



Gang Violence: Concepts, Benchmarks and Coding Rules

The operations of large-scale, organized groups like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) in El Salvador, drug cartels in Mexico, and anti-drug operations in the Philippines pose conceptual problems by occupying “a gray zone between ordinary crime and political violence” ([Kalyvas, 2015: 1517](#)). Political violence can be understood as “the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation” ([ACLED; 2019, 1](#)). Such violence generally manifests as attempts to take over control of a state, make secession demands, increase one’s political influence or position, and/or express demands or views with regards to specific political issues. Gang violence in Latin America (e.g. El Salvador, Mexico, and Brazil), Africa (e.g. [Kenya](#), [Nigeria](#)) and in South-East Asia (e.g. [Philippines](#)), however, is not perpetrated with any of these intentions in mind. This seems to make it ‘non-political’ and sets it apart from more clear-cut examples of political violence seen in these regions.

Yet, large-scale organized crime is not so easily classified as simply ‘criminal’: organized crime is not well-defined, but most definitions highlight elements of material or economic benefit and – for larger groups – a notion of monopolizing illegal markets ([Reuters, 2008](#); [OrganizedCrime](#)).¹ While this definition fits the *raison-d’être* of groups like MS-13, the Sinaloa Cartel, or the Red Command, it does not fully capture their range of activities. These groups directly involve themselves in politics through pressure, bribery, direct clashes, financing of campaigns, and even grooming cartel members to become politicians. Moreover, they engage in indirect yet highly relevant political acts; their activity of displaying bodies or rendering certain areas *de facto* no-go zones for state forces severely challenges the state’s monopoly of force. *While intentions may not be political, the consequences are.* To complicate matters further, these patterns are not always restricted to large and transnational groups; they hold equally true for some national, regional, and sometimes even local groups.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project’s (ACLED) mission is to understand political violence in its fluid and fast-changing manifestations ([OECD, 2016](#)). Therefore, rather than sticking to a clear cut definition of political versus criminal violence, ACLED aims to capture this disorderly nature in the political manifestations of criminal violence across the globe. This methodology piece aims to tackle the gray area between political and criminal violence by providing conceptual clarification around when gang violence is political; it does this by providing specific benchmarks and indicators used to determine which countries should be considered to have a gang problem which has extended into the realm of the political, and by discussing the complicated issue of attributing violence to unknown (gang) actors. This piece is particularly tailored towards Latin

¹ E.g. [UNODC](#) has no definition to “allow for a broader applicability of the UNTOC to new types of crime that emerge constantly as global, regional and local conditions change over time”



America but the general approach, benchmarks, and indicators apply equally to other contexts. The term 'gang violence' is used to describe violence committed by criminal groups without an overt political agenda. This term is solely meant to communicate that the gangs discussed in this document are organized, have a leadership ([Spergel, 1995](#)), and that their objective is not political but economic in nature.

When is gang violence political?

ACLED has a relatively restrictive understanding of political violence and, by definition, it does not include crime. But ACLED includes gang violence when it is used towards meeting overt political goals. Further, when gang activity directly and fundamentally challenges public safety and security, it is deemed 'political violence'.

Organized crime evolves through gang competition and monopolies over illegal markets. As Von Lampe (2016) explains: "It is true that illegal markets can be linked to high levels of violence. However, not all illegal markets in all countries are equally violent or not all violence that occurs in the context of illegal markets is directed against competitors in an effort to increase market shares and eventually to achieve a monopoly position (Andreas and Wallman, 2009). Violent conflicts can also occur between suppliers and customers, within illegal enterprises, and in the form of predatory attacks on illegal market participants (Amir, 1995; Berg and Loeber, 2015; Wright and Decker, 1997)" (p. 197). Further, we argue that the competition for monopolies and territories involves a perverse incentive to act as a violent, governing entity combatting both security services and civilians. It is within this context that we explore the political nature of gang activity.

Many explanations of gang violence point to the political origins of these groups, including the political and economic deprivation or failed social policy ([Rogers, 2012](#); [Hagedorn, 2003](#)). While failed social policies and neglect undoubtedly play a role in the emergence of gangs, there are reasons for a more restrictive understanding. The study of political violence is typically concerned with how violence is *used* as a tool by political actors. ACLED ensures that 'political intent' is a key part in defining political violence.

ACLED's interpretation of gang activity dictates that it qualifies as political violence when it has direct political targets and/or is used for political purposes. For example, when a criminal group or gang targets a (standing or former) mayor, councilor, parliamentarian, minister, or civil servants and their families; the destruction of symbols of public authority (e.g. bombing government property); and assaults of those in public domain including journalists, human rights activists, and other civil society members. In many cases, this type of violence is employed for a political purpose, and politicians or those with a public interest act as funders, instigators, or benefactors. In the



African context, for example, gangs are frequently employed during elections. Across ACLED, this type of gang violence is included for each country and region.

ACLED also includes gang violence when a state's public security and safety is fundamentally challenged. This happens in places like Haiti and Jamaica where gangs can act as *de facto* local governments and public service providers. In the Brazilian favelas, gangs control territory and engage in highly public acts of violence, rendering these places essentially a no-go area for state forces. This violence is neither carried out with an overt political purpose or motivation, nor is it used to that end. However, the decision to include gang violence in these specific circumstances is based on the assumption that the level and nature of gang violence *affects* and challenges the existing political order. Hence, *while the overt purposes and motivations of these groups may not be explicitly political, the consequences for residents and security services are.*

When does gang violence fundamentally challenge a state's public security and safety? Generally, this happens under two conditions. First, when gang violence severely limits **de facto control of the state over its territories** (e.g. by limiting entry of the state into territory, either physically or politically). Second, when gangs challenge the state's ability to enforce public security and safety by engaging in regular **brutal and public violence**, such as battles on the street, public killings, and brutal violence against civilians. These conditions are present in some countries. For example, gang violence in Mexico has rendered state control over some key territories ineffective and involves brutal and public violence, but gang violence in Venezuela has not had this effect.

In short, gang violence pose a challenge to the definition of political violence. It is perpetrated by groups that have no overt political motivation. However, some gang violence has clear political connotations and consequences. ACLED considers gang violence as political when it is employed by political actors such as funders, instigators, or benefactors, and serves identifiable political goals. ACLED also considers gang violence 'political' when it fundamentally challenges the public safety, security, and control of the state.



Political Gang violence in Latin America

Gang violence that is directly political -- e.g. with public figures as targets, investors, instigators, or beneficiaries -- is included in every country and region. However, the question remains which countries qualify for a political interpretation of their gang violence when it is not used with a political intent in mind. This section tracks which countries in Latin America are home to gangs which specifically fit the benchmark of challenging “public security and safety”.

