violence, state repression remains present in Nicaragua, albeit in a different way from El Salvador and Honduras, because of Nicaragua's marginally stronger state infrastructure. Through the lens of state strength and mass incarceration literature, this thesis examines varying similarities and differences between the three states using John Stuart Mill's methods of agreement and difference to determine the origins of these policies and contrasts.

Imprisonment as State Repression: Recent Carceral Approaches to Gang Violence in Central
America

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College of Literature, Science, & the Arts
at the University of Michigan in partial fulfillment
for the requirements for the degree
of Bachelor of Arts
International Studies with Honors
2024

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Dedication

To the wrongfully incarcerated in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the rest of the world

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my advisors, Professor Robert Jansen and Dr. Anthony Marcum, for their constant support, advice, and constructive criticism. I had many doubts going into this project and often felt I was not “cut out” for producing a large academic work; had it not been for their instrumental roles in the researching and writing processes of this thesis, I would not have felt confident in myself enough to complete this project. I am grateful for the work they do and the meaningful conversations I had with them about how to improve this thesis.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the other members of the International Studies 2024 Honors Cohort for helping me revise this thesis and providing moral support. Academic work tends to be more enjoyable when others are engaged in similar projects along your side. Congratulations to all of you for your amazing theses and the exciting futures you have ahead.

I would also like to thank the members of the Michigan Running Club for listening to me talk about this thesis at practices, meets, and social events. I will forever be indebted to that community for letting me serve as Co-President of an organization that centers my values, cares about me and all its other members, and introduced me to some of my greatest lifelong friends. Here, I would further like to thank the rest of my non-MRun friends who also listened to all my hopes, fears, doubts, and tangents about this thesis. If it had not been for planning fun events via Google Calendar, this thesis may have controlled every aspect of my life. You all know who you are!

I am so fortunate and grateful to have been raised in a household where my parents supported my academic ambitions, encouraged me to always produce my best work, and generously assisted me in financing my undergraduate career. Additionally, I want to acknowledge my sister for allowing me to ramble to her about this thesis and the stresses of

being a college student. Thank you for always reminding me how uncool I am. Last, but certainly not least, I am grateful to Gavin for his constant emotional support. If there is one person I can count on to keep me grounded when I feel like I am spiraling, it is you.

To anyone else who has, unknowingly or not, supported me in any way throughout my undergraduate career, I am grateful for you. And to anyone reading this – thank you for taking the time to read my thesis.

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Discussion on Translations

I am biliterate in English and Spanish, so I translated articles written in Spanish on my own. I can also speak and understand spoken Spanish, but I did not often refer to audio or video when researching this thesis. Thus, I completed all Spanish-to-English translation in this thesis.

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

In some Central American¹ states, gang violence dominates everyday life. Organized gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (hereafter MS-13, with the word *maras* frequently used to refer to gangs and gang members in Central America) and Barrio 18 (in English, 18th Street) have caused high homicide rates that sometimes rival those of states actively at war.² However, this pattern does not occur in all states in that region. This pattern of high levels of institutionalized gang violence prevails in the Northern Triangle, a subset of countries in Central America that refers to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These three states have historically been home to unstable governance and conflict.³ Meanwhile, other states in Central America, such as Costa Rica and Nicaragua, have lower levels of homicide and gang violence. Such a trend is understandable in the relatively politically stable Costa Rica, but the low levels of gang violence and homicide in Nicaragua remain confounding due to political instability in the last quarter of the twentieth century, state repression in the twenty-first century, and extreme poverty that supersedes poverty levels in all other Central American states.⁴

Further complicating this narrative is the current state of policy in Central American countries. El Salvador became the first country to crack down on gang violence in recent years when, in March 2022, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele implemented a state of exception that

¹ When referring to Central America in this thesis, I do not include Mexico because that state is not normally included in that region and has crime-related problems that differ significantly from its southern isthmus neighbors.

² Thomas C. Bruneau, “‘Pandillas’ and Security in Central America,” *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. 2 (2014): 156.

³ José Miguel Cruz, “Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, no. 4 (2011): 1.

⁴ Cruz, “Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America,” 2.

limited guaranteed judicial rights to stem gang violence more effectively.⁵ This policy also included the construction of a prison specifically for suspected gang members with a capacity of 40,000, called the Terrorism Confinement Center.⁶ These policies have successfully lowered the rates of gang violence and homicide and given Bukele outstanding popularity, yet this has only occurred at the price of human rights violations in the state.⁷ Simultaneously, Honduran President Xiomara Castro, despite indicating support for less militarized responses to crime during her candidacy, has also implemented a state of emergency that functions similarly to Bukele's in El Salvador. President Castro announced plans for building a large prison on an island off the coast of Honduras, although it remains unclear when or if construction on that prison will begin.⁸ The similarity of these two leaders' policies towards gangs becomes more interesting when one considers the notable differences between the two leaders and the two countries, which I will detail below. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega has repressed dissent to his presidency, imprisoning those in opposition to his regime.⁹ Gang violence still has not manifested in Nicaragua.¹⁰ Because of this failure of organized gang violence to appear in the country, Nicaragua represents a negative case that would reasonably be expected to have similar gang issues to its neighbors to the north.

⁵ Natalie Kitroeff, "In El Salvador, the President Cracks Down on Civil Liberties, and Is Beloved for It," *The New York Times*, Apr. 28, 2022.

⁶ Sarah Kinoshian, "El Salvador Opens 40,000-Person Prison as Arrests Soar in Gang Crackdown," *Reuters*, Feb. 1, 2023.

⁷ Natalie Kitroeff, "El Salvador Decimated Its Ruthless Gangs. But At What Cost?," *The New York Times*, Apr. 9, 2023.

⁸ Beatriz Guillén, "Honduras: the Country Where the Bukele Model Failed," *El País* (Madrid), Oct. 4, 2023.

⁹ Gabriela Selsler, "UN Says Nicaragua's Human Rights Violations and Persecution of Dissidents Are on the Rise," *The Associated Press*, Sept. 12, 2023.

¹⁰ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 2. The only exception to this phenomenon has been youth street gangs, which only briefly retain members and have a minimal effect on violence levels in the state. See Dennis Rodgers, "Bróderes in Arms: Gangs and the Socialization of Violence in Nicaragua," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 5 (2017), for more information on the operations of these gangs, which I will detail in Chapter Four.

Research Question

Given the difference in political perspectives between El Salvador's Nayib Bukele and Honduras' Xiomara Castro and the similarities of the two states to Nicaragua, I sought to investigate the following conundrum: why have both Bukele and Castro chosen to use states of exception and emergency as responses to gang violence whereas Daniel Ortega has not used these strategies to address gang violence?

Argument

Both El Salvador and Honduras have historically endured gang-related violence since the 1990s and have infrastructurally weak states, leading to both selecting short-sighted policies to respond to gang violence that fail to acknowledge societal inequalities and a lack of state-provided public goods as the root causes of gang violence. Those causes can only be resolved through a deep and long-term restructuring of policy. Despite its regional similarities to El Salvador and Honduras, Nicaragua has avoided issues with gang violence due to its history of a left-wing government from 1979 to 1990 and the legacy that its style of policing left behind. However, despite the lack of gang violence, state repression remains present in Nicaragua, albeit in a different way from El Salvador and Honduras, because of Nicaragua's marginally stronger state infrastructure.

Mass incarceration is an alarming and problematic tactic that, I argue, should not be used by any state. I seek to offer alternative strategies that involve deeper reforms to systems that, in their current state, promote crime rather than prevent it. These three states serve as cautionary tales for the overreach of state repression and how that phenomenon does great harm to rights and democracy. Avoiding challenges to mass incarceration in all its forms has dangerous

consequences for any movement that seeks to reduce prison systems, implement restorative justice, and address structural inequalities that push people towards crime and dissent.

The Emergence of Gangs and *Mano Dura* in El Salvador and Honduras

The emergence of gang violence in Central America has roots in the Salvadoran Civil War between the left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Salvadoran government. The war lasted from 1979 to 1992, devastating El Salvador and causing mass migration out of the country.¹¹ Chávez (2015) details the end of the civil war and argues that the FMLN adapted their terms for ending the civil war and stopped calling for socioeconomic reform by the end of the war.¹² Failing to reform the state would prevent the state from strengthening itself, which in turn opened the way for gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18 to fill the power vacuum in the government.

Many of those who left El Salvador during the civil war arrived in the United States and particularly in Los Angeles, and the poverty in which many immigrants found themselves played a role in leading some to form and join gangs.¹³ It was in Los Angeles that MS-13 and Barrio 18 emerged, two of the largest and most influential gangs in Central America. These two gangs posed significant problems for maintaining law and order in the United States, so the United States government resolved to deport gang members back to El Salvador.¹⁴ The civil war left a weak Salvadoran state in its wake, leading to struggles for that state to exercise power. The weak state provided an ideal opportunity for deported gang members to fill the vacuum of power,

¹¹ Joaquín M. Chávez, “How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?” *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 5 (2015): 1784.

John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces and Political Change*, 7th ed. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 157.

¹² Chávez, “How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?,” 1788.

¹³ Bruneau, “‘Pandillas’ and Security in Central America,” 155-156.

¹⁴ Bruneau, “‘Pandillas’ and Security in Central America,” 157-158.

leading them to obtain influence and provide a semblance of fear-based order. Salvadoran gangs spilled over into neighboring weak states that lacked the infrastructure to address threats to the gangs' control of the state apparatus, the most notable for this thesis being Honduras.¹⁵

Gangs rapidly became a large problem in Central America due to their violent methods of obtaining control; as the influence of gangs grew, crime rates – particularly those of extortion and homicide – increased. Controlling these gangs and reasserting the state became an imperative of the Salvadoran and Honduran governments. The first instance of attempts to control began under Honduran president Ricardo Maduro, who in 2002 implemented a “*cero tolerancia*” (zero tolerance) strategy to gangs that strongly resembled a type of “war on crime,” which included harsh penalties for gang involvement.¹⁶ Maduro’s approach served as a precursor to the *mano dura* (in English, “iron fist”) strategy of harsh penalties for gang involvement.¹⁷ Salvadoran president Francisco Flores first coined the term in 2003 when he implemented *Plan Mano Dura* to combat gangs, which included an “Anti-Gang Bill” that made gang membership a criminal offense and permitted the arrest of minors suspected to have gang involvement. His successor, Tony Saca, continued the policy the following year under the name “*SUPER Mano Dura*.”¹⁸

Mano dura policies continued to dominate politics in the two states with no significant rhetoric change until the 2005 election of the left-leaning Manuel Zelaya to the presidency. Crime had dominated this election, making Zelaya’s victory particularly significant due to his language on crime. Zelaya claimed to favor more transparent policies but still implemented his

¹⁵ Ana Arana, “How the Street Gangs Took Central America,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 3 (2005): 101.

¹⁶ Arana, “How the Street Gangs Took Central America,” 102.

¹⁷ To be detailed in Chapter Two.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, “The Evolution of Security Policies,” in *El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence* (2017), 15.

own brand of *mano dura* policies, which proved ineffective at stemming gang violence.¹⁹ Such policy remained in place until June 28, 2009, the date on which the Honduran Army arrested and deported Zelaya in a coup, replacing him with the more hardline Roberto Micheletti. In the years that followed, Honduras would be plagued by corruption, human rights abuses, and a failure of the state to address gang violence.²⁰

Also in 2009, El Salvador elected Mauricio Funes to the presidency, making him the first FMLN member to serve in that position. Funes promised a tough-on-crime approach, yet in 2012, reports emerged that he helped negotiate a truce between MS-13 and Barrio 18; this truce proved ill-fated, and not long after, gang violence erupted in El Salvador once again.²¹ This violence continued until the election of Nayib Bukele. After his election, he announced the Territorial Control Plan (PCT), which resumed the harshness of *mano dura* through the mobilization of military patrols to aid police in enforcing security, large-scale detentions, and strict control over the influx of physical capital and information in and out of prisons.²² Adding to the punitive PCT, Bukele's announcement of the Terrorism Confinement Center promised zero tolerance for gangs and gang violence.²³

Current Politics in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua

El Salvador experienced little significant political change after the Salvadoran Civil War until 2019. Since that year, Nayib Bukele has been president of El Salvador. Bukele was a political outsider, being of Palestinian descent and coming from the business sector. However, he

¹⁹ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 250-251.

²⁰ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 252.

²¹ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 169-170.

International Crisis Group, "Back to the Iron Fist? Bukele's Security Policies," in *Miracle or Mirage?: Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador* (2020), 8.

²² International Crisis Group, "Back to the Iron Fist?" 10.

²³ Kinoshian, "El Salvador Opens 40,000-Person Prison as Arrests Soar in Gang Crackdown."

made a name for himself as the mayor of San Salvador, El Salvador's capital, from 2015 to 2018. A former member of the FMLN, Bukele was removed from the party in 2017 for causing divisions, having cult-of-personality-like tendencies, verbally attacking other party members, and disparaging the rights of women. Bukele's election to the presidency under his own new "big tent" party, Nuevas Ideas, allowed him to upset the two-party system in El Salvador with great success:²⁴ his approval ratings regularly hover around ninety percent. These high approval ratings are largely due to his response to gang violence, which has led to a precipitous decline in homicide rates in El Salvador.²⁵ Bukele was reelected to the presidency in 2024 with approximately eighty-three percent of the vote.²⁶ This election was contentious due to the unconstitutionality of Bukele running for a second consecutive term.²⁷

Like El Salvador, Honduras also experienced a rupture of its two-party system, occurring in 2021, when Xiomara Castro was elected to the presidency. Castro, Honduras' first woman president, ran under the LIBRE Party, a leftist party that splintered from Honduras' left-leaning Liberal Party after the 2009 coup of then-president Manuel Zelaya. Castro is Zelaya's husband, making her less of a newcomer to politics than Bukele.²⁸ Nevertheless, the election of a left-wing party in a historically conservative country allows new perspectives into government regarding how to address social problems facing Honduras.

Unlike its neighbors to the north, Nicaragua has been under the presidential rule of Daniel Ortega, party leader of the nominally leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN),

²⁴ Gabriel Labrador, "How Bukele Crafted a Best-Selling Political Brand," *ElFaro.net*, May 3, 2022.

