



# A Failed Plan: Mano Dura and the Proliferation of Gang Activity in El Salvador

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## Abstract

In 2003, President Francisco Flores, head of the Nationalist Republican Alliance or ARENA party initiated *Plan Mano Dura* or “Iron Fist.” The electorate threw its support behind the bill in the hopes of decreasing violence and crime that had plagued the nation. In particular, *Plan Mano Dura* targeted MS-13 and Calle 18, two street gangs that have a strong presence in urban El Salvador. While significant attention was paid to foreign and domestic actors that sought to abate violence and crime, significantly less attention has been paid to the effectiveness of *Plan Mano Dura* and its correlate policies throughout the ensuing years. First I analyze the benefits of rehabilitation efforts versus mass incarceration. Additionally, I analyze negotiation practices between state enforcement and MS-13. Both of these tools are methods of controlling gang activity but ultimately reveal themselves to be symptomatic of flimsy security policies.

\*Background/Contextual Information: Both the MS-13 and Calle 18 gangs began in the streets of Los Angeles, California as early as the 1970s. Beginning in the 1980s Salvadoran immigrants flooded into the United States as a result of a brutal civil war. After the civil war ended many of these immigrants (the majority of them undocumented) were deported back to El Salvador. MS-13 is technically considered an international gang, but splits time between two poles: LA (the physical birthplace) and El Salvador (the spiritual birthplace).

## Research Question/Argument

Questions: How does El Salvador’s state-enforced zero-tolerance policies continue the presence of MS-13 gang activity? What implications do these policies have on the larger political agenda of El Salvador?

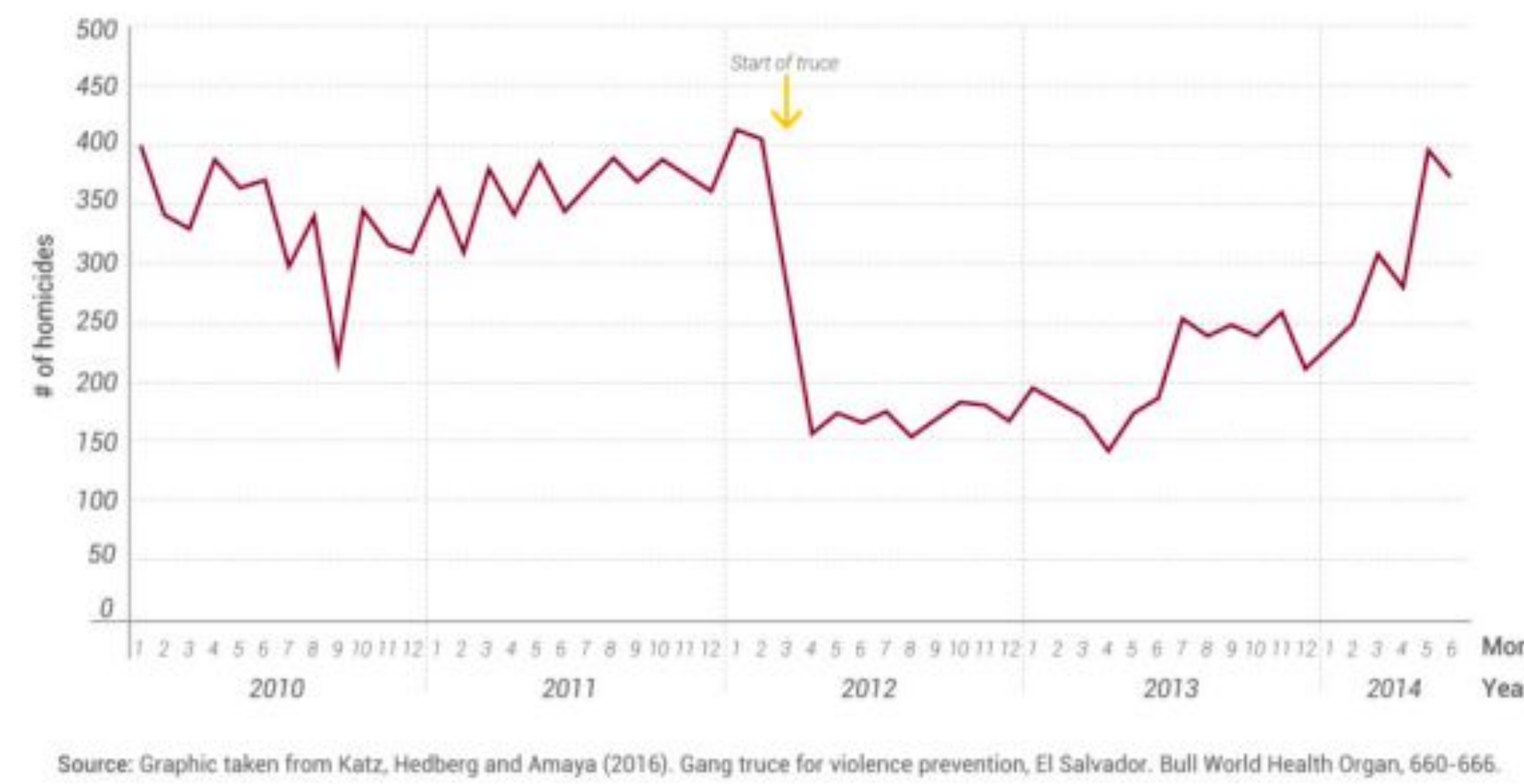
Argument: I argue that El Salvador’s *Mano Dura* crackdown on gang-related crime overcrowded prisons with recently incarcerated MS-13 members. As a result, imprisoned gang members were able to reorganize and restructure gang activity to extort local communities and engage in high profile kidnappings. While a variety of methods have attempted to stem violent crime including demilitarization and treaties, very few methods have focused on the rehabilitation and treatment of prisoners. Instead, mass incarceration is used as a political tool to assuage public fear and panic while at the same time allowing for party leaders to maintain control despite growing socio-economic cleavages.