The question of whether gang violence challenges “public security and safety” has been addressed through the review of a number of variables for each country in Latin America. These are based on benchmarks identified in the previous section: some general measures about public safety and security, and more specific indicators on the extent of *de facto* control, as well as the type of public violence (see **Table 1** below).

To carry out this analysis, ACLED required consistent data for all countries on both its political as well as its gang violence. As existing data could not be found on Latin American gang or political violence in a comparable format, ACLED constructed a database containing all reported violence in each country during 2018 and the first quarter of 2019 (with the exclusion of petty and domestic crime). These data allowed ACLED to construct measures and systematically assess the extent of gang violence in each country.² In addition, some indicators required other data (e.g. five-year averages for homicide rates) or qualitative research, which was carried out by researchers. ACLED’s conclusions about which countries should have their gang violence considered as political were ultimately reviewed by external country experts before being applied systematically in the coding methodology. Similar reviews of countries continue to be done regularly. ACLED researchers collect information weekly in line with real-time coding. Researchers flag cases in which they deem, qualitatively, that a new assessment is warranted for a country (i.e. if its ‘status’ should be changed from a gang exclusion country to inclusion, or vice-versa).

² ACLED researchers coded all Latin American data for a period of time spanning from January 2018 to July 2019, including both criminal and political violence. Petty and domestic crime was not included. A classification was subsequently assigned to each event: either political violence (in line with the standard ACLED definition) or criminal violence (non-political murders, robberies etc.). A total of 32,971 events were analyzed and each event was classified with either a ‘1’ (gang likely involved); a 0 (gang not involved); or a ‘?’ (unclear). Gang violence was identified according to the protocol described in the subsequent table. This process involved: a) flagging all known gangs; b) using keyword searchers in the notes and; c) analyzing event types (e.g. gangs generally do not engage in political protests). The analysis resulted in 3,766 events with clear gang involvement, 16,415 events with no gang involvement, and 12,788 events for which it was unclear whether gangs were involved. All analyses reported in this document were carried out under the most restrictive conditions, meaning that only events where a report specifically mentioned gang involvement were used to determine gang violence inclusion. Nevertheless, ACLED controlled for each indicator by examining whether alternative specifications led to different results (e.g. considering all unclear violence as gang violence and vice-versa).



Table 1: Indicators to Measure Political Gang Violence

Benchmark	Indicator	Source
Public safety and security at stake	Share of gang violence in overall violence	ACLED
	Homicide rates	UNODC
	Links between politicians and gangs	Qualitative
<i>De facto</i> control	Spatial dispersion of infrequent violence	ACLED
	Specialized anti-gang police/military units	Qualitative
	Control of two largest cities (often includes the capital)	Qualitative
Public acts of violence	Proportion of ‘Violence against civilians’ events vs. ‘Battles’ events	ACLED
	Type and style of public violence	Qualitative

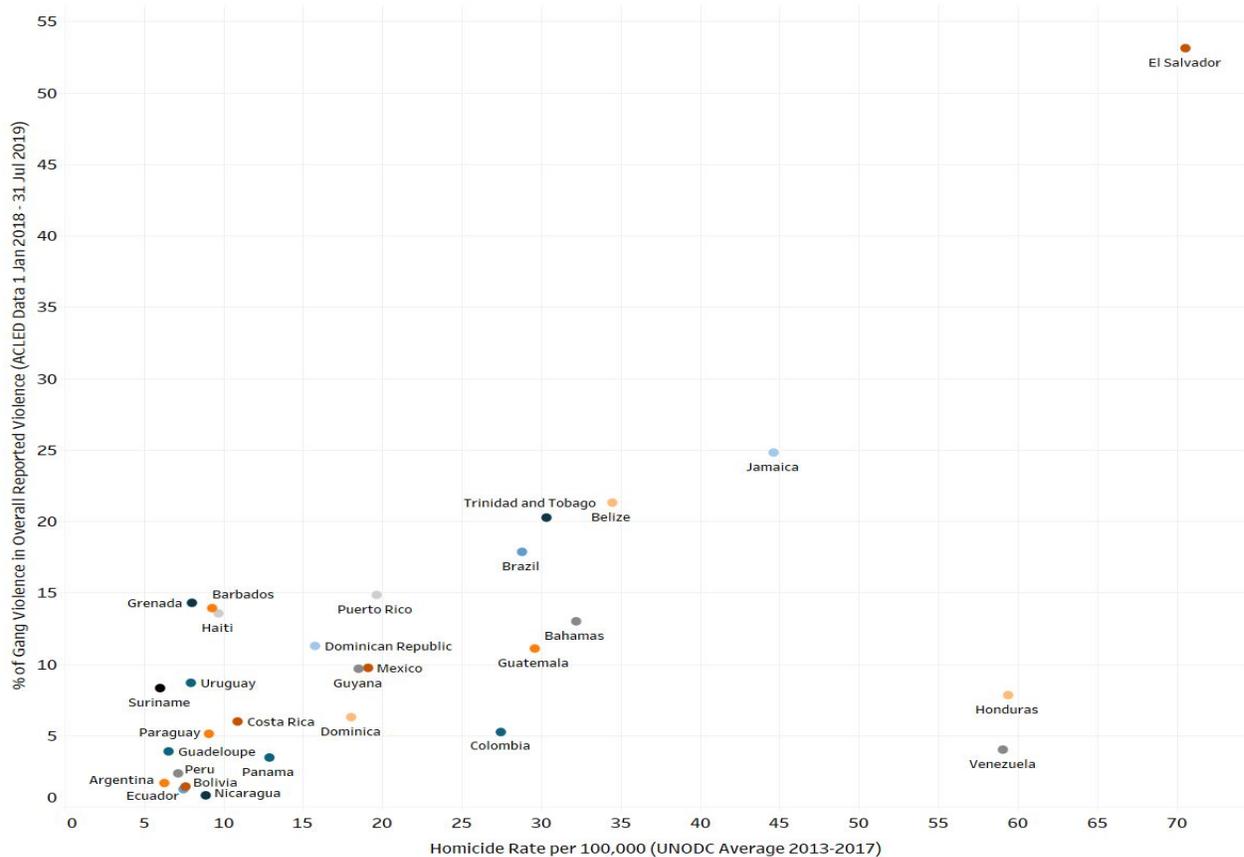
Benchmark 1: Public safety and security

The three indicators above aim to measure the challenge to the state’s safety and security directly.