²⁵ Kitroeff, "El Salvador Decimated Its Ruthless Gangs. But At What Cost?" Approval ratings at such a high level should not be accepted uncritically, although it seems that support for Bukele is certainly high among Salvadorans.

²⁶ Nelson Renteria and Sarah Kinosian, "El Salvador's Bukele Re-elected as President in Landslide Win," *Reuters*, Feb. 5, 2024.

²⁷ Reuters, "El Salvador Kicks off Election Campaigns as Incumbent's Bid Faces Criticism over Constitutionality," *Reuters*, Oct. 3, 2023. Courts in El Salvador, stacked with judges sympathetic to Bukele, approved his reelection campaign.

²⁸ "Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE)," Progressive International, accessed Jan. 16, 2024.

since the 2006 presidential elections. The FSLN has been involved in Nicaraguan politics since its revolutionary overthrow of the then-government in 1979, which resulted in Sandinista rule until 1990. Thus, Ortega is a member of a party that has remained in the political consciousness of Nicaraguans for forty-five years. Furthermore, Ortega was previously the FSLN head of government during its first stint in power from 1979 to 1990 and has returned to his previous position.²⁹ Ortega's rule in the twenty-first century has differed from his previous presidency,³⁰ yet gang violence at an institutionalized level continues to remain lower in Nicaragua than in its northern neighbors.³¹ Gauging the popularity of Ortega in Nicaragua is much more difficult. The state has taken on an authoritarian character, with elections largely regarded as shams in Nicaragua due to Ortega's recurring large margins of victory³² and the usual incarceration or exile of most, if not all, potential opposition candidates.³³

Motivation for This Thesis

Central American issues tend to be neglected in the United States. Growing up in the northern United States, I never heard much about Central America, aside from general knowledge of high homicide rates and the presence of gangs. Upon electing to take courses in college on Latin America as a whole, I exposed myself to issues unfamiliar to me occurring in that region. My own interest in crime policy derives from my desire to pursue a career in human

²⁹ Lucía Dammert and Mary Fran T. Malone, "From Community Policing to Political Police in Nicaragua," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, no. 110 (2020): 87.

³⁰ International Crisis Group, "Ortega's Apparatus of Power," in *A Road to Dialogue After Nicaragua's Crushed Uprising* (2018), 5-6.

³¹ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 2.

³² Salvador Martí i Puig and Macià Serra, "Nicaragua: De-democratization and Regime Crisis," *Latin American Politics and Society* 62, no. 2 (2020): 121.

³³ "Nicaragua: Announcement of Ortega's Re-election Augurs a Terrible New Cycle for Human Rights," *Amnesty International*, Nov. 8, 2021.

rights law, and the states of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua provide space for studying how governments attempt to “legitimize” human rights violations to maintain power. In the cases of El Salvador and Honduras, politicians have sought to control gang violence, and this thesis observes that seeking to mitigate gang violence is often politically motivated and not necessarily done in the interest of the public. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, while the state lacks organized gang violence at the scale of El Salvador and Honduras, it still uses repression against dissidents. This thesis seeks to explain the roots of all these issues and contribute to Central American literature on the interconnectedness of mass imprisonment, gang violence, and state capacity.

A Note on Terms in This Thesis

The crux of my argument relates to state capacity. In this thesis, for the sake of word variety, I will alternate “state capacity” with “state power” and “state strength.” I will also use *mano dura* as an umbrella term for gang violence policy in El Salvador and Honduras as the states have historically used it. Additionally, I will often refer to El Salvador and Honduras as the Northern Triangle, a collection of those two states along with Guatemala. However, I will not analyze Guatemala in this thesis, and any use of “Northern Triangle” will solely refer to El Salvador and Honduras.

In this thesis, I will use the Spanish acronyms of organizations, even if I name the organization in English. For example, I will refer to the Sandinista National Liberation Front as the FSLN or, as an adjective, Sandinista (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*); the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front as the FMLN (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*); the National Republican Alliance as ARENA (*Partido Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*); and Liberty and Refoundation as LIBRE (*Libertad y Refundación*). I

will also refer to political parties how literature commonly refers to them in English. For example, I translated Liberal and National parties in Honduras but left Bukele's party, Nuevas Ideas (in English, New Ideas), in the Spanish translation.

Summary of Succeeding Chapters

Chapter Two reviews the literature to set the context for my argument and identifies key ideas used in the analysis. The literature on gang violence in Central America does not discuss the effects of the current political situations in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua on violence levels given the recent nature of the events considered in this thesis, so I will explain the concepts in the literature to which I seek to contribute by applying state strength, *mano dura*, and mass incarceration literature to the present situations in all three states. I also explain the methodology of my research with respect to John Stuart Mill's methods of agreement and difference in this chapter.

Chapter Three evaluates various competing hypotheses that explain why Bukele and Castro have both implemented states of emergency and exception. These similar policies, I argue, result from low levels of infrastructural power, high levels of despotic power, historical migration flow, and the prevalence of homicide in the countries. The roles of the United States, political ideology, and racial hierarchies are less relevant for explaining these similarities.

Chapter Four examines crucial distinctions that exist between Nicaragua versus El Salvador and Honduras that explains Nicaragua's response to gang violence and crime. Nicaragua has not experienced the high levels of gang violence experienced by those of its Northern Triangle neighbors, which alters its policies towards gangs. Nicaragua's Sandinista government from 1979 to 1990 elected to use a community-based policing model to address

crime, resulting in lower incarceration rates and more long-term solutions to crime. Additionally, unlike the other two states, Nicaragua is currently led by Daniel Ortega, a leader who has not had to position himself as a new response to the country's social and political problems. Finally, Nicaragua never received an influx of migrants to the extent that its neighbors did as after the Sandinista Revolution; many Nicaraguans who opposed the revolution migrated to the United States.

Finally, Chapter Five summarizes my analytical findings on the reasons for convergence between El Salvador and Honduras on gang violence policy and divergence between those two states and Nicaragua. I follow this summary with some examples of potential areas of future research on these topics. This chapter also makes broad policy recommendations for the three states that, based on my analysis of current policies, will encourage effective long-term solutions that can truly reduce gang violence.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Methodology

Introduction

El Salvador and Honduras stand out in Central America for their distinctness in crafting repressive policies to crime; the policies of these two countries make for a compelling comparison with Nicaragua's unorthodox approaches to policing. I seek to understand why the three countries have chosen certain avenues to address crime and what those choices imply about the strength of their states. This understanding allows for a critical analysis of state policy and the ability to recommend alternatives to harsh and punitive responses to gang violence.

The scholarly community has done little research into this issue because developments in El Salvador and Honduras are recent. Thus, in this chapter, I analyze how the Salvadoran and Honduran cases fit—and how the case of Nicaragua does not fit—the narrative of state-employed mass incarceration based on potential gang affiliation. Examining the consequences of these responses for the stability and strength of the states will allow for a better understanding of the diversity of responses to gang violence broadly in Central America and their implications for successfully addressing chronic violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. This chapter addresses the literature and explains how I intend to add to the existing literature through my methodology.

My thesis seeks to fill these gaps in the literature. In the first section of this chapter, I describe the existing literature and then explain how my research will address those gaps. I then follow this description with a discussion of my methodology for this thesis, in which I analyze qualitative data through a comparative analysis between Honduras and El Salvador and then between those two countries and Nicaragua. To complete my discussion of the methodology, I note the limitations of my method and explain how I aimed to address those limitations.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I discuss leading arguments in the scholarly community about the strength of the state, *mano dura* as anti-gang policy in Central America, and mass incarceration. I find myself in agreement with much of the literature, but I feel that the arguments are incomplete when it comes to understanding Central American gang policy. I will examine this literature in the following section and explain how I intend to synthesize it with my own ideas in the rest of the thesis.

State Strength

State strength literature warrants a conversation because it offers insights into why the issue of gang violence has grown in El Salvador and Honduras but has not followed a similar trend in Nicaragua. Understanding the strength of the state, however, requires definitions of forms of state capacity. When discussing the strength of the state, Michael Mann (1984) refers to two types of state power: despotic, which refers to the power that the elite of a state can implement without any external checks from civil society, and infrastructural, which refers to the ability of the state to genuinely implement policy throughout its territory and civil society.³⁴ I draw on Mann by applying his definitions of despotic and infrastructural power to measure the strength of the states of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, both in recent history in the three states and in the present moment (i.e. since 2022). I also consider infrastructural power, as Mann defines it, to be present in state policies that seek to address the root causes of issues over a longer period, for only a government that has a solid base of infrastructural power will be able to consider these policies and implement them. I find El Salvador and Honduras to be

³⁴ Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 25, no. 2 (1984): 188-189.

infrastructurally weaker than Nicaragua, even if only by a marginal amount. Deepening Mann's analysis, Soifer and vom Hau (2008) note that civil violence is typical of infrastructurally weak states because such states cannot act to mitigate violence.³⁵ I argue that this phenomenon has been the case with Honduras and El Salvador, where gangs arose and aimed to fill an infrastructural state vacuum in both cases.³⁶ Meanwhile, Nicaragua lacks civil violence on the scale of El Salvador and Honduras, the reasons for which I explore later in this thesis. I use the condition that Soifer and vom Hau establish regarding civil violence to further argue that Nicaragua's state is currently infrastructurally stronger than its Northern Triangle neighbors.³⁷

Some scholars argue that war strongly influences state capacity. Tilly's (1985) classic argument that "war makes states" sets the precedent for understanding the development of the state as resulting from the existence of war in a society.³⁸ Centeno (2002) explains this phenomenon by considering the presence of total versus limited war in Latin America. He argues that only limited war played a role in Latin American state-building, yet he argues that total war is a necessary precursor to establishing state capacity.³⁹ Centeno asserts that, as a result of a legacy of limited and not total war, states in Latin America have generally been unable to implement authority in a permanent, lasting way.⁴⁰ Centeno neglects to comment on whether these patterns hold true for states specifically in Central America.

Due to Centeno's intentional⁴¹ oversight, I apply his analysis to create an understanding

³⁵ Hillel Soifer and Matthias vom Hau, "Unpacking the *Strength* of the State: The Utility of State Infrastructural Power," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43, no. 3 (2008): 225.

³⁶ See "The Central American Context: Understanding *Mano Dura*" in this literature review for more information on the evolution of Central American gangs.

³⁷ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 2.

³⁸ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 170.

³⁹ Miguel Angel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 21-22.

⁴⁰ Centeno, *Blood and Debt*, 8.

⁴¹ Centeno, *Blood and Debt*, 31.

of the long-term effects of the civil war in El Salvador, lack of civil war in Honduras, and the Sandinista revolution and counterrevolution in Nicaragua in the twentieth century on the capacity of the three states to combat crime. I consider these conflicts limited wars due to the conflicts occurring primarily within the borders of their respective states and partially consisting of guerrilla armies that do not require the same mobilization levels of the use of only state armies.

Nicaragua enters the conversation with analysis by Cruz (2011). Cruz seeks to understand why violent crime is so much less common in Nicaragua than it is in the Northern Triangle and ultimately argues that state institutions and capacity, not simply the presence of gangs and migration in a state, explain why Nicaragua enjoys lower levels of violence.⁴² Nicaragua has employed a different approach to public security from that of the Northern Triangle that, since the Sandinista Revolution in 1979, has been community-oriented and far less violent towards citizens than its neighbors to the north.⁴³ This distinct approach makes Nicaragua different from the three states in that region and thus warrants a separate analysis of the implementation of policies in Nicaragua, which I provide by contrasting Nicaragua with El Salvador and Honduras in the fourth chapter of this thesis.⁴⁴ Rocha et al. (2023) fundamentally disagree with Cruz, asserting that gang violence remains a significant problem in Nicaragua and that the low rates of crime and homicide are underreported by the Nicaraguan government, leading to the issue of gang violence lacking salience within the public.⁴⁵ The Nicaraguan government may indeed be underreporting these statistics. Nevertheless, the public perception of gang violence as a seeming non-issue due to its apparent limited existence, intuitively leading the state to not address it,

⁴² Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 6-7.

⁴³ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 13.

⁴⁴ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 21.

⁴⁵ José Rocha, Dennis Rodgers, and Julienne Weegels, "Debunking the Myth of Nicaraguan Exceptionalism: Crime, Drugs and the Political Economy of Violence in a 'Narco-state,'" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 55, no. 3 (2023): 526.

makes it difficult to evaluate the strength of the state in combating gang violence.

I find Cruz (2011) more compelling due to Nicaragua's lower levels of violence, accurately reported or not. Thus, I seek to add to Cruz's points in my thesis by further detailing what makes Nicaragua's alternative policing methods more effective at lowering levels of gang violence over a longer period. However, I also complicate this point by examining the current state of Nicaraguan democracy under Daniel Ortega, who has significantly weakened democratic institutions. I apply Cruz's argument to the current issues facing the three states with respect to gang violence and crime.

The Central American Context: Understanding Mano Dura

The Salvadoran and Honduran governments have addressed the growth and spillover across borders of gangs in a few different ways, but *mano dura* remains the most frequently employed in both states. Understanding why leaders use *mano dura* requires an understanding of what constitutes *mano dura*. Holland (2013) defines *mano dura* as a set of reforms that limit one's rights in the justice system, allow for military involvement in policing and extrajudicial police violence, and give security forces greater ability to arrest individuals based on subjective evidence.⁴⁶ This definition applies to both El Salvador and Honduras in the present day, where states of emergency and exception function as *mano dura* under a different name. Holland further notes that crime as a political issue spans across ideological divisions, which indicates that politicians can and do use "tough-on-crime" rhetoric and policies opportunistically.⁴⁷

Holland observes that, in El Salvador, the political right appeals to the lower class with promises

⁴⁶ Alisha C. Holland, "Right on Crime? Conservative Party Politics and 'Mano Dura' Policies in El Salvador," *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 1 (2013): 46.

⁴⁷ Holland, "Right on Crime?," 45.

to clamp down on crime despite those policies disproportionately affecting the poor; however, the political left in El Salvador has been willing to implement such policies on occasion as well.⁴⁸ I use Holland's definition of *mano dura* in my thesis and her argument as a framework in tandem with John Stuart Mill's method of agreement⁴⁹ to analyze the contrast between Nayib Bukele and Xiomara Castro and their common decision to implement harsh policies to address crime.

