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Understanding gangs as armed groups

Jennifer M. Hazen

Dr. Jennifer M. Hazen is a Fellow at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. Her areas of expertise include armed groups, conflict dynamics, and post-conflict peace-building processes.

Abstract

Gangs have long been considered a source of violence and insecurity, but they are increasingly identified as a cause of instability and a threat to the state. Yet gangs operate mainly in non-conflict settings, raising questions about whether applying a conflict lens to understand gangs is appropriate. Marked differences appear between armed groups and gangs when considering concepts of ungoverned spaces, the state, violence, and sustainability. Few gangs reach the threshold of posing a direct challenge to the state; this makes comparisons with other armed groups difficult and suggests the need for a more specific analytical lens.

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> *…men can only be highly civilized while other men, inevitably less civilized, are there to guard and feed them.*
>
> George Orwell, 'Rudyard Kipling' (1942)

Urban violence has been characterized as endemic and unbound.[1] Such portrayals of violence in the media have created climates of fear and widespread perceptions of insecurity, regardless of the reality on the ground. Discussions of violent cities echo studies of civil wars and concerns about failed, anarchic, lawless, and ungoverned states. Yet such sweeping descriptions often fail to reveal the underlying dynamics of violence and conflict, the reasons why individuals take up arms and engage in violent acts, the concentration of violence in certain areas of otherwise stable cities or countries, the nature of the perpetrators and the victims, and the nature of governance in countries severely affected by violence. Current discussions of urban violence and gangs tend to dramatize the problem,

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over-generalize about violence, simplify the nature of gangs, and justify a heavy hand by governments.

Violence in non-conflict settings produces the vast majority of violent deaths.[2] These deaths result from a mixture of criminal violence, interpersonal violence, organized crime, the drug trade, gang violence, state-led violence, and political violence. As scholars and practitioners try to grapple with violence in non-conflict areas, current theories of armed groups and armed conflict, drawn from the conflict studies literature and based largely on the study of civil wars, are being used to understand the situation of violence in our cities. Criminologists have long viewed gangs as a criminal problem to be handled through law and order measures. Political scientists have taken this a step further, to consider gangs as insurgents. Gangs are increasingly identified as a cause of violence, a source of instability and insecurity, and a threat to the state. This raises important questions about whether applying a conflict lens to gangs is appropriate, or whether differences in the characteristics, behaviours, and contexts of gangs require a rethinking of this approach. This article seeks to answer those questions.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section reviews common stereotypes of urban violence and gangs. Despite being inaccurate, these stereotypes often guide popular understanding of gangs and government responses to them. The second section looks at how armed groups, in general, are defined and characterized. This is followed by a discussion of how gangs fit within the broader category of armed groups. The focus is on youth gangs, though other types of gang exist: motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, skinheads, and other types of organizations, such as drug organizations and organized crime. These are all often labelled simply as gangs, yet they operate very differently from one another, making distinctions between them important. Special attention is paid at the end of the section to institutionalized gangs, which most closely resemble rebel groups. The third section presents four key concepts in conflict studies: the context of ungoverned spaces, the relationship of the group to the state, the role of violence, and the sustainability of an armed group. Since few gangs reach the threshold of posing a direct challenge to the state, this makes comparisons with other armed groups difficult and suggests the need for a more specific analytical lens.

Common stereotypes[3]

Gangs are commonly referred to as predators, criminals, losers, delinquents, and thugs. Gang members are demonized as inherently bad, violent, truant, poor, and uneducated. Gangs are frequently associated with violence, drugs, and the inner

1 Alisa Winton, 'Urban violence: a guide to the literature', in *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 16, No. 2, October 2004, p. 166.
2 Geneva Declaration Secretariat, *Global Burden of Armed Violence*, Geneva, 2008, pp. 1 and 67.
3 For a more detailed discussion of gang myths see James C. Howell, 'Menacing or mimicking? Realities of youth gangs', in *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 2, Spring 2007, pp. 39–50.

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city.[4] The stereotypes of gangs abound: they prey upon innocent citizens; they are highly structured criminal organizations; all gangs are alike; all gang members are hardened criminals; gang members spend most of their time involved in criminal and violent acts; and gang members are responsible for the majority of crimes committed in their neighbourhoods.[5] The reality is far more complex, and far less criminal and violent in nature. The stereotypes and heightened rhetoric fail to recognize the great variation that exists across gangs or the numerous factors that enable and encourage the creation and perpetuation of gangs.