First, **the share of gang violence as part of overall violence** is based on data coded for this project by ACLED. The measure expresses how much violence is perpetrated by gangs as opposed to violence linked to non-gang actors and unknown groups (which may also include gangs, but are being excluded from this process based on a more conservative approach). The average amount of clearly identifiable gang violence in Latin America is around 11% of overall violence levels (median 8%). Countries like El Salvador (around 53%) and Jamaica (around 24%) have much higher levels of gang violence (see Figure 1). The cut-off point for potentially considering gang violence contextually political was set at around 10% (representing the upper quartile of the data, see Figure 1). Identification of gang violence should be understood as an approximation rather than a definitive statement on gang violence in the country. Attributing gang violence to actors was carried out in line with the protocol described in **Annex 1** at the end of the document.



Figure 1: Homicide rates and share of gang violence



The second indicator, **homicide rates**, is derived from UNODC data from 2013 to 2017 ([UNODC, 2019](#)), which was used to construct the average homicide rate for five years. The indicator shows the number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. In an effort to use a more conservative threshold, the cut-off point was set at approximately 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants – which represented the upper quartile, meaning that only those countries with high numbers potentially qualified for inclusion.

The last indicator measures whether there are known **links between politicians and gangs** (e.g. membership of political, financing, services). This was applied to countries with at least one



reported gang-related incident. This information is based on publicly-available information collected by ACLED researchers with specialized knowledge on those countries.

Benchmark 2: De facto control

'*De facto* control' is measured using three indicators.

The first measures the **spatial dispersion and level of gang violence** with the assumption that relatively high dispersion geographically (i.e. low clustering) of infrequent activity is an indicator that *de facto* control is not being challenged. High clustering (especially in the two largest cities, which often includes the capital) and high-levels of violence imply a strong gang presence. This indicator is based on ACLED data.

A second indicator assesses whether the **police and/or military have specialized units for combating gangs**. This is meant to capture whether the state itself recognizes gang activity as a particular problem. This information comes primarily from official police and military websites and press releases.

The final indicator assesses whether **gangs or the state control the two largest cities (which often includes the capital)**. ACLED researchers with knowledge of the countries carried out qualitative research and assessed reports on the extent of geographic control. This was meant to complement a purely data-driven analysis.

Benchmark 3: Brutal and public acts of violence

Finally, two indicators measure the type of gang violence employed.

A first indicator compares the **share of 'Violence Against Civilians' events to the number of 'Battles' events**, per ACLED coding methodology (see the [ACLED Codebook](#)). The assumption here is that a higher share of 'Violence Against Civilians' events suggests a purposeful focus by the gang on challenging public safety and security through instilling fear in the local population rather than a focus on engaging outright with state forces or other armed agents.

A second indicator addresses the **type and style of gang violence** within a specific country (i.e. the nature and methods of this violence). The indicator is based on qualitative reading of event notes for attack descriptors. To start with, all reported incidents in the ACLED data for the country were assessed for markers of brutal and public violence, such as daylight attacks; attacks on taxi and bus drivers, government officials, as well as seemingly innocent bystanders; the mutilation of bodies along with their public display; and drive-by shootings. Subsequently, general reports on the country and its violence by NGOs and (local) think-tanks were assessed for similar markers.



Conclusions

Based on these seven indicators, a total of 44 countries/territories were assessed on each criteria. The inclusion of gang violence as having a political connotation was accepted if most (5 or more) of the eight indicators were satisfied. **The selection of countries results in the inclusion of gang violence as political for ten countries/territories in Latin America of the 44 that were initially assessed; these include: Belize, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Puerto Rico,³ Trinidad and Tobago).** Summary results are available in **Table 2** below – while full results can be found in **Annex 1** at the end of the document. Generally, the share of violence and homicide rates were good indicators for the extent of gang problems, and countries with high rates often met the threshold for the other indicators.

While most countries satisfied nearly all criteria, two countries/territories – Puerto Rico and Trinidad and Tobago - were border cases. Puerto Rico has high levels of violence (15%) and a high homicide rate (20 per 100,000); however, violence is dispersed and bystander deaths are uncommon. Given that there are strong links between politicians and gangs in the region, ACLED opted to include Puerto Rico. Trinidad and Tobago, where 20% of all violence is gang-related, and 30 homicides per 100,000 was reported, was characterized similarly.

Table 2: Summary of gang violence inclusion

Country	Conclusion	Inclusion
Antigua and Barbuda	No gang violence reported.	No
Argentina	All indicators suggest exclusion, though some public killings are very public and involve brutal violence.	No
Aruba	No gang violence reported.	No
Bahamas	Data are insufficient to draw robust conclusions. Overall homicide rates are high, but all other indicators point to exclusion.	No
Barbados	Data are insufficient to draw robust conclusions, but levels of violence, as well as the general homicide rate, are low.	No

³ ACLED codes Puerto Rico as separate from the United States for the sake of analysis, as they are self-governing and exist within a separate cultural region (Caribbean).



Belize	Background information is lacking. However, both homicide rates and gang violence data collected by ACLED suggest Belize is among the most affected countries on the continent. Reported incidents are violent and public, while the location of violence is centralized.	Yes
Bolivia	Except for specialized police units, there are no indicators pointing towards inclusion. Share of violence and homicides rates are very low.	No
Brazil	All indicators suggest inclusion	Yes
British Virgin Islands	No gang violence reported.	No
Cayman Islands	No gang violence reported.	No
Chile	No gang violence reported.	No
Colombia	Most groups engaging in violence have stated political goals (e.g. even the <i>Clan del Golfo</i> – a gang many believe has solely economic goals).	No
Costa Rica	One indicator (type of violence) could suggest potential inclusion, yet gang violence is generally limited. Low levels of violence and below average homicide rates.	No
Cuba	No gang violence reported.	No
Curacao	No reported violence and no information.	No
Dominica	No indicators suggest inclusion and violence levels are very low.	No
Dominican Republic	Many indicators point to a gang problem, but the share of violence and homicide rates are not reaching the highest scores in the region. Moreover, no clear gang control over specific areas.	No
Ecuador	No indicators suggest inclusion and violence levels are very low.	No
El Salvador	Most indicators suggest inclusion (though there are no specialized units and there is no proven link between politicians and gangs). The country yields both the highest number of homicides, as well as the highest share of gang violence in Latin America. Very public violence, with gang control over areas.	Yes
French Guiana	Little data and status unclear.	No
Grenada	Small share of gang violence, low homicide rates, and generally little information.	No