Arana (2005) notes that Honduras implemented *mano dura* before El Salvador in 2003, which may come as a surprise given that El Salvador's repressive policies currently receive more news attention than do those of Honduras.⁵⁰ *Mano dura* has not manifested in Nicaragua in the way that it has in El Salvador and Honduras with respect to addressing gang violence, so my additions to this literature from the Nicaraguan perspective will be limited, but my analysis seeks to understand why *mano dura* has failed to manifest in Nicaragua. The literature on *mano dura*, however, contextualizes the present moment in El Salvador and Honduras and gives me an opportunity to contribute an analysis of their states of exception and emergency to the literature, which lacks this analysis.

The literature largely agrees that *mano dura* is an unsustainable practice. In his discussion of gang negotiations in El Salvador under President Mauricio Funes, van der Borgh (2019) asserts that repressive policies towards gang crime are not effective because such policies will modify how gangs operate, not eliminate them, and will lead to further tensions between the government and criminal groups.⁵¹ van der Borgh notes that heavy-handed government policies

⁴⁸ Holland, "Right on Crime?," 52-53.

⁴⁹ To be detailed in "Methodology."

⁵⁰ Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," 102.

⁵¹ Chris van der Borgh, "Government Responses to Gang Power: From Truce to War on Gangs in El Salvador," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 107 (2019): 3.

in El Salvador have allowed gang leaders to continue directing gang operations from prison.⁵² The strength of gangs in prison indicates that prisons in El Salvador, and perhaps elsewhere in the region, are sources of weak infrastructural power because prisons are unable to control what happens behind bars. Bruneau (2014) agrees with van der Borgh's assessment of *mano dura*, noting that simply implementing incarceration will make the problem of gang violence worse.⁵³ Bruneau finds that *mano dura* serves a more punitive than preventive purpose when it comes to crime. He further finds that prisons cannot sustain and support these carceral policies; yet the set of policies remains popular among citizens in Central America.⁵⁴ I argue that the paradox of Bruneau's observation of high popularity of crime policy and ineffective long-term responses explains the creation of massive prisons to address gang violence such as the Salvadoran Terrorism Confinement Center and the proposed Honduran island prison.⁵⁵

Prevailing Notions Regarding Mass Incarceration

Much of the literature on mass incarceration focuses on the American context, particularly due to the immense increase in imprisonment in the United States that began in the 1980s, yet the literature still applies to countries outside the United States.⁵⁶ Mass incarceration has prevailed in many Latin American states due to the emergence of the "penal state." This phenomenon in Latin America refers to the state's use of harsh approaches to crime to maintain

⁵² van der Borgh, "Government Responses to Gang Power," 9.

⁵³ Bruneau, "'Pandillas' and Security in Central America," 164.

⁵⁴ Bruneau, "'Pandillas' and Security in Central America," 161-162.

⁵⁵ Carlos S. Maldonado, "A Honduran Alcatraz: Xiomara Castro Intends to Build a Prison on an Island for 2,000 Gang Members," *El País* (Madrid), Jul. 20, 2023.

⁵⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 5. See Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*; Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) for further reading on mass incarceration in the United States.

its strength.⁵⁷ The penal state directly results from the influence of the United States' carceral responses to crime. Additionally, incarceration became common in Latin American states because those who aimed to develop Latin American governments saw incarceration as symptomatic of modernity, which those governments strove to achieve.⁵⁸ One state's implementation of this model in the hopes of achieving modernity would encourage its neighbors to do the same to reap the benefits of a supposedly modern state. This penal state has continued into the twenty-first century and, considering El Salvador's status as the state with the highest incarceration rate in the world per capita⁵⁹, has allowed El Salvador to use imprisonment as a response to crime with hopes of state development. This incarceration has in turn influenced Honduras to take similar action.⁶⁰

While some of the literature that comments on mass incarceration focuses on Latin America, it typically excludes Central America as a sub-region because the patterns of mass incarceration in these countries have manifested much more recently. Thus, a gap in the literature appears. I use the debates that exist in mass incarceration literature to contextualize that phenomenon in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua and add their examples to the literature that examines mass imprisonment and its efficacy at preventing crime.

Western and Muller (2013) comment on the effects of mass incarceration in the United States and its tendency to target specific groups and exacerbate poverty, but their analysis can and does still hold relevance for understanding such processes in Central America. Mass

⁵⁷ Markus-Michael Müller, "The Rise of the Penal State in Latin America," *Contemporary Justice Review* 15, no. 1 (2012): 58.

⁵⁸ María-Fatima Santos, "Modernizing Leviathan: Carceral Reform and the Struggle for Legitimacy in Brazil's Espírito Santo State," *American Sociological Review* 87, no. 5 (2022): 891.

⁵⁹ *Highest to Lowest – Prison Population Rate*, World Prison Brief, London: Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, Birkbeck, University of London, 2022.

⁶⁰ Reuters, "El Salvador Kicks off Election Campaigns as Incumbent's Bid Faces Criticism over Constitutionality."

incarceration, as the authors use the term and as originally coined by David Garland,⁶¹ applies to unusually high rates of imprisonment in liberal-democratic regimes, usually accompanied by incarceration by demographic group.⁶² While this article has an American focus, I apply this to El Salvador and Honduras, noting that both are nominally liberal democracies due to their adherence to elections and multiparty governance and both incarcerate individuals by possible gang affiliation.⁶³ In El Salvador, this classification process takes the form of profiling men and boys based on what tattoos they have and what clothes they wear.⁶⁴ Western and Muller further note the unsustainability of mass incarceration as a policy,⁶⁵ which implies that significant limits exist to the success of current carceral responses to crime in El Salvador and Honduras.

Debate exists in the literature over the role of the criminalization of poverty as a driver for imprisonment. Wacquant (2003) comments on the connection in Brazil between incarceration and neoliberalism, the latter of which he sees as a conservative view, arguing that incarceration allows the state to dominate the poor in a discriminatory nature.⁶⁶ Santos (2022) agrees, arguing Brazil, which has parallels to El Salvador and Honduras, engaged in a pattern of mass incarceration that led the conservative state to incarcerate poor and otherwise economically disadvantaged minorities. These efforts allowed the state to gain legitimacy and power over structural issues of poverty, even if the state did so in a way that did not solve those societal problems.⁶⁷ However, on Wacquant's point regarding the criminalization of poverty in Latin

⁶¹ See David Garland, *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001).

⁶² Bruce Western and Christopher Muller, "Mass Incarceration, Macrosociology, and the Poor," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 647 (2013): 168.

⁶³ "El Salvador," *The World Factbook 2021*.

⁶⁴ Kitroeff, "In El Salvador, the President Cracks Down on Civil Liberties, and Is Beloved for It."

⁶⁵ Western and Muller, "Mass Incarceration," 172.

⁶⁶ Loïc Wacquant, "Toward a Dictatorship Over the Poor?: Notes on the Penalization of Poverty in Brazil," *Punishment & Society* 5, no. 2 (2003): 200.

⁶⁷ Santos, "Modernizing Leviathan," 896.

America as a conservative issue, Holland (2013) disagrees and notes that this issue spreads across political affiliations.⁶⁸ Hathazy and Müller (2016) concur with Holland, noting that the increase in mass incarceration in Latin America has more to do with the historically neoliberal-inspired structure and growth of the penal state and less to do with the ideology of the leader in power.⁶⁹ After all, as the cases of El Salvador and Honduras show, crime as an issue crosses ideological lines, including for those who support conservatives like Bukele and leftists like Castro. Thus, while Wacquant's point on poverty as linked to incarceration may hold in some cases, Wacquant's argument is much more difficult to determine in El Salvador and Honduras, where incarceration has more to do with supposed gang affiliation than income level. If the cause of increasing gang violence is not strictly connected to poverty, then gang violence results from deeper issues of societal structure.

I build upon Wacquant's argument by synthesizing his points and the points of those who complicate his work, highlighting that responding to poverty is not the only way to lower crime levels. This reasoning explains that gang violence in El Salvador and Honduras requires approaches that, beyond eliminating the criminalization of poverty, seek to remedy issues of poor state structure to eradicate gang violence. My work complicates the idea that the criminalization of poverty motivates incarceration. I argue that state strength plays a role in a state's decision to incarcerate a population.

Müller (2012) further observes the existence of Latin American "lawfare," a process that allows the state to use the legal system to implement a coercive regime.⁷⁰ With states of exception and emergency currently prevailing in both El Salvador and Honduras to expand the

⁶⁸ Holland, "Right on Crime?," 51.

⁶⁹ Paul Hathazy and Markus-Michael Müller, "The Rebirth of the Prison in Latin America: Determinants, Regimes and Social Effects." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 65, no. 3 (2016): 120.

⁷⁰ Müller, "The Rise of the Penal State in Latin America," 62.

power of the judiciary, it seems that Müller’s argument and concept of “lawfare” may apply best to cultivating an understanding of carceral developments in these countries. In a similar vein, Hathazy and Müller (2016) broadly discuss crime and incarceration in Latin America and note that the expansion of prisons results from institutional change rather than stability; the four factors the authors identify as most relevant for causing institutional change are democratization, reconstruction of parties, heavy implementation of the “war on drugs,” and expansion of penal state-promoting policies.⁷¹ The modifications to the party system hold true in El Salvador and Honduras, where the elections of third-party candidates Nayib Bukele and Xiomara Castro led to significant changes to their two-party systems, and the penal policies also hold true given the states of exception and emergency currently in effect in El Salvador and Honduras.⁷²

I contribute to the existing literature on the connection between institutional action and carceral policies by showing the ways in which prisons have grown under Bukele and Castro, due in no small part to the metaphorical disruptiveness of their obtainments of power, whereas, due to the long-standing rule of Ortega, incarceration has not expanded in Nicaragua. These differences in institutional action explain policy outcomes, which I use to detail the implications these policies hold for state strength. The points made in the literature on mass incarceration share similarities with the crackdowns on gang violence in El Salvador and Honduras, both of which have involved incarcerating people with even the vaguest connection to a gang in efforts to give the state more capacity in controlling crime. This contrasts with Nicaragua, which, despite imprisoning many government dissidents,⁷³ has not established a system for incarcerating

⁷¹ Hathazy and Müller, “The Rebirth of the Prison in Latin America,” 116.

⁷² Anatoly Kurmanav and Joan Suazo, “She Promised to Empower Women. Will Honduras’s President Succeed?,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2022, and Oscar Lopez, “After El Salvador Election, Bukele Is on Verge of Near-Total Control,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2021.

⁷³ Wilfredo Miranda, “The Revolving Door of the Ortega-Murillo Regime in Nicaragua: Once Again, the Jails Are Filled with Political Prisoners,” *El País* (Madrid), Oct. 10, 2023.

potential gang members due to the non-prevalence of gang violence in Nicaraguan society. The literature indicates that these various outcomes have origins in penal policies that, as I explain in this thesis, connect to events and other factors in the histories of the three states.

Methodology

Sources Used

The evidence I use to demonstrate my argument primarily consists of secondary sources, news articles, and research reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Beyond establishing a foundation for the literature, the secondary sources provide an understanding of the history of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua since 1979. I selected 1979 to the present as the time frame I analyzed because in this year, the Salvadoran Civil War began, and the Sandinista Revolution overthrew the Nicaraguan government. The period of events leading up to the present provides the necessary context to make sense of the present state responses to gang violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Given the massive scope of this time frame, I focus on examining political moments I consider significant in the strength of the state (e.g. coups, involvement of new actors into conflict, key policies enacted, etc.) and relevant changes in crime policy, largely beginning at the turn of the twenty-first century, which also aid in evaluating the strength of the state through an analysis of their implementation. These events provide the most compelling context for current policies in the three states, so I do not analyze other minor incidents. History prior to 1979 in the three states provides less direct relevance for explaining the current situations in Central America.

In addition to providing context, the secondary sources, particularly journal articles, detail different historical and sociopolitical aspects of the three states. I consider and analyze

both context and historical and sociopolitical aspects – including social programs, country histories, systems of governance, migration, and poverty – as potential explainers for causes of current responses to gang violence. Meanwhile, I treated argumentative journal articles with care, reading multiple articles discussing certain events to determine whether multiple authors agreed on claims to limit bias, although due to this being an argumentative paper, eliminating all bias on my end is impossible. I measured the dependent variable of this thesis, predominance of mass incarceration, by referring to research reports and data on incarceration rates per capita and qualitative reports from journalists on the prevalence of mass imprisonment in each state. For incarceration rate data, I reference the World Prison Brief,⁷⁴ and while the data is not always updated to the current year, the World Prison Brief is one of the only reliable databases affiliated with a university (Birkbeck University of London) that reports on comparative incarceration rates. I referred to this data in tandem with news articles and research reports claiming increases in imprisonment in the three states to ensure the reliability of news reports.

The research reports from NGOs and news articles explain current events and developments in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. NGOs offer a human rights-oriented perspective that critically examines carceral policies and suggests potential alternative responses to mass imprisonment. I read research reports and news articles discussing gang violence, state repression, domestic politics, and human rights.⁷⁵ Research reports dating from 2021 on El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua⁷⁶ came from the International Crisis Group and Reporters

⁷⁴ I specifically used *Highest to Lowest – Prison Population Rate*, World Prison Brief, London: Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, Birkbeck, University of London, 2022.

⁷⁵ Search terms included *mano dura*, prisons, state of exception, state of emergency, Nayib Bukele, Xiomara Castro, Daniel Ortega, elections, and human rights. I used these same search terms for news articles, which I filtered from 2019 onwards due to Bukele's election in that year. Occasionally, I read older articles using these same search terms to review the differences in policies between recent past and current administrations.

⁷⁶ Occasionally, I referenced older research reports for Nicaragua that contextualized anti-government protests in the state, which particularly increased in 2018.

Without Borders due to the thorough nature of their papers that supplemented the news articles I read. International Crisis Group reports primarily came from four series: *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*,⁷⁷ *A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever*,⁷⁸ *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*,⁷⁹ and *A Road to Dialogue After Nicaragua's Crushed Uprising*.⁸⁰ I use the most recent Reporters Without Borders reports regarding events in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, emphasizing reports from after 2018 to understand the current state of journalistic freedom in the three states. The content of International Crisis Group reports reveals a left-leaning bias when it comes to incarceration policies due to the criticism of repression with little attention given to the justification of these policies, and Reporters Without Borders limits its focus on repression of civilians to typically include only journalists. I cross-referenced that content with news articles and found that the information in the articles was still accurate.