Urban crime and violence have been growing concerns for the past decade among policy-makers and inhabitants of large cities around the globe.[6] Part of this concern stems from high levels of crime and violence in many cities. Meanwhile, part of the fear results from inaccurate stereotypes that demonize certain groups and place the blame for urban violence on gangs, whether or not there is evidence to support such allegations. The young man covered in tattoos, fighting in the streets and dealing drugs is a common stereotype of a typical gang member. While tattoos, fighting, and drugs are commonplace in many gangs, they do not define gangs, and the wide variation in gang membership and gang behaviour suggests that focusing solely on these negative elements can be misleading in trying to understand gangs, their activities, and their broader role in communities.

Concerns about urbanization and growing urban populations are linked to the perception that violence and crime are urban phenomena. Urban violence has 'reached unprecedented levels in many cities' in the developing world.[7] Today more than 50% of the world's population lives in urban settings, and developing countries account for over 90% of urban growth.[8] This suggests that urban violence is likely to take place in those cities least capable of preventing or addressing it, and gangs may play a significant role in this violence because they are 'most visible and most violent during periods of rapid population shifts'.[9] Although growing urban populations are correlated to higher levels of violence, this does not mean that all growth in city populations results in rising violence. The reality is not so simple. Urban growth, as a phenomenon, is not a cause of violence. Instead, it is the nature of the growth, the ability of cities to absorb new residents, the ability of the government to plan and manage growth, and the capacity of the government to

4 Tim Delaney, *American Street Gangs*, Pearson/Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2006, p. 11; Finn-Aage Esbensen, 'Preventing adolescent gang involvement,' in *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, 2000, p. 3; Randall G. Shelden, Sharon K. Tracy, and William B. Brown, in *Youth Gangs in American Society*, 3rd edn, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA, 2004, pp. 24–26.

5 J. C. Howell, above note 3; T. Delaney, above note 4, p. 11; Judith Greene and Kevin Pranis, *Gang Wars: The Failure of Enforcement Tactics and the Need for Effective Public Safety Strategies*, A Justice Policy Institute Report, New York, July 2007, p. 51.

6 Ellen Brennan, *Population, Urbanization, Environment, and Security: A Summary of the Issues*, Woodrow Wilson Center, Occasional Paper Series, No. 22, 1999, p. 16; UN-HABITAT, *Enhancing Urban Safety and Security: Global Report on Human Settlements 2007, Vol. 1: Reducing Urban Crime and Violence: Policy Directions*, Earthscan, London, 2008.

7 A. Winton, above note 1, p. 165.

8 UN-HABITAT, *State of the World's Cities 2008/9: Harmonious Cities*, Earthscan, London, 2008, p. 15.

9 James C. Howell, 'Youth gangs: an overview', in *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, August 1998, p. 2.

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address the basic needs of the new urban population that determine the sustainability of urban growth and the risk of violence.[10] When urban growth is unplanned and produces a rise in the number of urban poor, shanty towns, and slum dwellings, these populations are more vulnerable to crime and violence.[11]

Gangs are often blamed for urban violence, despite the lack of systematic information on gang violence.[12] Not all violence perpetrated in cities is gang violence: for example, in Central America, 10–60% of criminal violence is attributed to gangs.[13] Certainly at the lower estimate of 10%, but even at the upper estimate, many other actors are responsible for violence. In fact, it is extremely difficult to determine what percentage of crime results from gang activities.[14] In the United States, law enforcement agencies use different definitions to measure gang crime – whether it is gang-related or gang-motivated.[15] The former includes any crime committed by a gang member; the latter any crime committed on behalf of the gang.[16] It makes a difference which definition is used. For example, research conducted on police data of homicides in Los Angeles demonstrated that using the motive-based definition results in counting half as many homicides in Los Angeles as gang homicides compared to using the member-based definition.[17] In many instances, gang members acted as individuals to settle personal scores, and their actions were not committed on behalf of the gang. The involvement of a gang member in a crime or violent act does not make that act a gang activity.

Violence has often been a key attribute applied to gangs to distinguish them from other types of youth groups. However, the inclusion of violence in defining gangs has been disputed by those who suggest that gang involvement in violence needs to be assessed, rather than presumed. Gang members, although believed to be the primary perpetrators of crimes, are not.[18] This myth of always being involved in criminal activities is driven largely by exaggerated portrayals in the media and gang member accounts.[19] All gangs engage in some form of criminal and violent activities. However, these activities vary; they are not always violent in nature, and gang members rarely specialize in a particular type of crime.[20] In addition gang members, despite stereotypes, are not constantly engaged in criminal acts; instead, they spend far more time 'hanging out' than breaking the law.[21]