Guadeloupe	Small share of gang violence, low homicide rates, and generally little information.	No
Guatemala	All indicators suggest inclusions. Also very high homicide rates.	Yes
Guyana	Insufficient data available through traditional media and online resources. ACLED is in the process of finding in-country partners who may have more information.	No
Haiti	All indicators suggest inclusion. Share of total violence is relatively high (13%), many groups control territory, and violence is relatively endemic, brutal, and public. Moreover, there is clear political usage of these groups.	Yes
Honduras	All indicators (except for the existence of specialized police units) suggest inclusion. Homicide rates are high, there is gang control over territory, and there is public violence.	Yes
Jamaica	All indicators are satisfied (except for the existence of specialized police units). Jamaica has one of the highest homicide rates and shares of gang violence. Many small groups present engaged in common and lethal public violence. Political links are clear.	Yes
Martinique	All indicators suggest no inclusion.	No
Mexico	All indicators suggest inclusion.	Yes
Netherlands Antilles	No gang violence reported.	No
Nicaragua	None of the indicators suggest inclusion. Gangs are nearly absent and levels of violence are low.	No
Panama	No indicators suggest inclusion. Share of gang-violence and homicide rates are both low. Occasional gang violence, but contained within gang feuds.	No
Paraguay	None of the indicators suggest inclusion.	No
Peru	All indicators (except political connection) indicate exclusion. E.g. Share of gang violence is low, as are homicide rates, and violence is dispersed.	No
Puerto Rico	Border case as indicators are mixed and sometimes unclear. However, gang violence and homicide rates are high (though they border exclusion). Violence is deadly but not very public. No clear control of territory. Close links between politicians and gangs tips balance in favor of inclusion.	Yes
Saint Lucia	Little data and status unclear.	No



Saint-Martin	No gang violence reported.	No
Sint Maarten	No gang violence reported.	No
St Kitts and Nevis	No indicators support inclusion (although qualitative information suggests that the share of gang violence is higher than what ACLED data seems to indicate – meaning that it may not be heavily reported). Generally, little data available and status unclear.	No
Suriname	No indicators supporting inclusion. Generally, little data available and status unclear.	No
Trinidad and Tobago	Difficult case with some indicators suggesting inclusion (e.g. homicide rates, share of violence) while others suggest exclusion (dispersion and type of violence). Given high rates of violence, ACLED opted for inclusion.	Yes
Uruguay	All indicators suggest exclusion.	No
US Virgin Islands	No indicators support inclusion. Generally, little data are available and status unclear.	No
Venezuela	Two indicators suggest inclusion (homicide and specialized units). Yet, homicides rates are co-produced by armed groups with political goals.	No



The attribution of gang violence in Latin America

This final section discusses the problem of how to attribute responsibility for gang violence when there are high levels of unidentified violence. It is likely that gangs conduct a high level of unidentified violence. However, ACLED does not use a 'blanket rule' by assigning unidentified violence to gangs when unidentified, in Latin America or in other contexts. While gangs perpetuate much of this violence, they do not conduct all of it. This has been corroborated through discussions with local partner organizations in the region. For example, a study on gang violence in Guatemala concluded it could not assign responsibility in 35% of cases ([USAID, 2016](#)) where it reviewed homicides in two major hotspots of gang activity, Chiquimula ("trafficking corridor"), and Zona 18 of Guatemala City ("gang area"). In both cases – 28% and 41% respectively – homicides could be credibly attributed to gangs. The study therefore concluded that: "*the information from authorities was fragmented, disorganized and sometimes missing altogether.*" This equally applies to a host of other Latin American, Asian, and African countries, as reporting on violence often does not include the identity of the group involved because the identity is deliberately concealed by the perpetrator or victim,⁴ self-censorship by the outlet, or simply because no one observed the actual violence but its consequences.⁵ As such, blanket rules of resorting to gang attribution are not appropriate.

Further, there are various incidents for which it is not clear whether the activity is carried out by an individual or an armed group. There are also a large number of other armed groups active in these spaces, often in response to gang violence, who can also be responsible for unidentified violence. And lastly, the demarcation between gangs and other groups is not always clear. These three reasons are briefly discussed below.

Complex actor landscape

A significant problem for the attribution of gang violence is that criminal violence can be perpetrated by an individual rather than an organized armed group (i.e. a gang). For example, an event that reads "*On Feb 16, a civilian was killed in an armed attack over drugs at Miragoane. Motives are unknown*" may have involved an organized group, but may have been perpetrated by an individual. To ensure that only organized violence is included, ACLED includes only events where it is clear that either multiple people were involved in violence (e.g. 'a gang'), or where there is evidence that an individual was acting on the orders of an armed group (e.g. an assassination by a hitman).

Further, there are often various forms of local armed groups present in the same space. For example in Brazil, *milícias* operate within some of the same neighborhoods as gangs and also contest for territory. These *milícias* were initially formed to 'protect' citizens from drug trafficking

⁴ See [Kishi, 2015](#).

⁵ See for further readings on event-data bias [Weidman, 2016](#) and [De Bruijne & van Veen, 2018](#)



groups; yet over time their methods became more coercive as they began charging ‘taxes’ from residents for ‘protection’. Typically, these groups fight drug cartels and provide public goods -- though they have also become violent and pose a threat to civilians ([ALERJ, 2008](#)). Some *milicias* in Rio state have begun working in drug trafficking themselves, further complicating event attribution ([O Globo, 10 October 2019](#)). Moreover, many of these *milicias* are sponsored by or led by state actors and police (both current and former). In Mexico, communal militias of indigenous groups -- so called *Policia Comunitaria* -- were likewise established to protect the community against the activity of gangs. Yet, like in Brazil, police authorities incorporated these self-defense groups into the indigenous justice system, making them state agents in some areas (Oaxaca, San Luis Potosí and Guerrero). Meanwhile, non-indigenous groups in Mexico have established self-defense forces that have not been integrated in the state. Finally, in countries like Haiti and El Salvador, there are combatants from former paramilitary groups that engage in political as well as criminal violence for various bidders. As a result, the splintered landscape of violence-brokers in countries with active gangs makes it impossible to apply standardized rules across countries without considering the context.