I read news articles from a variety of sources, but most English-language sources came from the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, which I selected due to their usual reliability regarding reporting on Central America. I did not, however, want to limit myself to American sources, so I also consulted the *British Broadcasting Company (BBC)* for a different international perspective. However, I acknowledge that the *BBC* comes from a Western-European developed democracy, making it likely to have similar biases as American news outlets regarding issues of democracy in Central America. In addition, because I can fluently read and translate written Spanish, I also frequently referenced *El País*, a Madrid-based

⁷⁷ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?: Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, International Crisis Group (2020).

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group, *A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever*, International Crisis Group (2022).

⁷⁹ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, International Crisis Group (2017).

⁸⁰ International Crisis Group, *A Road to Dialogue After Nicaragua's Crushed Uprising*, International Crisis Group (2018).

newspaper that covers events in Latin America in addition to those in Spain. I read these articles in Spanish and paraphrased relevant portions of the articles in this thesis in English without the aid of an external translator. I rarely use reporting from Central American countries, which is a limitation of my methodology. The lack of Central American news sources referenced in my thesis originates from the repression of a free press in all three states. As noted by Reporters Without Borders, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua all score low rankings on press freedom, which stems from self-censorship of reporters fearing harassment and both state and non-state violence.⁸¹ Due to concerns over the reliability of Central American news sources for those reasons, I avoided using those sources and prioritized external sources.

Method of Analysis

I employ a qualitative comparative analysis to connect my evidence to my argument by adapting John Stuart Mill's methods of agreement and difference. Mill's method of agreement asks why one sees convergence (i.e. a common factor) between two phenomena when one would expect to see divergence. To answer this, one must examine what crucial similarity the phenomena have that makes them converge.⁸² I analyze El Salvador and Honduras using the method of agreement through examining historical context, events, and factors of governance and state structure to see which aspects explain the similar policy of carceral state repression in both countries as a response to gang violence. The factors I evaluate include similar or different country histories, migration, late-twentieth-century state capacity, regional influence, targeting of specific sectors of the population, and political systems.

⁸¹ *Press Freedom Index* (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

⁸² John Stuart Mill, "Of the Four Methods of Experimental Inquiry," in *John Stuart Mill's Philosophy of Scientific Method*, edited by Ernest Nagel, 211-238 (New York: Hafner, 1950), 211-214.

In contrast, Mill's method of difference asks why one sees divergence between two phenomena when one would expect to see convergence. One determines this by examining what critical difference the two phenomena have that leads to divergence.⁸³ My use of this method involved bringing in Nicaragua and considering El Salvador and Honduras as one entity based on their similarities. I place this unit in conversation with Nicaragua and analyze history and state policies and factors (e.g. social programs, country histories, systems of governance, migration, and poverty) using the method of difference to determine what led to the contrast in response to gang violence. The image below from Skocpol and Somers (1980) provides a visual description of how Mill's methods of agreement and difference operate:

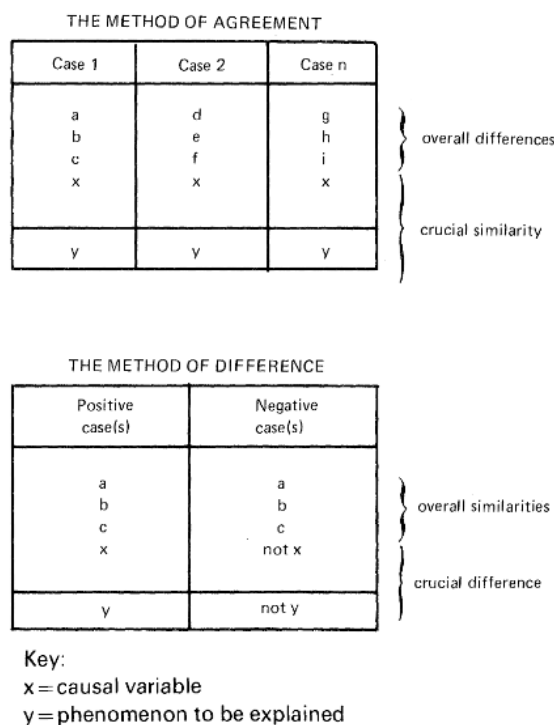


FIGURE 1. Two Designs for Macro-Analytic Comparative History (from John Stuart Mill)

Figure 1: Visual depiction of Mill's Methods of Agreement and Difference.⁸⁴

⁸³ Mill, "Of the Four Methods," 214-216.

⁸⁴ From Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (1980): 184.

Limitations

The Millian method is not without its limits. The structure of the methods of agreement and difference assume that the phenomena being compared are completely independent of one another; El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, while not dependent on one another in a literal sense, have influenced one another's responses to political issues and models of governance. Avoiding this issue in Mill's methods remains difficult, so I aim to emphasize in this thesis the direct or indirect connections events and aspects have with one another. Further, the order in which events occur matters, yet Mill's method slightly disregards that. To address that limitation of this method, I kept linear history in mind when constructing my analysis and tried to incorporate that linearity when possible, although my thesis does not examine events in a linear manner. My thesis will examine aspects leading to crime policy convergence and divergence in a thematic manner with different factors leading to an outcome rather than a certain timeline, which makes Mill's methods more justifiable to apply here. Additionally, by examining events and factors at the state level, I am not directly engaging with the life and experience of the incarcerated in the three states. To keep my thesis focused on a specific context, I am unable to give all the attention I want to all issues related to my topic. Thus, I comment more extensively on human rights implications of these responses to crime in my conclusion chapter, which covers policy recommendations I have for the three states in their endeavors to address crime.

For the purpose of this thesis, I adapted the methods of agreement and difference to allow multiple aspects to explain convergence or divergence in policy rather than simply identifying one explanatory factor, which Mill's method prefers. Because factors in this case are not entirely present or not and do not all have equal impact on policy, to give Mill's methods of agreement and difference more depth, I combined it with Ragin's conceptualization of fuzzy-set analysis.

Ragin specifically points out the issues with Mill's method as unable to consider multiple factors of cause.⁸⁵ In Ragin's view, phenomenon x may appear to be the cause of y in Country A, but cannot be the cause because x exists in Country B but y does not.⁸⁶ In my use of fuzzy-set analysis, instead of determining whether an aspect exists, I examined the extent to which said aspect existed and what kind of impact it held on influencing crime policy. I executed this analysis by designing a Likert-scale type system that assesses factors possibly causing convergence or divergence in the following simple terms of increasing importance: nonfactor (no impact on causing convergence or divergence), small factor (a necessary cause of convergence or divergence but not on its own significant enough to cause the convergence or divergence), and large factor (a sufficient standalone cause of convergence or divergence). This scale measures to what extent factors potentially causing convergence or divergence played a role in determining such outcomes, and I use historical context and the current state of carceral policies to determine which category most accurately fit each factor. In the following two chapters, I spend time explaining each factor I analyze, evaluating the factor's impact on convergence or divergence, and concluding each section by assigning a value to each factor from the Likert scale based on my analysis.

Alignment with Argument and Addressing Misconceptions

Ultimately, the evidence aligns well with my argument. The strength of the state appears to be low in both El Salvador and Honduras based on the evidence, which reveals that the implementation of crime policy is difficult in Honduras and in El Salvador. I measured state

⁸⁵ Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 37.

⁸⁶ Ragin, *The Comparative Method*, 40.

power, the crucial independent variable affecting convergence or divergence, by evaluating the efficacy of state policies in lowering levels of violence, which I assessed using World Bank data on intentional homicides, and by examining whether these policies, regardless of efficacy, addressed deeply rooted structural inequalities.⁸⁷ Both reveal histories of short-sighted responses to crime and structural inabilities to provide for people and give them an alternative to a life of crime, creating a cycle in which people engage in gang violence and cannot be extracted from it. These short-sighted policies allow for an understanding of why the incarceration rate remains high in all three states, and, at the individual state level, why variation exists in that rate.

One issue with the evidence and my argument is Nicaragua's overall weak state. Nicaragua's state power is mostly despotic, for its power allows the government to shut down news outlets and expand incarceration. Ortega maintains a firm hold over politics in Nicaragua, even if his state's primary and arguably only infrastructural power keeps him in the presidency and does not aid individual Nicaraguans, who compose the population of one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.⁸⁸ However, the Nicaraguan state has residual strength from the government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front that, I argue, provides it a stronger infrastructural capacity than El Salvador and Honduras.

In this final portion of my methodology, I detail what my thesis does *not* seek to do. This thesis, due to limitations on time and length, does not examine the daily life of civilians in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, incarcerated or not. This thesis also does not do a deep analysis of other types of violence in these three states. I explicitly focus on gang violence and do not discuss other types of organized crime because doing so would complicate my analysis since there is not always overlap between perpetrators of gang violence and perpetrators of other

⁸⁷ *Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 People)*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022.

⁸⁸ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 5.

organized crime, such as drug trafficking. However, I do comment on the different form of Nicaraguan carceral repression, which targets political dissidents more frequently than perpetrators of gang violence. Additionally, I do not discuss aspects of race due to the relative population homogeneity of the three states. The case for race-based discrimination in the three states is weaker than the case for class-based discrimination given the relative racial homogeneity and high inequality in these three states⁸⁹, so my argument will instead examine the class aspect. I have also excluded Guatemala, the third Northern Triangle member, from my analysis because Guatemala has a different demographic makeup with its large indigenous population that complicates comparison with the other three states because ethnicity likely plays a significant role in how the Guatemalan government implements crime policy.⁹⁰ Guatemala merits its own separate analysis and addition to the literature of how state repression maps onto race.

Conclusion

The literature providing insight into state strength, mass incarceration, and *mano dura* all contain much value for understanding the issues of gang violence and imprisonment in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. By identifying how theoretical arguments in the literature do indeed apply to these three states, I fill a gap existing due to these new crime policies beginning in March 2022 in El Salvador and later than that in Honduras. My thesis, in examining carceral policies under Bukele, Castro, and Ortega, adds to this gap, introducing a newer area of further research to the literature. I use the Millian methods of comparative analysis to seek

⁸⁹ *The World Factbook 2021* (“El Salvador,” “Honduras,” and “Nicaragua”) and *Gini Index*, 2024. I used Gini Index values to indicate high levels of inequality.

⁹⁰ “Guatemala,” *The World Factbook 2021*.

agreement between El Salvador and Honduras and the difference between those two states and Nicaragua. Exploring these issues in my thesis will allow me to raise awareness about the problematic nature of carceral responses to gang violence and encourage more long-term solutions that will improve the socioeconomic conditions that foster gang life.

Chapter Three: Exploring Policy Convergence in El Salvador and Honduras

Introduction

The similarity of Nayib Bukele's and Xiomara Castro's responses to gang violence, namely their declaration of states of emergency and exception and planned large prisons to hold gang members, warrant comparison to understand why two regional neighbors have elected the same policies. Despite the similar history of colonization shared by the two states, El Salvador and Honduras have less in common than one might predict about two countries in the same region. In this chapter, I explore possible common factors that El Salvador and Honduras share to determine which of these factors led to convergence of policy towards gangs.

In comparing the two states, I employ John Stuart Mill's method of agreement, which seeks to find a common factor between two different entities that explains why the two entities share a convergence. I seek to determine which factors led to convergence and evaluate to what extent those factors influenced the similar outcome, using the Likert scale I crafted that assigns values of "nonfactor" (no impact), "small factor" (necessary impact but not enough to be a standalone factor), and "large factor" (sufficient impact to be a standalone factor) to determine the level of impact a given factor has. I made predictions prior to evaluating the various competing factors that could feasibly explain the similarity in crime policy towards gangs between El Salvador and Honduras. I foresaw a strong connection between the responses and state infrastructural and despotic power, historical migration flow, and high homicide rates in both states. I did not expect to find political ideologies, American influence, and racial hierarchies in the two countries as particularly salient explanations for the similar responses because these aspects manifest differently or not at all in the policies of the two states.

A Note on the Histories of El Salvador and Honduras

At this juncture, one might note that the histories of El Salvador and Honduras share commonalities: weak state infrastructure, *mano dura* policies, and enduring gang violence. Certainly, *mano dura* is a shared history of both states, and past policy, regardless of success, tends to be the most likely influence on current policy due to its previous implementation. However, despite these parallel policies, the two histories of the states alone are not similar enough to serve as an explanation as to why both states have now opted for prison expansion and states of emergency and exception to resolve crime.

While both states experience the same problems and have chosen similar solutions, crucial differences in their histories exist. If one goes back far enough into history, one sees the common aspect of both states experiencing colonization under the Spanish.⁹¹ This experience has left all former colonies at varying degrees of weakness, with El Salvador and Honduras being two of the most negatively affected. Yet the more recent aspect of instability in El Salvador results from its civil war from 1979 to 1992, which significantly reduced the state capacity of El Salvador, leading gangs to take advantage of the weakened state apparatus. In Honduras, however, no civil war occurred to further weaken the state. The Salvadoran Civil War remains a significant factor in enabling gang prominence in El Salvador, leading to state repression of gangs, whereas no analogous event occurred in Honduras; the Honduran state experienced a lengthy problem with infrastructure not resulting from a particular conflict.

Furthermore, while Salvadoran and Honduran governments have both historically utilized *mano dura* policies, both states have replicated their own historical policies separately from one

⁹¹ For further reading on the Spanish colonization of Central America, which I will not describe in great detail in this thesis, see Leslie Bethell, ed., *Central America Since Independence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Hector Perez-Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America*, trans. Ricardo B. Sawrey A. and Susanna Stettri de Sawrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

another. Until Bukele's model began to succeed at decreasing the homicide rate in El Salvador, Honduras had not sought to emulate El Salvador but rather continued to implement its own brand of *mano dura*.

Both states could have pursued different policies independently of one another without having histories in common. Thus, overlapping histories are a "nonfactor" in leading to similar outcomes in gang violence policy because simply having a history in common does not explain the cause for similar responses and because the histories are not comparable enough to provide a justifiable explanation for the responses.