Left: MS-13 gang members sitting in “prison cages”. Right: Face tattoos cover these prisoners upper bodies as well as their faces. Gang members in El Salvador are notorious for their large tattoos which they wear as badges of honor. Photos are courtesy of Getty Images.

## Data and Empirical Analysis

Monthly Homicides in El Salvador - 2010 - 2014



Source: Graphic taken from Katz, Hedberg and Amaya (2016). Gang truce for violence prevention, El Salvador. Bull World Health Organ, 660-666.

Figure 1: Monthly homicides in El Salvador from 2010-2014. In 2012, the Salvadoran state reached a peace treaty with MS-13 and Calle 18 members that resulted in a significant decrease of homicides. However, notice that beginning in early 2013, homicides began to rise again, peaking in late 2014.

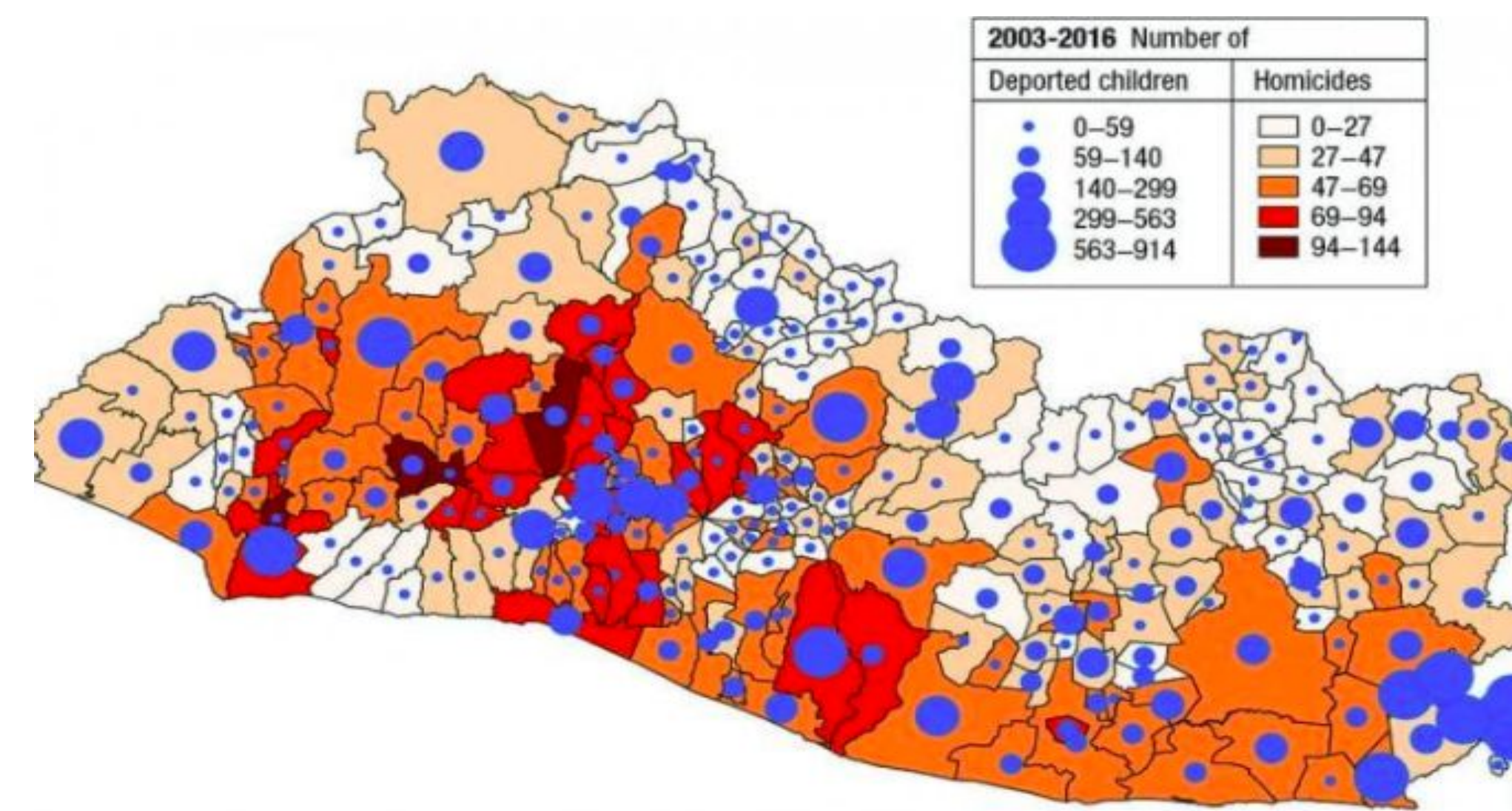


Figure 2: Map of origins of deported children and average local homicide rates 2003-2016. Indirect effect that shows that gang leaders from the US who migrate back to El Salvador and continue violent crimes pushes minors to leave El Salvador. However, lack of proper US documentation leads to the deportation of these children. Source: Crisis of Conflict 2017.

Gang membership can be determined by “appearance and affect” alone and therefore warrants an arrest. Additionally, petty crimes such as loitering, public nuisance, and vagrancy are all considered illegal behavior (Holland 2013). Minor offenses thus become criminal misdemeanors and ratchet up the number of incarcerated individuals. Estimates suggest that from 2004-2008 the population of imprisoned gang members doubled from approximately 4,000 to 8,000, accounting for a third (1/3) of the total prison population (Dudley 2010). In particular, MS-13 was able to strengthen communication systems between prisoners and other members to diversify their activity. MS-13 appears to make up to \$31.2 million per year from extortion alone, harping on 70% of businesses in their territorial control (Martinez et al 2016).