Finally, even in those contexts in which it is relatively clear that a gang operates, it is not clear *which* actor exactly should be used. Gangs in Latin America are generally discerned as *pandillas* and *maras*. *Pandillas* are criminal groups organized with a local character (street-gangs), they are rooted within a community, and they often provide some level of local public services ([Bruneau, 2014](#)). *Maras*, instead, are nationally or transnationally organized gangs (e.g. Mara Salvatrucha) that often engage in transnational crime and have a different mode of operation. ACLED typically describes armed actors with strong local ties as ‘communal militias’ (“violent groups that act locally, in the pursuit of local goals, resources, power, and retribution” [[ACLED, 2015](#)]). In this way, *pandillas* are indeed comparable to communal militias in other contexts. However, the professionalization of gangs in much of Latin America since the 1990s has led to the integration of many *pandillas* into *maras* (despite *pandillas* still being quite common in the urban areas of Haiti or Jamaica). This factor, in addition to vagueness of source information, makes distinguishing between *pandillas* and *maras* next to impossible, however. As such, gangs in general are treated as akin to political militias in other areas of ACLED coverage given their goals of influencing and impacting governance, security, and policy.⁶ The difference between groups identifying as *pandillas* versus *maras* is quite fluid. A group might identify as one today and the other next month. This makes the

⁶ Per the [ACLED Codebook](#), political militias are coded with an interaction code of 3 while communal militias are coded with an interaction code of 4. Political militias are a more diverse set of violent actors than communal militias and are often created for a specific purpose or during a specific time period and for the furtherance of a political purpose by violence. These organizations are defined by their political goals of influencing and impacting governance, security and policy, and operate in conjunction, or in alliance, with a recognized government, governor, military leader, rebel organization, political party, business elite, or opposition group.



distinction around agent categorization (i.e. interaction terms in the ACLED data) less meaningful -- and, as such, unlikely to significantly impact analysis.

The various generic actors labels in Latin America

Any (gang) actor that is named in the source is coded as such. Hence, an event with notes that read, *“On June 6, 2018, the leader of the Compound Gang was killed in a confrontation with the police in Saint Catherine, Jamaica”* will be coded as an interaction between the Compound Gang and the state police. However, it is common that violence cannot be attributed to a specific armed group: for example, an event may have notes that read, *“On August 16, 2018, an alleged gang member was shot and killed by an unknown armed group In May Pen, Jamaica.”* This section defines how ACLED treats these latter cases of various general actors operating in Latin America, and how they can be discerned from one another and coded.

Unidentified Gang [Country]: This label is used for gang violence in countries that qualify for the inclusion of gang violence (outlined in Table 2 of this briefing). This actor is coded when it is clear from reporting that a gang is responsible – or it is extremely likely a gang is responsible – for the violence, but we do not know the specific gang (i.e. MS-13). Criteria include explicit mention of gang-related violence, or some indication of the actor’s criminal nature in the source (e.g. drug trafficking). For some countries, specific modes of violence point to the operation of gangs (e.g. narco-message, public hanging, decapitation, drive-by shootings, etc.). As mentioned previously, given that most gangs in Latin America are no longer street-gangs but have been integrated into larger gangs, ACLED uses an interaction code of 3 for all gangs. Off-duty gang members are considered to be generally armed on every occasion, and are therefore always coded as ‘Unidentified Gang [country]’. Hence, the August 16 example above would be coded as an interaction between a “Unidentified Gang (Jamaica)” and an “Unidentified Armed Group (Jamaica)”.

Communal Militia [Country]: This actor is used when the source indicates that the group is a self-defense group from a particular area, or when this point is clearly inferred from circumstantial evidence. The main differences between communal militias and gangs are apparent in the scope of their membership, actions, and goals. Communal militias only act locally and pursue local goals, resources, power, and retribution. These groups identify as part of a neighborhood, village, or other community. They typically manifest as members of a communal self-defense group against gangs or other armed groups, despite their ability to engage in attacks themselves. Communal militias are coded with an interaction code of 4 per ACLED coding methodology. Consider the following example: *“On 23 April, a body was found by the police forces in Ciudad Cuauhtemoc, Ciudad de Mexico. A message was left on the body of the victim warning gangs operating in the area and signed by a vigilante group.”* This event is coded as a “Communal Militia (Mexico)” that has attacked a “Unidentified Gang (Mexico)”.



In Mexico and Brazil, some communal militias have taken on different forms and have started to cooperate with or incorporate into state actors (Brazil and Mexico). In these cases they may be classified either as political militias (coded by ACLED with an interaction term of 3), with their specific group name as the actor handle, or as state actors (coded by ACLED with an interaction term of 1) if fully integrated into the state structure.

Police Militia: This actor is specific to Brazil and refers to the *milícias* – armed groups that are organized and led primarily by current and former police and other state agents. Because of their leadership, they have access to powerful positions within the state, and are often more powerful than drug trafficking groups. They were initially formed as a way to ‘protect’ the citizens from drug trafficking groups, however, their methods have since become coercive and they often extort the community in exchange for their protection. An essential characteristic of these *milícia* groups has been that they are against drug trafficking and contest gang territorial control, however recent reports have surfaced describing new alliances between police militias and drug traffickers in Rio state. Sources will name certain police *milícias* (e.g. “Liga da Justiça” and “Chico Bala”) however most often sources will refer to these groups simply as “*milícia*” or “*miliciano*”. Given their existence and organization outside of the state, despite their usage by certain state agents, police *milícias* are coded with an interaction code 3.⁷ The following is an example event containing police *milícias*: “On 1 July 2019, in Rio de Janeiro (Rio de Janeiro state), a shoot-out took place in Morro do 18 (Agua Santa) between a militia group and drug traffickers from the gang Amigos dos Amigos (ADA). During the shootout, several members of the ADA were injured.”

Coding armed groups in Latin America

Coding rules have been developed as a means to determine when to attribute violence to armed actors based on information provided by sources. In gang-inclusion countries and countries with active insurgencies, ACLED has opted to keep a relatively large amount of violence unassigned; the identity of actors is often hard to verify and the complex environment with a very large number of potential actors as well as their usage of different types of violence complicates attribution. ACLED uses the ‘Unidentified Armed Group (Country)’ label for all these events where attribution is impossible, however the groups meet a minimum threshold for inclusion.

Yet there are cases in which it is highly certain that gangs (or other groups) are responsible based on certain TTPs (tactics, techniques, or procedures) or other indicators such as the identity of the

⁷Conflict environments of most countries are complex with communal militias, ex-combatant groups, local and transnational gangs, drug cartels, police militias and ‘rebel groups’ all operate. In Brazil, however, the environment is simpler with either gangs or police militia’s operating alongside state forces. Hence, when it is clear that violence is not perpetrated by a rebel group or state force, yet it is unclear whether those responsible for violence are gangs or police *milícias*, ACLED uses the *Unidentified Gang and/or Police Militia* actor with an interaction code of 3.



victims. Various coding rules are used across different cases where the identity of actors is unclear (discussed below). Unidentified Gangs are generally coded in Battles (Armed clashes) in which the source mentions that groups were engaged in drug dealing/trafficking and/or organized crime. For VAC events, except for specific cases in Mexico and Brazil, it is generally unclear who is responsible for attacks against and kidnappings of civilians, and in most cases no responsibility is assumed; some exceptions may include obvious indicators such as narco messages left at the scene.