State Capacity: The Most Salient Factor

While El Salvador and Honduras have certain similarities, the most central commonality explaining their converging policies is their weak state capacities. These two states, per Michael Mann's definitions,⁹² suffer from a lack of infrastructural power, which hinders their abilities to implement effective long-term strategies to reducing crime. A despotically strong state can, in the short-term, address critical issues of crime and prompt a drop in crime rates; this scenario has been the case with Bukele's El Salvador, for its carceral method of addressing crime has led to a precipitous decline in homicides.⁹³ Yet an infrastructurally weak state cannot address ongoing problems related to crime and its systemic causes, such as poverty; limited access to social services; and stable, trustworthy policing, for an infrastructurally strong state would use all institutions available to it to construct a holistic response to issues. A despotic state, which lacks checks on executive power, does not have the means to implement large-scale societal

⁹² See Chapter Two for an understanding of Mann's categorizations of state power.

⁹³ Brian Avelar and Oscar Lopez, "El Salvador's Leader Has Eroded Rights to Tackle Violence. Is It Working?" *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 2022.

restructuring, a response which would be required to mitigate gang violence more permanently. In the case of El Salvador, this weakness has produced a high incarceration rate, which indicates a willingness to remove gang members from society but no apparent willingness to investigate why gang membership remains prominent in the country.⁹⁴ Similarly, although less starkly apparent as in El Salvador, Honduras' implemented state of emergency and statements favoring the construction of an isolated prison similar to that of El Salvador promise a response rooted in despotic power; expansion of punitive measures aligns with a despotic policy but does not contain any promise of expansion of infrastructural capacity to directly address root causes of gang violence. However, the lack of information discussing the construction of said prison, which perhaps reveals an incidence of empty rhetoric, indicates that Honduras has even weaker infrastructural power than El Salvador, for the Honduran state seems to be unable to fulfill its goals of expanding imprisonment in the same manner as El Salvador.⁹⁵ Both states have little infrastructural power and are using despotic power to implement their goals, which means that state institutions are not successfully checking central executive power, and external social institutions are either not checking or are being ignored by the state. These despotic responses result from a lack of state interest or ability to sustainably addresses the problems at hand.

Both El Salvador and Honduras have infrastructurally weak states resulting from similar sources. While El Salvador and Honduras did not share identical experiences during Spanish colonization, both countries emerged from Spanish colonization with weak states. Spanish colonial rule placed little emphasis on developing its colonies to become effective, independently functional states after the departure of the empire, so governance of the two states remained stagnant and could not evolve and flourish into a genuinely functional state due to inheriting the

⁹⁴ *Highest to Lowest – Prison Population Rate*, 2022.

⁹⁵ Maldonado, "A Honduran Alcatraz."

same extractive and hierarchical systems of governance implemented under colonial rule.⁹⁶ Once Spain retreated, it took time for former colonial governments to solidify themselves, and the states remained limited in their ability and willingness to implement programs and help improve the socioeconomic standing of their people.⁹⁷

This weakness compounded after the Salvadoran Civil War, during which El Salvador was aiming to recover and reconstruct itself, whereas Honduras was contemporaneously attempting to transition from authoritarian rule to democracy.⁹⁸ Both states were heavily impoverished and lacked strong institutions to deal with state problems, so as the United States deported gang members to El Salvador and Honduras, the two states could not effectively respond to the influx of individuals and thus could not address the increased violence accompanying these individuals. This inwards migration of gang members and increase in violence has led to emigration out of El Salvador and Honduras, leaving fewer people behind to address the issues posed by gangs and promote a more effective long-term strategy to limiting their influence and actions.⁹⁹ As a result, attempts to fill power vacuums by gangs went unmitigated and continued to exacerbate the problems of gang violence in states that could not properly limit them.

The current responses of prisons and abrogation of civil and judicial rights to gang violence in El Salvador and Honduras are also indicative of a weak state. The use of *mano dura* policies historically has done little to stop gangs, for *mano dura* sent gang members to weakly guarded prisons, which indicates an infrastructural failure on behalf of the state. In these prisons,

⁹⁶ See Centeno, *Blood and Debt*, for more details on Latin American states after colonialism.

⁹⁷ E. Bradford Burns, "The Continuity of the National Period," in *Latin America: Its Problems and Its Promise*, 3rd ed., ed. Jan Knippers Black (London: Routledge, 1999), 71-72.

⁹⁸ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 163 and 244.

⁹⁹ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 164.

gang members who had been incarcerated reformed and strengthened their gangs due to the lack of supervision and even complicity of guards.¹⁰⁰ Imprisonment served as an unsuccessful response to preventing gang violence and indicates that unless the state can monitor imprisoned individuals and create alternative avenues to successful lives outside of gangs, gang violence will continue to prevail. Until politicians can recognize the inefficacy of imprisonment as a long-term response to crime and as a symptom of a weak state, politicians will continue to implement similarly ineffective responses with the hopes of mitigating gang violence.

The entrenchment of imprisonment as a response to crime in Latin America explains why El Salvador and Honduras would continue to implement a carceral strategy. The United States' influential model of neoliberalism, which coincided with the expansion of incarceration, replicated itself throughout Latin America under often-authoritarian leaders supported by the United States.¹⁰¹ This replication allowed for the creation of the penal state throughout Latin America. Due to this historical precedent, it remains common for the Latin American state to incarcerate those causing societal problems and not acknowledge the reasons those incarcerated may be involved with criminal activity.¹⁰² This more recent introduction of such policy in Central America functions as a way for the state to test its own despotic power as it expands harsh policies against civilians without thorough external monitoring, unknowingly doing little to nothing to improve its infrastructural capacity. With the statements made and actions taken by Bukele and Castro in attempts to solidify control over crime, it appears that both states have employed more despotic than infrastructural power, despite both states seemingly aspiring to increase their infrastructural power. However, expanding the carceral system in a state will not

¹⁰⁰ Bruneau, "Pandillas' and Security in Central America," 163.

¹⁰¹ Wayne S. Smith, "The United States and Latin America: Into a New Era," in *Latin America: Its Problems and Its Promise*, 4th ed., ed. Jan Knippers Black (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005), 269.

¹⁰² Hathazy and Müller, "The Rebirth of the Prison in Latin America," 114-115.

necessarily correlate with an increase in infrastructural power in terms of successfully addressing crime. The following chart shows how this phenomenon has manifested in Honduras and El Salvador with the most recent responses to gang violence:

		Despotic Power Level	
		Low	High
Infrastructural Power Level	Low	El Salvador during civil war Honduras historically in the 20th c.	El Salvador under Bukele Honduras under Castro
	High		

Table 1: Table of infrastructural versus despotic power actualities in El Salvador under Bukele and Honduras under Castro as compared with historic situations.

Both countries have enacted states of emergency and exception as methods to address gang violence because their states are evidently both unable and unwilling to develop infrastructural power, which must be achieved by working with legislative bodies to invest long-term in improving social safety nets and providing basic goods for their populations. Such responses would most effectively and more permanently decrease gang violence and homicide rates. Both states, by making declarations and limiting civil rights, have resorted to despotic actions that, even if nominally effective in bringing down crime rates in the short term, have done little to address root causes of crime that result from a lack of opportunities for upward mobility in Salvadoran and Honduran society. Thus, I consider the weak capacity of the state in both El Salvador and Honduras to be a “large factor” in explaining why both states have opted for less effective strategies to lower crime rates.

Carceral Policies as a Group Targeting Tactic: A “Small Factor”

A common feature of mass incarceration is the targeting of specific sectors of society. While case studies that focus on mass incarceration tend to center on the United States and its historical pattern of imprisoning people of color at a higher rate than white people, thus targeting based on race, group targeting can take other forms. In the case of imprisonment in El Salvador and Honduras, individuals have been targeted based on potential gang affiliation, which police have determined based on physical appearance. The physical attributes that police use to profile potential gang members include presenting as male, having tattoos, wearing clothes similar to those of the stereotypical gang member, and having a shaved head.¹⁰³ Bukele himself has admitted as much in his messaging about the incarceration of gang members. Based on images and videos he has circulated of imprisoned gang members, race does not appear to be playing a major role, if any, in why certain individuals are being incarcerated.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, arrests have occurred due to one’s proximity to gang members: if police hold any suspicions that one is involved in a gang, then that individual may be targeted for imprisonment or repression.¹⁰⁵ The states in El Salvador and Honduras do not appear to be incarcerating on the basis of race, for both El Salvador and Honduras are relatively racially homogeneous as compared with their neighboring states, which have larger indigenous or Afro-Latino/a populations.¹⁰⁶

The imprisonment patterns in Honduras are weaker because the incarceration rate in Honduras is lower than that of El Salvador, and the incarceration rate is high enough in El Salvador that it is unclear in that instance if patterns of group targeting beyond profiling are

¹⁰³ Katherine Funes, “El Salvador’s State of Exception Turns One,” *NACLA*, Mar. 27, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Kitroeff, “In El Salvador, the President Cracks Down on Civil Liberties, and Is Beloved for It.”

¹⁰⁵ Funes, “El Salvador’s State of Exception Turns One.”

¹⁰⁶ “Central America and the Caribbean,” *The World Factbook 2021*.

indeed occurring.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, any targeting beyond suspected affiliation with a gang would include an implicit targeting of the poor. Bukele's and Castro's governments never provide targeting the poor as the reasoning behind arresting individuals, but gang members are predominantly of lower-income backgrounds due to the lack of career opportunities available to them, which cannot go unnoticed by politicians. Thus, this repression and arrest pattern disproportionately affects poorer individuals, whether leaders are conscious of that or not.

I determine group targeting to be a “small factor” in explaining policy convergence. Both leaders have opted to target individuals based on their possible gang affiliation and may be using this form as a way of implicitly targeting the poorer sections of society. However, group targeting alone cannot explain the reason for using mass incarceration as a tactic, and the state in both cases does appear to be aiming to remove gang violence from society by imprisoning gang members.

Political Shifts: Significant... and an Introduction to the Multiparty System?

A possible explanation for why El Salvador and Honduras have selected similar policy responses to gang violence could be linked to a particular watershed moment in the political systems of the two states. Both El Salvador and Honduras saw significant shifts in their political systems with the elections of Bukele and Castro. Prior to their elections, El Salvador and Honduras historically hosted two of the most stable two-party political systems in Central America. In El Salvador, this stable system emerged after the Salvadoran Civil War with the entry into politics of the demobilized leftist guerrilla organization, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and the rise of the rightist Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA).

¹⁰⁷ *Highest to Lowest – Prison Population Rate, 2022.*

While the two parties at the end of the civil war were not the only parties in existence, ARENA soon absorbed smaller, more moderate parties, presumably in a move to make ARENA less “far-right” than it seemed. Meanwhile, Honduras had been home to domination by the moderate Liberal Party and the more conservative National Party. This two-party system had been the oldest in Central America, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁸

Yet these two systems did not endure. Salvadorans elected Nayib Bukele to the presidency in 2019, at which time he promised to make changes to Salvadoran politics. Utilizing his charisma, Bukele fulfilled this promise, with his party, Nuevas Ideas, achieving a sizable majority in the Legislative Assembly, El Salvador’s primary legislative body. Bukele founded Nuevas Ideas in 2017 during his tenure as mayor of the capital, San Salvador, amid his frustration with the two-party system.¹⁰⁹ Prior to this point, Salvadoran politics had been dominated by two parties. El Salvador under Nuevas Ideas, a third party, seems to have morphed into a multiparty system. However, El Salvador appears to be multiparty in name only due to the lack of checks on Bukele’s power and his large number of allies in the legislature and on the judiciary.¹¹⁰ Honduras experienced a similar rupture of its system approximately two years later. In November of 2021, Honduras elected its first female president, Xiomara Castro, the leader of the LIBRE Party. Opponents of the 2009 coup of President Manuel Zelaya, Castro’s husband, founded LIBRE in 2011 with the goal of re-solidifying democracy in Honduras.¹¹¹ This election saw a break from the domination of Honduran politics by the National Party, whose most significant opponent in politics prior to this moment was the Liberal Party. Like Bukele’s

¹⁰⁸ Fabrice Lehoucq, *The Politics of Modern Central America: Civil War, Democratization, and Underdevelopment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 142.

¹⁰⁹ Editorial staff, “Bukele Lanza el Movimiento ‘Nuevas Ideas,’” *Contrapunto*, Oct. 25, 2017.

¹¹⁰ Oscar Lopez, “After El Salvador Election, Bukele Is on Verge of Near-Total Control,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 1, 2021.

¹¹¹ “Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE).”

election, Castro's election led to gains for LIBRE, which in turn disrupted the nature of the two-party state.¹¹²

There is significance in the election of these two third-party candidates that extends beyond changes to the political party systems. The election of a candidate from a new party that disrupts an existing stable system implies both literal power change and policy change. One would reasonably expect a candidate from a new party to implement different policies from previous governments. Indeed, while campaigning, Bukele emphasized the restoration of "law and order" in El Salvador,¹¹³ whereas Castro called for anticorruption efforts and political reforms to address crime, a position she quickly reversed.¹¹⁴ Thus, the elections of these new candidates who both promised systemic change encouraged modifying the response to one of the most significant problems facing the country: gang violence. As of 2020, El Salvador and Honduras held the title of having two of the highest homicide rates in the world,¹¹⁵ and gang members carry out many of these homicides.¹¹⁶ In their decisions to address gang violence, both Bukele and Castro, not long after their elections, implemented states of emergency and exception to solve this problem, both of which constitute repressive actions towards a civilian population.¹¹⁷ These responses to crime were more heavy-handed than those previous administrations had implemented. In El Salvador, this response has proven effective at lowering the homicide rate, making neighborhoods seemingly safer and even causing Bukele's popularity

¹¹² Kate Linthicum, "The Promise of a Fresh Start in Honduras Is Tarnished by a Political Crisis," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 25, 2022.

¹¹³ Maria Abi-Habib and Bryan Avelar, "Explosion of Gang Violence Grips El Salvador, Setting Record," *The New York Times*, Mar. 27, 2022.

¹¹⁴ Maldonado, "A Honduran Alcatraz."