In 2004, President Antonio Saca targeted at-risk youth and communities with special programs such as *Mano Amiga* “Helping Hand” and *Mano Extendida* “Extended Hand.” However the state did not provide enough funding and as a result, participants were minimal (International Crisis Group 2017). Furthermore, police and law enforcement have not been favorable among the MS-13 community in Central America. While police forces believe that physical abuse and in some extreme cases, extrajudicial killings might incentivize MS-13 members to disband, it allows for greater mistrust in law enforcement.

## Conclusion

In conclusion *Plan Mano Dura* failed to stem gang related violence in El Salvador. Data and empirical analysis suggests that *Mano Dura* reorganized and strengthened MS-13 gang activity. Mass incarceration diversified MS-13 criminal portfolio to include extortions and kidnappings in addition to an escalating level of homicides. In response to diversified crimes, law enforcement has taken a militarized approach that justifies beatings and in some extreme cases, extrajudicial killings.

Given the fact that MS-13 and Calle 18 represent 99% of gang members in El Salvador (Katz et al 2016), elected officials from ARENA and FMLN consider gangs to be integral to the political process. Furthermore, when political parties fail to address systemic socio-economic differences, and exert zero-tolerance policies of control, plans such as *Mano Dura* reflect a Salvadoran democracy in crisis. *Mano Dura* is not a stand-alone policy of repression, but rather symptomatic of weak democratic institutions, political polarization and the maintenance of authoritarian like control. Do note that all of these characteristics highlight a country that failed to consolidate democracy decades after a brutal civil war.

In order to restore peace to El Salvador, politicians should proceed first by addressing systemic socio-economic cleavages such as illiteracy and poverty. Additionally, plans such as “Safe El Salvador” should invest heavily in marginalized youth. Furthermore, these programs should make a concerted effort to reintegrate gang members into society on a rehabilitative model, without the threat of capital punishment should members refuse to comply.

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