Coding armed groups in countries where ACLED has deemed gang violence *should be included as political violence*

In cases where the group (gang) is specifically named, the named actor is coded in the event (e.g. Barrio-18). If the source report calls an unnamed group a ‘narco gang’, ‘narco-criminal group’, or ‘drug gang’, etc. then the unnamed actor is coded as “Unidentified Gang (COUNTRY)”.

In cases in which violence is carried out by an unidentified armed group, ACLED researchers rely on answers to certain questions to determine whether or not the unnamed actor should be coded as an “Unidentified Gang” or as an “Unidentified Armed Group” — or not at all.

In short, such events are only attributed to “Unidentified Gang” actors if there is mention of drugs (e.g. “two people were shot dead by armed actors; authorities believe the killing is linked to drug-related feuds”) or a narco-message.

Otherwise, the event is coded yet attributed to “Unidentified Armed Group” if:

- There is evidence that the perpetrator is an armed group (i.e. it is a group of two or more using sophisticated weapons).
- If the victim is political. These victims include those such as politicians, government employees, former political actors, public prosecutors, lawyers, judges, other overtly political groups (e.g. human rights defenders), journalists, etc.⁸
- If there is evidence of use of TTPs otherwise attributed to gangs elsewhere in the region. These include things like drive-by shootings, the mutilation of bodies, public hanging of corpses, public mass shootings, etc.

In all other cases, the event would *not* meet the threshold for inclusion at all in the ACLED dataset. Examples of such events could be “dead woman found”; “man was killed by unknown person”; “bones of a man were found”; etc. These events are assumed to not be instances of political violence.

⁸ Per ACLED methodology, cases of interpersonal violence are not coded.



Coding of such violence in [Mexico](#) and [Brazil](#) (two gang-inclusion countries) as well as Colombia and Venezuela (two countries with active insurgencies) follow additional parameters, which can be found in the respective methodology documents outlining them.

Coding armed groups in countries where ACLED has deemed gang violence *should not* be included as political violence

If the source report calls an unnamed group a ‘narco gang’, ‘narco-criminal group’, or ‘drug gang’, etc., or cites a specific gang by name, then the event is *not coded* as the violence is deemed to be specifically criminal in such countries. This includes cases in which there is mention of drugs or a narco-message. However, in cases where the group is specifically named as a transnational cartel (e.g. MS-13, Sinaloa Cartel), the event *is* coded and is attributed to the group. Such groups are coded when active in their ‘home countries’, which are included in the list of gang-inclusion countries, where their activity is considered to meet the political violence threshold, and so continued coverage of such actors is deemed appropriate.

In cases in which violence is carried out by an unnamed armed group, the event is only coded and attributed to “Unidentified Armed Group” if the victim is political. These victims include those such as politicians, government employees, former political actors, public prosecutors, lawyers, judges, other overtly political groups (e.g. human rights defenders), journalists, etc.⁹

In all other cases, the event would not meet the threshold for inclusion in the ACLED dataset.

⁹ Again, per ACLED methodology, cases of interpersonal violence are not coded.



Annex 1: Summary results

Country	Share	Homicide Rate	Link to politicians	Type gang violence	Spatial dispersion	Gang control	Specialized Units	Conclusion	Inclusion
Antigua and Barbuda	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
Argentina	1.69%	6.28%	Claims of connection but nothing proven. Police involvement at the local level is more common.	VAC most common. Public violence (killings) happens, including attacks on public officials, such as judges.	Violence is dispersed.	Gangs control limited territory.	Somewhat. Special forces of police conduct both counter-terrorism and counter-narcotic operations.	No inclusion. All indicators suggest exclusion though some public killings are relatively high end.	No
Aruba	N/A	3.85%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
Bahamas	12.96%	32.18%	No links known.	Little violence reported - gang murders are common.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	No control over territory.	No	No inclusion. Data are insufficient to draw robust conclusions but levels of homicide are high but all other indicators do not warrant inclusion	No
Barbados	13.89%	9.28%	Effects of the criminal activities seem to be very low, and mostly focused on criminal activities. Hardly links with politicians.	Little violence reported - gang murder common. Qualitative arguments that violence is on the rise - few killings.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	Unclear	No	No inclusion. Data are insufficient to draw robust conclusions but levels of violence as well as homicide are low.	No



Belize	21.28%	34.48%	Unclear	VAC is most common event type. Violence is public, such as killing public workers.	Yes, mainly in Belize City.	Unclear	Unclear	Inclusion. Background information is lacking both homicide rates and measure by ACLED of gang violence suggest Belize is among the most affected countries in the region. Report incidents are violent and public, location of violence is centralized.	Yes
Bolivia	1.43%	7.63%	No links known (Morales tends to seek to legalize drug production).	Little violence reported. Gang violence mostly government vs. producers of cocoa.	Violence is dispersed (though little data available).	Unclear	Yes, FELCN, with more than 1500 members.	No inclusion. Except for specialized police units, there are no indicators pointing to inclusion. Violence share and homicides rates are very low.	No
Brazil	17.86%	28.8%	Links between gangs and politicians.	Battles most common between gangs - VAC is less common. Battles between gangs, police and police militias at public places and often violent.	Violence is dispersed but with hotspots (particularly in Rio and Sao P).	Gang control favelas, but police militias fight gangs and also control parts.	Yes	Inclusion. All indicators suggest inclusion	Yes
British Virgin Islands	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
Cayman Islands	N/A	8.5%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
Chile	N/A	3.575%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
Colombia	5.26%	27.48%	Most armed groups are politicized.	Clashes more common than VAC. Many	Violence is dispersed.	Control of two largest cities is gang based.	Yes. COPES and the ESMAD, as	No inclusion. Most violence is engaged by groups that have stated political goals (even	No