¹¹⁵ *Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 People)*, 2022.

¹¹⁶ International Crisis Group, "From Security Miracle to State of Exception," in *A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever* (2022), 10,.

¹¹⁷ Abi-Habib and Avelar, "Explosion of Gang Violence Grips El Salvador, Setting Record," and Marlon González, "Honduras President Declares State of Emergency over Gang Crime," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 25, 2022.

to skyrocket in some polls.¹¹⁸ Intuitively, the success of one state’s policies may cause another state in the region to implement a similar option, which appears to be the case with the state of emergency announced in Honduras and Castro’s verbal commitment to building a large prison for gang members just as El Salvador has done. The success of one third-party leader, Bukele, incentivized another, Castro, to put into place a policy that seems effective in the short-term, has been appreciated by neighboring civilians, and could give her momentum to maintain her popularity as an alternative to pre-existing political domination by two parties.

Both states implemented *mano dura*, although in a significantly stronger way due to the expansion of incarceration and limits on judicial rights, which indicates a new, more drastic policy. Thus, I rank this factor to be a “large factor” in determining reasons for a similar policy.

Political Platforms: Not Relevant

Political views and platforms typically have a sizable impact on policy outcomes. However, this phenomenon does not appear to be the case with El Salvador and Honduras. Both El Salvador and Honduras have historically enacted socially conservative policies, which can be traced to the prominent role of the Catholic Church in Central American society.¹¹⁹ For example, Honduras’ left-leaning Liberal Party still staunchly opposes abortion, a view shared by the Catholic Church.¹²⁰ Castro’s LIBRE Party holds much more progressive views, positioning itself farther to the left; Castro has expressed support for overturning Honduras’ ban on abortions.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Kitroeff, “El Salvador Decimated Its Ruthless Gangs. But at What Cost?” Polls should always be taken with a grain of salt, especially when they project a leader to have an approval rating over eighty percent. Nevertheless, Bukele’s actions, ruthless as they may be, have succeeded in appealing to civilians who want a safer El Salvador, no matter the cost, due to the prolonged nature of gang violence.

¹¹⁹ For more detail on how this plays out, see Christopher W. Hale, “Catholic Church Advocacy in Latin America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2019): 1-21.

¹²⁰ “En el Partido Liberal Estamos en Contra del Aborto,” *El Mundo*, Enlace Global S. de R.L., Sept. 23, 2021.

¹²¹ Anna-Catherine Brigada, “In Honduras, First Woman President Faces Tough Fight on Abortion,” *Reuters*, Dec. 8, 2021.

Meanwhile, El Salvador's right-leaning ARENA has tended to dominate politics, although the FMLN, a less socially conservative party, has had some of its presidential candidates elected to the presidency. Nevertheless, the FMLN did not win a presidential election until 2009 despite coexisting with ARENA for decades prior, and the large role of ARENA in Salvadoran politics ensured that socially conservative policies still prevailed or at least existed in some form.¹²² With the shift to multiparty systems during the elections of Bukele in El Salvador and Castro in Honduras, new political voices have arrived on the political stage. Bukele's Nuevas Ideas maintains a "big tent" position, refusing to align with a particular ideology, which reveals that Bukele has not aimed to significantly change political platforms that predominate Salvadoran politics, although Bukele individually holds socially conservative views.¹²³ By contrast, LIBRE's victories in politics have centered political platforms that have historically been on the fringe of Honduran governance.

Because of this contrast in the politics of Bukele and Castro, the ideology of the leaders does not appear to connect to their policy choices, for both leaders have selected similar responses to gang violence in their states. The issue of gang violence has harmed the countries of El Salvador and Honduras to such a degree that new leaders who promise to address crime must appear to be taking some kind of substantive action against the problem, and few actions seem as strong as implementing harsh state policy to clamp down on crime. Stricter responses to crime in Latin America historically span political ideologies and views due to crime often featuring as a forefront concern throughout Latin American states with high homicide rates.¹²⁴ Indeed, mass incarceration as a policy choice in Latin America tends to be implemented regardless of

¹²² Will Freeman and Lucas Perelló, "In El Salvador, Broken Promises Have Forced the Establishment Out," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, Mar. 2, 2021.

¹²³ Gabriel Labrador, "How Bukele Crafted a Best-Selling Political Brand," *ElFaro.net*, May 3, 2022.

¹²⁴ Holland, "Right on Crime?," 46.

differences between leaders in power.¹²⁵ In both El Salvador and Honduras, Bukele and Castro have implemented carceral responses to crime, despite Bukele aligning with a centrist party and Castro with a leftist party. Such an understanding makes clearer why two leaders would select similarly heavy-handed responses to crime.

While the parties themselves have specific ideologies, those platforms do not always align with the exact views of their leaders. In the case of El Salvador and Honduras, both presidents have emphasized their own policy views over those of the party. Bukele's conservative views indicate support for carceral policies despite the more centrist views of his own political party, but Castro's views, which place her farther to the left and have previously indicated support for reducing police militarization, do not align with a political decision to implement a state of emergency and publicly state a plan to build a massive prison, even if that plan has not yet come to fruition.¹²⁶

I rank political platforms as a “nonfactor” influencing policy convergence because the platforms of the parties and their leaders, two different entities, do not match to explain similar policy outcomes. Political views are indeed highly adaptable; however, in the cases of Bukele and Castro, their views do not align sufficiently and reveal that responding to crime in a repressive way serves as an opportunistic action to maintain one's position in power rather than acting in line with one's political platform.

The Role of the United States: Only a Partial Explanation

Investigating what led both Bukele and Castro to select states of exception and emergency to address gang violence, with the knowledge that both are Central American states

¹²⁵ Hathazy and Müller, “The Rebirth of the Prison in Latin America,” 120.

¹²⁶ Guillén, “Honduras: the Country Where the Bukele Model Failed.”

in a region over which the United States historically aims to exert control, leads one to consider whether the United States had any contemporary influence on the policy decisions. Since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine, in which U.S. President James Monroe claimed the entire Western Hemisphere as an American “sphere of influence,” the United States has felt it has the right to exercise control over events occurring in Latin America, regardless of whether such actions are justifiable. The United States has struggled to relinquish this role it assigned itself and has frequently meddled in Latin American politics.¹²⁷ The United States has long hosted an influential model for mass incarceration, which is merely one manifestation of its role in affecting policy decisions in the region. Although the governments of El Salvador and Honduras have not imprisoned individuals with racial bias as the United States has,¹²⁸ both states have employed discriminatory policies that have incarcerated individuals based on suspected gang affiliation. This form of discriminatory imprisonment seems to have been inspired by similar methods in the United States.

While the United States influenced the creation of penal policies in Latin America, the current state of relations between Bukele and Castro and the Biden Administration reveals inconsistencies in their respective relationships that show the United States and its Central American neighbors do not always agree on policy. Biden has openly criticized Bukele’s government for rejecting democratic values.¹²⁹ Bukele enjoyed much closer relations with the Trump Administration due to closer alignment of political views.¹³⁰ Meanwhile, Castro has so far only been president during the Biden Administration and has been quite close to Biden’s

¹²⁷ Smith, “The United States and Latin America: Into a New Era,” 250-251.

¹²⁸ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 5.

¹²⁹ Chris Megerian and Joshua Goodman, “Salvadoran Leader Rebuffs Blinken Effort to Bolster Summit,” *The Associated Press*, Jun. 9, 2022.

¹³⁰ U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, *Remarks by President Trump and President Bukele of El Salvador Before Bilateral Meeting*, New York: September 25, 2019.

government, aiding in the corruption trial of previous Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández, promising more transparency under a nominally pro-democracy government,¹³¹ and visibly allying with Vice President Kamala Harris, a show of solidarity among two first female leaders.¹³² Bukele's presently colder relations with the United States indicate less of a connection between current American foreign policy and Central American crime policy, although there may have been influence from alignment with the Trump Administration.

I rank this factor to be a “small factor,” for the role of the United States may have held some influence in policy outcomes but did not play a sufficiently large role to ensure immediate policy convergence.

Conclusion

The common decision by El Salvador and Honduras to address gang violence with states of emergency and exception and expansion of the prison system can be explained by certain commonalities between the two states. Out of the factors I analyzed, I found weak state capacity in both El Salvador and Honduras to be a “large factor” in causing the same policy outcome because both states lack the infrastructural power to address the root causes of gang violence. Changes to the political system also constituted a “large factor” because of the disruptiveness of electing third-party candidates who want to implement change but not so much as to risk failing reelection. “Small factors” influencing the common decision include the role of the United States as a regional actor and targeting based on group affiliation. Political platforms and similar

¹³¹ Marlon González and Michael Balsamo, “Honduras Ex-President Hernández Extradited to U.S.,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 2022.

¹³² Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Natalie Kitroeff, “Harris Seeks Ally in Honduras as She Revisits Central America,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 27, 2022.

histories were “nonfactors” because these aspects between the two states are highly dissimilar, thus preventing a logical comparison.

Large Factor	Small Factor	Nonfactor
Weak state capacity	United States influence	Political platforms
Changes to the political system	Group targeting	Similar histories

Table 2: Table summarizing nonfactors, small factors, and large factors influencing policy outcomes in El Salvador and Honduras.

Many of these factors either directly or indirectly arise from the existence of the infrastructurally weak state, which must be addressed to prevent crime from thriving in Central America.

Chapter Four: Nicaragua as a Case of Divergence

Introduction

The similarities in how Bukele’s El Salvador and Castro’s Honduras have responded to gang violence have roots in certain commonalities the two states and their leaders share. When one compares the policies of these two states to those of Nicaragua on crime, however, one notices differences between the former two and the latter. Nicaragua, unlike its Northern Triangle counterparts, has not responded to gang violence with carceral strategies, largely due to gang violence not being as significant of an organized problem in Nicaragua as it is in El Salvador and Honduras. Nicaragua makes for a compelling negative case because the state shares similarities with El Salvador and Honduras that would make it reasonable to expect similar policy outcomes, such as regional proximity, racial homogeneity,¹³³ history of colonization by the Spanish,¹³⁴ and high poverty levels.¹³⁵

To evaluate the differences between Nicaragua and the other two states, I used Mill’s method of difference combined with the Likert scale I utilized in the previous chapter to determine which distinctions between the three states were most relevant in explaining the contrasting situations and the level of relevance each factor held. To do so, I identified areas where, despite general commonalities between the states, I felt there would be a divergence between Nicaragua and its Northern Triangle neighbors that could explain the distinct outcomes in crime policy. After determining whether these factors did or did not produce any contrast (i.e. “nonfactor”), I differentiated between those that did with the use of the Likert scale by referring

¹³³ *The World Factbook 2021* (“El Salvador,” “Honduras,” and “Nicaragua”).

¹³⁴ For further reading on the Spanish colonization of Central America, see Bethell, ed., *Central America Since Independence* and Perez-Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America*.

¹³⁵ *GDP per capita (current US\$)*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022.

to them as either “small factors” or “large factors,” depending on whether I felt the factor had a small or large impact on the policy outcome. Nicaragua does not use mass incarceration against gangs, but that should not be misunderstood as saying the Nicaraguan state under Daniel Ortega does not target populations for political reasons. Ortega’s Nicaragua, as I will detail below, uses carceral policies against opponents of his regime. In the analysis of this chapter, I will examine the different histories of Nicaragua and El Salvador and Honduras, Ortega’s policies as president, poverty and gang structures, migration, and, woven into all these categories, Nicaragua’s state capacity. I expect differences in histories to be the most crucial factor leading to divergence, but I expect to find all these factors except poverty to be relevant in fostering divergence in some way.

Historical Contrasts: The Essential Point of Divergence

The key reason for the lack of harsh responses to gang violence in Nicaragua is the lack of organized gang violence manifesting in Nicaragua in the last quarter of the twentieth century. To understand this difference, one must examine the history of Nicaragua after 1979 in contrast to those of El Salvador and Honduras and observe that Nicaragua’s history differs significantly from other Central American states, despite regional proximity. The Sandinista government that led Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990 cultivated a marginally stronger state for Nicaragua that, although by no means at full infrastructural strength, held enough capability to prevent gang violence from festering in the country the way it did in El Salvador and Honduras.

Prior to 1979, the Somoza family dominated Nicaraguan politics, enforcing an extractive system of governance that strengthened ties with the United States and failed to provide aid to its general population.¹³⁶ This repression remained the norm until the Sandinista Revolution of

¹³⁶ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 103.

1979, in which the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)¹³⁷ overthrew the government and established a brand of a Marxist-Leninist state that, despite the label, implemented the Marxist-Leninist ideology in a Nicaragua-specific way in an effort to provide for the population. The Somozas had not previously made such an effort.¹³⁸ These programs were not without faults: the FSLN faced threats to its stability throughout its period of governance from the U.S.-backed Contras, a militia which consisted of opponents to the government who had been sympathetic to the Somozas, and the resources required by the war with the Contras, combined with debt, limited reforms the FSLN could implement in Nicaragua.¹³⁹ However, the FSLN did make some effort to change the state to provide for its people. For the purposes of this thesis, the most significant of these efforts was the reshaping of the police force in Nicaragua.¹⁴⁰ Instead of maintaining a repressive police force, Nicaragua pursued a more community-focused method that involved the women-led Sandinista Police, which sought to decrease human rights abuses by police, and Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS) that patrolled communities to prevent crime.¹⁴¹ While this policing model was not entirely unproblematic due to its willingness to persecute regime opponents, Sandinista policing methods avoided militarized police responses that prevailed in most other Central American states and kept the homicide rate substantially lower than those of El Salvador and Honduras.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ I will alternate between FSLN and Sandinistas when referring to adherents to this movement as the terms are interchangeable.

¹³⁸ Salvador Martí i Puig and Claire Wright, “The Adaptation of the FSLN: Daniel Ortega’s Leadership and Democracy in Nicaragua,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 52, no. 4 (2010): 82. further detail on the history of the FSLN and the Somozas prior to this point, see Robert J. Sierakowski, *Sandinistas: A Moral History* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

¹³⁹ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 113 and 116.

¹⁴⁰ Dammert and Malone, “From Community Policing to Political Police in Nicaragua,” 84.