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			Unclear whether gangs are.	clashes involve Clan de Golfo interacting with ELN and FARC factions. VAC attacks seem often 'ordinary VAC', as opposed to particular brutal or public killings.		Bogota's southern region is widely reported as controlled by armed and/or common delinquency groups, with some reports arguing that political armed groups have a presence. In Medellín, crime has been decreasing, but armed groups/gangs still control some neighborhoods and provide basic services.	well as Army: Joint Task Force Titan.	Clan del Golfo) and should be included as such.	
Costa Rica	5.97%	10.9%	No indication of substantial links	Gang violence involves public killings (drive-by shootings) and occasionally property destruction. Yet rates are relatively limited - 48% of the deaths are from gang	Gang Violence is dispersed.	There is no indication of gang control of specific territory	Somewhat. SERT and OIJ are special forces which operate as anti-narco forces in addition to other special tasks.	No inclusion. One indicator (type of violence) could suggest potential inclusion, yet gang violence is generally limited. There remain overall low levels of violence and below average homicide rates.	No



				violence and 25% are related to drug trafficking (Business Insider, 19 January 2018).					
Cuba	N/A	5.375%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
Curacao	6.25%	N/A	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	Unclear	Somewhat - The Dutch Special Police Forces (RST) support the KPC with anti-drug, money laundering, human smuggling, and other high profile cases	No inclusion. Little reported violence and no information	No
Dominica	6.25%	18.05%	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	No	No (MJINIS, 2019)	No inclusion. No indicators suggests inclusion and violence levels are very low.	No
Dominican Republic	11.26%	15.775%	Close links and clear-cut alliances between criminal groups and political parties. Security forces are believed to be involved in up to 90 percent of	VAC and Battles. Violence very lethal.	Violence is dispersed.	Unclear	Yes. DNCD and the Criminality Analysis Unit	No inclusion. Many indicators point to a gang problem but the share of violence and the homicide rates are not reaching the highest scores in the region. Moreover, no clear control over specific areas.	No



			<p>organized crime cases, including contract killings, arms trafficking, extortion, and extra-judicial killings (US 25 June 2015, 1; AI 25 Feb. 2015, 133). The Dominican Republic newspaper <i>El Nuevo Diario</i> also quotes the Attorney General as saying that former police officers have been involved as perpetrators “in almost all” contract killings committed in the Dominican Republic (<i>El Nuevo Diario</i>, 8 June 2015).</p>						
Ecuador	1.24%	7.48%	No apparent links.	<p>Little violence reported - no conclusion possible. Generally known that homicide rates and violence have reduced drastically (InSight Crime, 11</p>	Violence is dispersed.	No control	No	No inclusion. No indicators suggests inclusion and violence levels are very low.	No



				August 2017).					
El Salvador	53.10%	70.58%	No links known. But deep links between police and gangs.	VAC just a little higher than Battles. A large amount of inter-gang fighting and public killings, which are often brutal.	Violence dispersed through the country, but with clear hotspot areas – such as San Salvador.	Control of large areas in towns serving as de facto authority with community services (Crisis Group, 26 November 2018).	No, but military assist where needed.	Inclusion. Most indicators suggest inclusion (however there are no specialized units and there is no proven link between politicians and gangs). Highest number of homicides and gang violence in Latin America. Very public violence, and gangs hold control over certain areas.	Yes
French Guiana	4.76%	N/A	Unclear	ACLED data has little violence reported - no conclusion possible. General review suggests that criminals have used small arms to perpetrate violent crimes around small-scale/illegal mining operations in the interior (OSAC, 30 July 2019).	No conclusion possible (insufficient data)	Unclear	Unclear	No inclusion. Little data and status unclear	No
Grenada	14.29%	8.02%	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	Unclear	Unclear	No inclusion. Small share of gang violence, low homicide rates and generally little information.	No
Guadeloupe	3.85%	6.58%	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	Unclear	Unclear	No inclusion. Small share of gang violence, low homicide rates and generally little information.	No



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Guatemala	11.06%	29.58%	Unknown but police officers have links (InSight Crime, 28 March 2019).	VAC is most common event type. Public killings occur, including attacks on family members and in public transport. Little usage of high end weapons.	Centralization of gang violence in capital.	Different reports mention the influence of MS-13 and B-18 in the whole country; however, there is an evident control and disputes over territory in the capital city (Prensa Libre, 16 November 2016); (InSight Crime, 26 April 2019).	Somewhat - subdivision of criminal investigations. Yet no separate and independent budget (MINGOB, 2019). There are some questions about the independence of police forces (Crisis Group, 20 July 2012).	Inclusion. All indicators suggest inclusions. Also very high homicides rates.	Yes
Guyana	9.64%	18.5%	No links known.	Little violence reported. Gang violence is deadly.	Violence is dispersed (though insufficient data).	Unclear	No	No inclusion, although tentative. Lack of sufficient data to support inclusion.	No
Haiti	13.52%	9.7%	The state endorses alternative political and social orders. Criminal groups (posses, yardies, and paramilitary forces) have become part of the political	Battles and VAC balanced. Substantial brutal and public violence with many deaths, brutal attacks including dismemberment, cannibalism, and gang-rape.	Centralization of violence around Port au Prince.	Armed urban gangs are almost entirely in popular urban zones, based in a neighborhood with clearly defined boundaries.	Yes. The "anti-gang unit," of the Haitian National Police. Focus on armed urban groups in Port-au-Prince's.	Inclusion. All indicators suggest inclusion. Share of total violence is relatively high (13%), many groups control territory and violence is relatively endemic, brutal, and public. Moreover, clear political usage of these groups.	Yes



			system. (InSight Crime, 15 September 2017).			They usually provide a wide range of social services to residents.			
Honduras	7.83%	59.38%	Reports mention the links between criminal organizations in Honduras and politicians, elite families who control large enterprises (InSight Crime, 2019).	VAC dominates gang violence. High homicide levels with characteristics such as body mutilation, attacks against labor groups that do not pay extortion money, footballers, and family member of targets. The situation has caused some migration (Human Rights Watch, 2019).	There is centralization in San Pedro and in Tegucigalpa.	Yes (New York Times, 13 May 2019).	Unclear. The Honduran police force has different units specialized in investigation, border security, and others which have a mandate to develop strategies against organized crime (Policía Nacional de Honduras, 2019).	Inclusion. All indicators (except specific police units) suggest inclusion. Homicides rates are high, there is gang control over territory, and there is highly public violence.	Yes
Jamaica	24.77%	44.66%	The state endorses alternative political and social orders. Criminal groups (posses, yardies, and paramilitary forces) have become part of	VAC dominates gang violence reports. Mostly drive-by shootings, attacks on public workers, public killings, and attacks on youths. Gang feuds	Mixed. Centralized around Kingston. Other gang violence is dispersed.	Unclear	Unclear, but special operations are carried out.	Inclusion. Most indicators are satisfied (except for specialized police unit). Jamaica has one the highest homicide rates and share of gang violence in the region. Many small groups present engaged in common, lethal, and public violence. Political links clear.	Yes



			the political system. These criminal organizations have established clear-cut alliances with political party members and sectors of the state. (InSight Crime, 15 September 2017).	common.					
Martinique	1.45%	N/A	No	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible. Crime rates are low generally (French MoI, 19 May 2016)	No conclusion possible (insufficient data)	No	No (French MoA, 1 June 2017).	No inclusion, all indicators suggest exclusion.	No
Mexico	9.73%	19.1%	Various political links exist between gangs and politicians.	VAC dominates gang events. Very high levels of brutal and public criminal violence (murder, signature killing, drive-by shootings, killing of family members, killings of public workers, etc.)	Dispersed, but hotspots in major towns/cities.	De facto gang/Cartel control over many areas.	Yes	Inclusion, all indicators point towards inclusion.	Yes
Netherlands Antilles	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No



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Nicaragua	0.79%	8.68%	Links are shallow. Some members of criminal gangs are allegedly part of the paramilitary groups that support the government (Open Democracy, 2 July 2018); (Barricada, 23 September 2018).	Types of violence are not particularly public or brutal. According to Insight Crime, Nicaragua has been one of the least violent countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (InSight Crime, 15 June 2018).	Data are not clustered.	No known control of gangs over specific territory.	No. Although, Unidad Especializada contra los Delitos de Delincuencia Organizada (UECDO) combats crime.	No inclusion. None of indicators suggests inclusion. Gangs are nearly absent and levels of violence are low.	No
Panama	3.42%	12.88%	In the past the links between politics and criminal groups seems to have been stronger then presently (InSight Crime, 30 May 2017). Police, however, are still linked to gang activity to a degree (Global Initiative, May 2019).	Occasional gang feuds, fights and killings. Occasional clashes with the police. Gangs have possession of sophisticated weapons to protect drug transit but usage of these seems limited (Panama America, 19 September 2014). 70% of homicides are linked to drug trafficking and organized crime in Panama (InSight Crim, 22 February 2016).	Some clustering of violence. Mainly Panama city. Some gang violence in border areas with Colombia and Costa Rica.	Some gangs have control in Panama city but it's not exclusive and remains limited.	Yes, in Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta Águila.	No inclusion. Few indicators suggest inclusion. Instances of violence and homicide rates are relatively low. Gang violence occasionally high, but contained within remits of gang feuds.	No



Paraguay	5.09%	9.08%	No reported links between politicians and gangs. Police and gangs links are more common.	Violence limited. Occasional killings of public workers (accountants) linked to drug trade. Many police raids against production facilities.	Violence dispersed, with some clustering at the border.	State controls border areas regardless of attempts of gangs to take control.	Unclear	No inclusion. None of indicators suggests inclusion.	No
Peru	2.31%	7.18%	There appear to be a number of connections between gangs and government entities, especially police forces, who seem to have a significant involvement in drug trafficking and other illegal activities.	More battles than VAC. While gang battles are most common, murders are equally committed by gangs (Guayaquil, Lima and Quito).	Violence is dispersed.	Unclear (but in Lima there are 100 gangs operating)	No	No inclusion. All indicators (except political connection) indicate exclusion. Share of gang violence is low, low homicide rates, and dispersed violence.	No
Puerto Rico	14.84%	19.62%	Close links and clear-cut alliances between criminal groups and political parties or sectors of the state. Some public housing blocks ("cacerios" in San Juan municipality) have the highest density concentration of gangs. Gangs	VAC dominates. Many gang related executions. Usually specific targets not aimed at public workers or family. Executions common through gunshots.	Violence is dispersed.	Unclear	Unclear	Inclusion. Border case as indicators are mixed and sometimes unclear. Gang violence and homicide rates are high, but bordering exclusion. Violence is deadly but not very public. No clear control of territory. Close links between politicians and gangs tips balance in favor of inclusion.	Yes



			played a critical role in allowing the former ruling party – the New Party for Progress (PNP) - to win multiple victories in the last three municipal elections.						
Saint Lucia	14.29%	N/A	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	No control of territory.	No	No inclusion. Little data and status unclear.	No
Saint-Martin	N/A	20.08%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
Sint Maarten	N/A	22.725%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No gang violence reported	No
St Kitts and Nevis	30.00%	N/A	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible. Qualitative information suggest a worse image (ISSAT, 11 February 2011).	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	No	No	No inclusion. No indicators supporting inclusion (although qualitative information suggests there is a larger gang presence that ACLED pilot data shows). Generally, little data available and status unclear.	No
Suriname	8.33%	6%	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data).	Unclear	No	No inclusion. No indicators supporting inclusion. Generally, little data available and status unclear.	No
Trinidad and Tobago	20.23%	30.333%	The leader of one of the larger gangs also has a	VAC dominates. Violence is very deadly but not	Violence is dispersed.	Unlike ACLED data, qualitative	There is not a specific police unit	Inclusion. Difficult case with some indicators suggesting inclusion (e.g. Homicide rates,	Yes



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			<p>car dealership, and high influence with politicians (InSight Crime, 21 October 2013).</p> <p>Others have become involved in the provision of jobs and sponsoring politics (UWI, 4 November 2011).</p>	<p>public or particularly brutal.</p>		<p>data suggest that gangs have a high influence in the capital and Laventille area, and control public infrastructure in the latter.</p>	<p>against gang violence, but reports mention that the military has been used to help with patrols and police operations.</p>	<p>share of violence) and others (geographic dispersion and type of violence) suggest possible exclusion. Given high rates of homicides, and high share of gang violence in overall violence, opted for inclusion.</p>	
Uruguay	8.70%	7.98%	No reported links.	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	Violence is dispersed (though little data).	No control	Unclear	No inclusion, all indicators suggest exclusion.	No
US Virgin Islands	21.43%	N/A	Unclear	Little violence reported - no conclusion possible.	No conclusion possible (insufficient data)	No	No	No inclusion. No indicators supporting inclusion. Generally, little data available and status unclear.	No
Venezuela	4.02%	59.10%	<p>There are substantial links between state and criminal groups amongst a number of high offices (InSight Crime, 16 May 2018). Moreover, Police officers and supervisors in Carabobo state have been linked to the gang Tren de Aragua (El Cooperante, 12 September 2018).</p>	<p>Gang violence can occasionally be very deadly (InSight Crime, 21 September 2017).</p> <p>High rate of robberies and street violence remains within the criminal sphere.</p>	No, gang violence is dispersed.	Gang control is limited except for some control in the Southern Bolivar Region.	Yes, CICPC.	No inclusion. Three indicators suggest inclusion (ties, homicide rate, and specialized units). Yet, homicides rates are co-produced by armed groups with stated political goals.	No