¹⁴¹ Robert Sierakowski, “‘We Didn’t Want to Be Like Somoza’s Guardia’: Policing, Crime and Nicaraguan Exceptionalism,” in *A Nicaraguan Exceptionalism?: Debating the Legacy of the Sandinista Revolution*, edited by Hilary Francis, 28 (University of London Press, 2020).

¹⁴² Dammert and Malone, “From Community Policing to Political Police in Nicaragua,” 89.

By implementing a more community-based and less harsh method of policing and reinforcing trust in the policing system, Nicaragua established a stronger infrastructural state that could lower crime without alienating the public. This method of preventive policing allowed Nicaragua to avoid the expansion of gang violence, even as Nicaragua fought the Contras in a war that should have devastated the country more than it did.¹⁴³ In 1990, when Nicaraguans elected Violeta Chamorro to the presidency, the FSLN peacefully left power, and the Chamorro government, despite being of a different and farther right political orientation, continued the community-based prevention of crime.¹⁴⁴ These efforts did not fully prevent any violence from developing as youth street gangs began to form in Nicaraguan cities, but these gangs did not organize themselves as institutionally as MS-13 and Barrio 18 did in El Salvador and Honduras.¹⁴⁵ In 2007, when Daniel Ortega, former FSLN government leader from 1979 to 1990, returned to the presidency, giving him control over the government once again, organized gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18 still never developed as violent crime remained low compared to its neighbors in the Northern Triangle.¹⁴⁶ The Nicaraguan state thus never had to implement *mano dura* policies because it did not have the problem of gangs of the magnitude that El Salvador and Honduras had.

I rate different histories to be a “large factor” explaining the different responses to gangs: history dictated different severities of problematic violence.

¹⁴³ Dammert and Malone, “From Community Policing to Political Police in Nicaragua,” 85.

¹⁴⁴ Dammert and Malone, “From Community Policing to Political Police in Nicaragua,” 84.

¹⁴⁵ Dennis Rodgers, “After the Gang: Desistance, Violence and Occupational Options in Nicaragua,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 55, no. 4 (2023): 683-684.

¹⁴⁶ Dammert and Malone, “From Community Policing to Political Police in Nicaragua,” 87.

Daniel Ortega's Politics and State Capacity: A Crucial Factor

Nicaragua's government operates in a significantly dissimilar way from those of Honduras and El Salvador, and the reason for this can be tied to the politics and governance of Daniel Ortega. Unlike Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Xiomara Castro in Honduras, Ortega is openly a repressive, authoritarian leader who has been in power for longer and is reelected regularly with increasingly large margins.¹⁴⁷ The way Ortega and his government operate reveals that, although Nicaragua does not pursue repressive policies towards gangs, it suppresses the agency of its population with carceral methods in other respects. An authoritarian state will repress its population, but it will not always do so in the same way other states with authoritarian tendencies do. Such methods depend on the leader, and Ortega's leadership, which borders on being a cult of personality, allows Ortega to target the section of the population which most threatens him: political dissenters.

The election of Ortega in 2006 differed from those of Bukele and Castro because Ortega was not a relative newcomer from a new party that had never held the presidency. Ortega ran for president under the FSLN, and his election marked his and the FSLN's first return to power since 1990.¹⁴⁸ Unlike his Northern Triangle contemporaries, Ortega did not have to propose radical changes to justify his election as a third-party candidate because he was not from a third party due to the entrenched nature of the FSLN and was already known by segments of the Nicaraguan electorate. The election of Ortega, however, did not mean that all would continue the same as it had when he was previously the head of the government under the FSLN from 1979 to 1990. In fact, with his reelection in 2006, Ortega reversed his policies that he had previously promoted as

¹⁴⁷ *Nicaragua – National Assembly (Historical Archive of Parliamentary Election Results)*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011.

Nicaragua – National Assembly. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021.

¹⁴⁸ Martí i Puig Serra, "Nicaragua: De-democratization and Regime Crisis," 119-120.

FSLN leader, engaging in authoritarian actions. He also adopted socially conservative views, particularly on abortion, in an apparent attempt to court the religious sectors of the largely Catholic population.¹⁴⁹ Authoritarian actions under Ortega have included harassing and closing critical news outlets;¹⁵⁰ effectively rigging elections; illegally appointing his wife, Rosario Murillo, as his vice president;¹⁵¹ and, most notably, imprisoning anti-government protesters and dissenters.¹⁵² Due to Ortega's presidency continuing uninterrupted since 2006, Ortega has solidified his political rule and grip on power and dissent.

While the actions by Ortega's government certainly indicate a despotic state, I argue that Nicaragua does have some infrastructural strength, although this strength is largely residual from past governments. However, the comparative infrastructural strength of the Nicaraguan state to its Northern Triangle neighbors does not mean that the state is infrastructurally strong. The actions Ortega has taken as president to ensure his rule over Nicaragua continues without threats to his power have led to suppression of dissent and carceral approaches to silencing those who speak out against his state. The nature of Ortega's repressive and despotic state prevents checks on his power as he can take actions without criticism from a legislature stacked in Ortega's favor and largely independently of the demands of social institutions, such as the Catholic Church, which indicates that the state holds more despotic than infrastructural power. The carceral methods Nicaragua uses against dissenters, although not identical in motivation to the repression of gang members in El Salvador and Honduras, certainly overlaps in terms of employed strategy. Hence, while the government of Ortega's Nicaragua holds a small amount of infrastructural

¹⁴⁹ International Crisis Group, "Ortega's Apparatus of Power," 5-6.

¹⁵⁰ "Staff of La Prensa, Nicaragua's Leading Independent Newspaper, Forced to Flee Abroad," *Reporters Without Borders*, Jul. 28, 2022.

¹⁵¹ Martí i Puig and Serra, "Nicaragua: De-democratization and Regime Crisis," 124 (elections) and 122 (vice-presidency of Murillo).

¹⁵² Gabriela Selser, "UN Says Nicaragua's Human Rights Violations and Persecution of Dissidents Are on the Rise," *The Associated Press*, Sept. 12, 2023.

power that is certainly larger than those of El Salvador and Honduras, the state is not sufficiently infrastructurally strong to avoid repressing its population, even if that repression manifests against different segments of the population.

Ortega's repression of state dissenters mirrors the actions of Bukele and Castro against gang members. While Ortega has not been using mass incarceration against gangs because gangs do not plague Nicaraguan society the way they do in the Northern Triangle, Ortega has used *mano dura*-esque policies against those who speak in opposition to the regime, although he does not call these policies *mano dura* as *mano dura* is gang-specific. He has emulated the same policies of mass imprisonment and abrogating civil and judicial rights for political opponents that El Salvador and Honduras use against suspected gang members. Moreover, Nicaragua has a higher incarceration rate per capita than Honduras.¹⁵³ Imprisoning political activists, like imprisoning gang members, will to some extent limit their direct protesting power but will not be enough to stop anti-government protests from continuing.¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, Ortega, in addition to incarcerating those who publicly oppose him, has also targeted the Catholic Church due to its increasing opposition towards him. Ortega had originally aimed to garner support from the Church by adapting his views to align with those of the Church, yet the success of obtaining this support seems to have been balanced out by his repressive behavior. By incarcerating church leaders, Ortega may be silencing some of those leaders, but he is not silencing their movements and is merely fueling opposition to his regime from Catholics, who make up a substantial portion of the Nicaraguan population. This Catholic opposition comes

¹⁵³ *Highest to Lowest – Prison Population Rate, 2022.*

¹⁵⁴ Two striking examples of this phenomenon are the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, which only further fueled anti-apartheid activism, and the more contemporary example of Iran, where imprisoning those protesting the government has done little to limit the momentum of these protesters. For a basic understanding of these two instances, see the following articles: Greg Myre, "The Day Nelson Mandela Walked Out of Prison," *NPR*, June 27, 2013, and Somayeh Malekian, "Iranian Activists Go on Hunger Strike over Execution of Protester Mohammad Ghobadlou," *ABC News*, Jan. 25, 2024.

from Nicaraguan Catholics and even the Vatican itself, a severe condemnation from the administrative center of the population that should be most supportive of Ortega's social policies and views.¹⁵⁵ Like the incarceration policies of Bukele and Castro, the incarceration methods Ortega is using will not prevent dissent from accumulating in Nicaragua, as Ortega's harsh actions have failed to stop protesters from challenging the population.

Although Ortega has not targeted gang violence, he has targeted political dissidents with the same force that Bukele and Castro have used against gangs. In this way, he has made himself into a Somoza-like leader, a policy he has been able to continue due to the political name he has made for himself for decades in Nicaragua.¹⁵⁶ His limitation of protest has also aided this effort, yet that does not make the effort successful. Thus, I rate Ortega's politics to be a "large factor," for although his politics alone do not explain the difference in response because they do not explain the root of the issue, they do explain how Nicaragua's government has avoided gang policy and instead placed harsh policies on political opponents.

Poverty Levels and Gang Structure: Minimal to No Impact

Patterns of gang membership in El Salvador and Honduras reveal that people often join gangs to have a semblance of upward social mobility. Due to the weak structure of society, gangs often provide more stability for citizens than the government does in Central America.¹⁵⁷ Nicaragua has more severe levels of poverty than its neighbors in the Northern Triangle and is statistically the second-poorest country using GDP per capita in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ "Nicaraguan Government Bans Jesuit Order and Says All Its Property Will Be Confiscated," *The Associated Press*, Aug. 23, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Martí i Puig and Serra, "Nicaragua: De-democratization and Regime Crisis," 117.

¹⁵⁷ Bruneau, "'Pandillas' and Security in Central America," 159.

¹⁵⁸ *GDP per capita (current US\$)*, 2022.

Considering that people join gangs in El Salvador and Honduras to escape poverty, one would assume that the high poverty levels in Nicaragua would coincide with high gang membership. Yet Nicaragua has substantially lower homicide levels than those of El Salvador and Honduras, indicative of lower gang membership levels.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, as Bruneau (2014) notes, poverty alone cannot explain gang membership, for other factors also influence whether someone joins a gang.¹⁶⁰

Due to the contrast between the FSLN's rule over Nicaragua versus the lack of an infrastructurally capable state in El Salvador and Honduras during the 1980s, gangs as institutionalized as MS-13 and Barrio 18 never took root in Nicaraguan society.¹⁶¹ The gangs that appear in Nicaragua are primarily youth street gangs and are not organized in the way these other larger gangs tend to be. Rodgers (2017), in his studies of Nicaraguan gangs, identifies a difference between the *maras* that dominate the Northern Triangle and the *pandillas*, or youth street gangs, that certain people join but only for brief periods of time in Nicaragua.¹⁶² The weaker structure of Nicaraguan gangs stems from the social programs that the FSLN initially implemented in its first period of rule, and although poverty remains rampant in Nicaragua and Ortega has significantly modified social programs into irrelevance, some social programs still exist and seem to have had some effect over the longer run in giving people alternatives to joining gangs.¹⁶³ However, organized crime does exist in Nicaragua in the form of international drug trafficking, which the state has not been able to stop from operating along the coast of the

¹⁵⁹ *Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 People)*, 2022. While crime statistics remain lower in Nicaragua than in many other Central American states, statistics from authoritarian governments, especially Nicaragua's, should always be viewed with caution, for the state in this case will release statistics that support Ortega's methods and will limit which statistics it releases to prevent itself from overwhelming criticism.

¹⁶⁰ Bruneau, "'Pandillas' and Security in Central America," 159.

¹⁶¹ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 6.

¹⁶² Rodgers, "*Bróderes* in Arms," 649, and Rodgers, "After the Gang," 680.

¹⁶³ Martí i Puig and Serra, "Nicaragua: De-democratization and Regime Crisis," 126.

Atlantic Ocean.¹⁶⁴ Drug trafficking can offer a lucrative life for someone for whom the state does not provide, but this form of organized crime still does not employ levels of violence as high as those of MS-13 or Barrio 18, keeping homicide levels lower in Nicaragua.¹⁶⁵

Higher poverty levels in Nicaragua serve as a “nonfactor” in explaining differences between responses to crime in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua because higher poverty levels would theoretically lead to higher gang membership, which has not happened in Nicaragua. Further, since gangs do not manifest in the same way in Nicaragua as they do in El Salvador and Honduras, there is no need for a response to gangs. Gang structure, however, serves as a “small factor” explaining the different responses because the less institutionalized nature of Nicaraguan gangs means the response to these gangs does not need to be as heavy-handed as those of El Salvador and Honduras. However, gang structure itself is not a sufficient explanation for the differences in gang responses because the structure is just one part of the history of divergences between gang responses in Central America.

Migration Patterns as a Driver of Policy Differences

A critical difference between Nicaragua and its Northern Triangle neighbors is the recent histories of migration in the three states. Contrasting migration patterns help explain why Nicaragua does not have the same problems of gang violence that El Salvador and Honduras face. In Nicaragua, people fled the country during and after the Sandinista Revolution, but the United States did not generally deport these migrants back to Nicaragua, allowing the state to avoid the violence that El Salvador and Honduras faced, largely due to the lack of Nicaraguan

¹⁶⁴ Cruz, “Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America,” 5.

¹⁶⁵ Cruz, “Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America,” 25.

gangs that formed in the United States by migrants.¹⁶⁶ This emigration from Nicaragua occurred without damaging the state as much as migration did in El Salvador and, via spillover of gang violence, in Honduras.¹⁶⁷

Once the United States started deporting gang members to El Salvador and Honduras, states which could not handle the increased migration due to their infrastructural weakness, gang violence started to increase in those countries. However, this trend did not happen contemporaneously in Nicaragua. The United States received an influx of Nicaraguan immigration after the Sandinistas took power due to the fear some Nicaraguans had of the FSLN's threats to their standing in society. Thus, the migration pool consisted of more upper- and middle-class Nicaraguans, which contrasted with the lower-class status of those who left El Salvador during the civil war.¹⁶⁸ Higher-class individuals have better economic prospects, making it less likely for these higher-class individuals to join gangs. The United States opposed the Sandinista government as part of its Cold War stance that opposed any government or movement that seemed to promote socialist or communist ideals.¹⁶⁹ Hence, the United States would not deport Nicaraguans leaving the country, instead welcoming them into the States. Meanwhile, the FSLN continued to implement programs to strengthen the state until the government was voted out of office and replaced with the pro-U.S. Violeta Chamorro, making the government more in line with American values.¹⁷⁰

In the case of Nicaragua, a power vacuum never manifested in the same way that one did in El Salvador and Honduras due to their weaker states, thus preventing organized crime from

¹⁶⁶ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 6-7.

¹⁶⁷ I discuss these migration patterns in greater detail in Chapter Three.

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth M. Larson, "Nicaraguan Refugees in Costa Rica from 1980-1993," *Yearbook, Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers* 19 (1993): 67-68.

¹⁶⁹ Jorge G. Castañeda, "Latin America and the End of the Cold War," *Transition*, no. 59 (1993): 48.

¹⁷⁰ Gary Prevost, "The Nicaraguan Revolution: Six Years after the Sandinista Electoral Defeat," *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1996): 310.

taking root. I rate migration patterns to be a “large factor” in the lack of gang formation because Nicaraguan migration did not lead to gang formation or deportation by the United States to a structurally weak state.

Conclusion

Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega has not used harsh, *mano dura*-type policies to repress and aim to eliminate gang violence, which differentiates it from Bukele’s El Salvador and Castro’s Honduras. Using Mill’s method of difference, one can understand why these differences exist; this divergence in policy largely results from Nicaragua’s lack of gang violence at the same organized scale as in El Salvador and Honduras. I found contrasting histories to be a “large factor” explaining these differences because the different histories of governance in the three states aid in explaining Nicaragua’s lack of gang violence, largely linked to the rule of the FSLN from 1979 to 1990. I also found Ortega’s policies to be a “large factor” in this difference in policy response because Ortega has channeled his repression less towards gangs and more towards political opponents and dissidents. Historically, the dictatorial Somoza family fueled dissent, which, despite efforts to repress the dissent, emboldened the FSLN to take power. Now, as Ortega incarcerates opponents to his regime, he himself is acting like a Somoza and will likely only further foment dissent. Migration patterns figured as a “large factor” as well because Nicaragua in the 1980s and 1990s did not experience a large influx of deportations back to a state that could not handle them, which occurred in the cases of El Salvador and Honduras and served as a catalyst for the prevalence of gangs in those two states. I ranked poverty levels as a “nonfactor” because poverty levels, in the case of Nicaragua, do not correlate with gang membership, but gang structure is a “small factor” because the more loosely organized nature of

gangs allows for but does not necessarily equate to shorter-term gang membership. Furthermore, organized crime still plagues Nicaragua in the form of drug trafficking.

Large Factor	Small Factor	Nonfactor
Contrasting histories Daniel Ortega's policies Migration patterns	Gang structure	Poverty levels

Table 3: Table summarizing nonfactors, small factors, and large factors influencing policy outcomes in Nicaragua in contrast with El Salvador and Honduras.

These rankings all serve as a measurement of state capacity, which evidently in Nicaragua is just high enough to prevent people from joining gangs at high levels as compared to El Salvador and Honduras but is insufficient to prevent opposition to Ortega's system of governance.

Chapter Five: Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The work of this thesis has determined that Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele and Honduran President Xiomara Castro have selected similar carceral policies to address increased gang violence due to the infrastructural weakness of their states in addressing root causes of gang violence in society and in using all branches of the state (i.e. legislative, executive, and judicial, with all selected in a fair way) to coordinate a response to gang violence. Other factors that influenced the common decisions by Bukele and Castro to use states of exception and emergency along with prison expansions against suspected gang members include disruptions to the states' two-party systems, influence from the United States, and targeting populations based on potential gang affiliation. I expected similarities in histories of the two states and political platforms of the two third parties (Nuevas Ideas and LIBRE) and their leaders to not have an impact on policy decision-making, and my research and analysis concurred with this hypothesis.

This thesis has also found that Nicaragua's policies towards gangs differ from those historically implemented in El Salvador and Honduras because gangs never took root in an organized way as they did in El Salvador and Honduras. This divergence is a direct result of the differing histories between Nicaragua and its Northern Triangle neighbors. Nicaragua's Sandinista government maintained enough state infrastructure to prevent gang violence from expanding, allowing the state to not need to focus on gang violence as much as its regional neighbors. President Daniel Ortega's policies have also contributed to this divergence, for his main concern has been consolidating his despotic power and incarcerating dissenters. This tactic mirrors Bukele's and Castro's carceral policies towards gang members; Nicaragua is using the same tactic of imprisonment and state harassment but against a different demographic. Migration

patterns and gang structure in Nicaragua contrast with those of El Salvador and Honduras, providing further insight into the different nature of gangs in the two states. Poverty levels, however, did not play a role in influencing Nicaraguan gang membership.

What remains surprising in these cases is the overwhelming popularity among the public of carceral policies, particularly in El Salvador, where these patterns are most well documented.¹⁷¹ Heavy-handed policies remain popular because these policies have the most successful immediate effect in reducing gang violence (or, in the case of Nicaragua, dissent). The success of policies in this respect in El Salvador has also influenced Honduras to implement similar policies, which appears to have a similar effect on public opinion. Thus, rolling back on these policies at this moment due to their short-term success could jeopardize the re-elections of Bukele and Castro, which explains their willingness to keep such repressive policies in place.

This investigation has identified patterns across El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua that can explain the policy choices their presidents have made while also noting false patterns that do not justify policy. I have demonstrated key problems with common assumptions about Central America and provided explanations that make the case for convergence between El Salvador and Honduras and divergence between those two states and Nicaragua. This research raises concerns about the current functionality of these states and the inefficacy of incarceration as a form of maintaining state infrastructural power, with despotic power reigning and failing to alleviate violence.

¹⁷¹ Kitroeff, “El Salvador Decimated Its Ruthless Gangs. But At What Cost?”

Possible Future Points of Interest

Several areas exist where others should conduct further research into topics related to this thesis. The first and, in my view, most glaring, omission from my own thesis was my decision to not include Guatemala. This Northern Triangle member merits investigation into its own patterns of gang violence and state weakness, but the analysis of this country would be more complicated than those of its neighbors due to the ethnic diversity of Guatemala.¹⁷² Guatemala has much larger indigenous populations than its regional neighbors, so an analysis of state weakness in tandem with responses to gang violence would require an intersectional analysis factoring in the experiences of these indigenous peoples.

Another Central American state I did not explore that is worth analyzing along the same lines as El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua is Costa Rica. Costa Rica has avoided any gang development and has fostered democracy.¹⁷³ Additionally, fitting assumptions about poverty levels and gang violence, Costa Rica is home to one of Central America's most prosperous economies.¹⁷⁴ Future research should examine how and why Costa Rica's comparatively low despotic power and high infrastructural power have allowed the country to differ from its neighbors in terms of having a more functional state.

The "Bukele model" of states of emergency and mass imprisonment to address gang violence are manifesting elsewhere in Latin America, and I would value an analysis that examines how these policies function and their implications for the strength of the state outside El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. For example, Ecuador on January 8, 2024, implemented

¹⁷² "Guatemala," *The World Factbook 2021*.

¹⁷³ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 2-3.

¹⁷⁴ "Costa Rica," *The World Factbook 2021*.

its own state of emergency to combat organized crime.¹⁷⁵ I am curious to see how this plays out in Ecuador, a country outside Central America, and would enjoy reading an analysis that compares that state, and any others that develop similar policies, to El Salvador's influential model.

Additionally, this analysis will not remain unaffected as political situations develop in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Future research should examine how these policies of state repression to address crime will or will not change under an imminent second Bukele term, under a potential second term for Castro, and, in the future, under other leaders if and when Bukele and Castro exit power. Furthermore, although it seems unlikely that Ortega will soon willingly step down from power, if he were to do so or were to pass away, a new leader would be needed in Nicaragua, and the policies of that future leader towards dissent and any development of gang violence would merit research and analysis.

Finally, scholars should conduct an analysis of the lives of those incarcerated in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. My thesis did not detail these aspects because they fell out of the scope of my analysis, but an examination of the daily experiences of people repressed by carceral systems and the opinions of incarcerated people in these three states would provide insight into how policy affects populations at the individual level. Human rights implications would also be better examined through the lens of incarcerated individuals; a study of people living in prison systems could reveal information pertaining to human rights abuses. This type of research would in turn contribute to awareness of human rights violations within prison systems and guide organizations towards restorative and non-carceral punishments for anyone potentially involved in a crime.

¹⁷⁵ Daniela Pulido, "Ecuador President Extends State of Emergency amidst 'Internal Armed Conflict,'" *JURIST*, JURIST Legal News & Research Services, Inc., Mar. 9, 2024.

Policy Recommendations

Having concluded this thesis, I compiled some thoughts on where policy can and should change to correctly address gang violence and dissent. There are both logistical and political problems with mass incarceration. Imprisonment at high rates is unsustainable due to the possibility of overcrowding prisons and the eventual need to construct more prisons in the future. Mass imprisonment remains popular among the public in El Salvador and inspires similar developments in the region, but when that tactic loses political favorability, politicians will be at risk of losing elections and will need to adapt their policies. Here, I discuss suggestions for the governments of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua; for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which can supplement government (in)action; and for the United States, whose historical hegemony in Central America requires addressing. My suggestions are not completely prepared for implementation as the focus of this thesis is not to advise on policy, but I do offer starting points for these three entities to implement change.

To reduce mass incarceration and more effectively resolve internal issues in their states, the governments of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua must address the root causes of violence and dissent. The states must work to strengthen their infrastructural capacity through free and fair elections, the utilization of all branches of government while increasing political and social perspectives at all levels of government, and the expansion of state funding to implement long-term strategies to improve socioeconomic conditions for their populations. These strategies could include multilateral initiatives with other Central American states or aid from international organizations such as the United Nations or the Organization of American States. More immediately, the governments of these three states must make a genuine effort to mitigate corruption, which will likely require oversight from an inter-governmental organization

or a non-governmental organization to ensure politicians reduce corruption in governance. Furthermore, the three countries should end their lengthy states of emergency and exception and restore the civil and judicial rights of their citizens. This effort would reincorporate holding fair and efficient trials, ensuring real evidence exists for convictions, and not incarcerating children for long periods of time without due process. The final piece of this strategy requires reducing prison capacities, imprisoning fewer individuals, strengthening prison security, and implementing restorative forms of justice that avoid incarcerating those who have permanently left gangs and rehabilitate rather than imprison individuals who have committed minor gang crimes or were coerced into joining gangs.

However, with the current state of functionality and the low likelihood to implement these changes in the governments of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, putting these reforms into place that require simultaneous implementation will be highly difficult to convince the governments to do. Enforcing the implementation of these changes in the three states will likely require both a desire on the part of the international community to improve conditions for citizens in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, and either funding incentives or sanctions for the three states. The next step, should the governments of the three states reject these changes, is to involve NGOs. For example, the Innocence Project, an American NGO that works to overturn wrongful convictions and release people from prison, could be replicated in Central America.¹⁷⁶ Similar organizations could be founded by human rights activists in Central America¹⁷⁷ to work to release those falsely accused of gang membership or unfairly imprisoned due to their dissent against the government. While such organizations may struggle to release those imprisoned in

¹⁷⁶ “History,” *Innocence Project*, 2024. Explore their website for further information on the work done by this NGO.

¹⁷⁷ Human rights activists of Central American nationalities or long-term bases in Central America, specifically the three countries discussed in this thesis, would be most qualified to form these organizations due to their intimate knowledge of governance and culture within El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

repressive states, this work would at minimum raise more awareness about these human rights violations and encourage more domestic or international investment in overturning wrongful convictions. NGOs could also make efforts to secure asylum status in other states for those persecuted in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua to offer them a life free from repression and imprisonment for crimes they did not commit or for which they should receive a fair trial and, if applicable, a fair sentence.

The United States should also play a role in helping improve conditions in the three states given that the United States has historically involved itself in Central American politics for the worse and should aim to better the situation. American politicians often fail to implement significant wholesale policy changes, which renders this section much more idealist than practical. In a hypothetical perfect world, the United States would completely stop interfering in Central American politics due to the historic problems with such actions. However, the United States is unlikely to isolate itself from the region, so, at minimum, the United States could expand its own asylum programs to aid those persecuted in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua in leaving their countries. Of course, this expansion would be challenging because neither Democrats nor Republicans have successfully expanded or seem keen to expand these programs.¹⁷⁸ Due to these problems, other regional states that are more open to asylum programs could open their borders to those escaping state repression. Yet it would be of greater value if Central Americans could live freely and peacefully in their own states. Thus, the United States, whose mass incarceration model has had influences on prison expansion in Central America, could begin to reduce its own policies of mass imprisonment. However, this action also remains unlikely due to the long-term need to critically examine and address racism in policing, courts,

¹⁷⁸ Bridget Bowman and Sahil Kapur, "Democrats' Pivot to Offense on Border Security Faces an Early Test in New York Race," *NBC News*, NBC Universal, Feb. 9, 2024.

and sentencing. If the United States did indeed work to reduce mass incarceration tactics, the country plays an influential enough role on the global stage that other countries would notice this reduction and perhaps emulate it.

The most glaring issue with reducing imprisonment and reinstating civil and judicial rights while attempting to reduce the conditions that encourage people to join gangs is the support these policies have among citizens. States and NGOs will need to craft the exact messaging that can most effectively convince citizens that policies that aim to improve socioeconomic conditions within the state will work to stem gang violence. After doing my own complex research, I reached this conclusion, but communications directors need to find the best way to distill these arguments in an uncomplicated and brief way that will encourage others to support these positions. Only when citizens become more aware of how problematic carceral policies are for reducing crime can human rights be upheld in a country while efforts are made to truly reduce violence and create an infrastructurally functional, peaceful, and free state.

Conclusion

The work I did in this thesis has made it clear to me that allowing repressive state structures to persist has grave consequences for both the ability of the state to develop and for the human rights of its citizens. As someone deeply invested in human rights and aiming to attain a career in the preservation of those rights, I believe raising awareness about the moves by El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua to engage in violence against their citizens is crucial to preventing similar actions from developing in neighboring states. More individuals need to know what has occurred in these three countries because, in the Western world, Central America often goes unnoticed. If the global community continues to ignore the alarming carceral developments

in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, then these leaders could shift to authoritarian practices that put human rights, justice, and democracy at risk.

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