10 UN-HABITAT, above note 6, pp. 2–5 and 14–15.
11 *Ibid.*, pp. 2–5.
12 For an overview of gang violence regionally, see Scott Decker and David C. Pyrooz, 'Gang violence: context, culture, and country', in *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 129–156.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
14 R. G. Shelden, S. K. Tracy, and W. B. Brown, above note 4, p. 21.
15 Malcolm W. Klein and Cheryl L. Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 69–71; R. G. Shelden, S. K. Tracy, and W. B. Brown, above note 4, pp. 22–23.
16 J. Greene and K. Pranis, above note 5, p. 51.
17 *Ibid.*
18 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
19 J. C. Howell, above note 3, pp. 39–40.
20 M. W. Klein and C. L. Maxson, above note 15, pp. 73–74.
21 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

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Rather than stereotyping gangs as violent, criminal enterprises, conceptualizing them as a particular form of social organization within a community moves the discussion beyond a subjective judgement of good and bad to a focus on the gangs, their actions, and their impacts. Gangs are one of many social actors in a community.[22] They can have a positive or negative impact on communities depending on the role they play. In some instances, they act as predators and generate fear and insecurity; in others, they offer a form of protection unavailable from existing state security forces.[23] This does not imply that gangs are dangerous or benign, but that understanding gangs requires more than assessing the threat that they pose.

Understanding armed groups

What is an armed group? There is no standard, universally accepted definition.[24] On the surface it would seem obvious what an armed group is: at its most basic level an armed group is an organized group with a clear structure, membership, and the capacity to use violence in the pursuit of its goals. Yet this broad definition does not provide much assistance in distinguishing between different armed groups. For example, it could include state security forces, such as the police and the military, as well as state-sponsored security forces, such as paramilitaries and militias. In order to avoid the inclusion of state-controlled forces, which are widely perceived as groups that can legitimately bear and use arms, many definitions focus on those groups that exist outside state control.[25] Numerous groups with wide-ranging characteristics and who differ tremendously in their composition, activities, and roles in society fall under the heading of 'non-state armed group', including gangs, militias, rebel groups, insurgents, terrorists, and criminal organizations.[26]

22 John M. Hagedorn, 'Introduction: globalization, gangs, and traditional criminology', in John M. Hagedorn (ed.), *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2007, p. 2.

23 For a discussion of the roles of gangs, see Enrique Desmond Arias and Corinne Davis Rodrigues, 'The myth of personal security: criminal gangs, dispute resolution, and identity in Rio de Janeiro's favelas', in *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 48, No. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 53–81; John M. Hagedorn, *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008, p. 21.

24 For various definitions of 'armed group' (and a discussion of competing definitions), see Jörn Grävingholt, Claudia Hofmann, and Stephan Klingebiel, *Development Cooperation and Non-state Armed Groups*, German Development Institute, Bonn, 2007, pp. 22–28; David Petrasek, *Armed Groups and Peace Processes: Pondering and Planning Engagement*, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, November 2005, pp. 8–10; Pablo Policzer, *Neither Terrorists nor Freedom Fighters*, Armed Groups Project, Working Paper 5, Latin American Research Centre, Calgary, 2005, pp. 6–10.

25 The International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP), for example, defines armed groups as 'groups that are armed and use force to achieve their objectives and are not under state control'. See ICHRP, *Ends and Means: Human Rights Approaches to Armed Groups*, ICHRP, Geneva, 1999, p. 5.

26 For examples of typologies of non-state armed groups, see Ulrich Schneckener, *Spoilers or Governance Actors? Engaging Armed Non-state Groups in Areas of Limited Statehood*, German Research Foundation (DFG), Research Centre (SFB)-Governance Working Paper Series, No. 21, 2009, Freie Universität Berlin,

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These labels can offer some indication of the nature of the group, but can also be misleading. Positive labels, indicating that the group has some legitimacy in taking up arms, include revolutionaries, liberation movements, freedom fighters, militias, community volunteer organizations, and community defence forces. Negative labels, hinting at the illegitimacy and illegality of the group, include terrorists, rebels, insurgents, criminals, gangs, and warlords. These labels have at times been used interchangeably, and often the application of the label says more about who applies it than about the group itself.[27] Thus it is often more helpful to detail the characteristics of an armed group than to apply a particular name to it.

Rather than focusing on slotting groups into particular categories, researchers have suggested a number of ways of comparing groups based on their characteristics. One analyst categorizes groups based on how they fare across nine dimensions: motivation, purpose, strength, scope, funding, organizational structure, role of violence, relationship to the state, and the function they play in society.[28] Another suggests the use of 'the lowest common denominator' of how groups choose to mobilize, based on three key elements: membership (e.g. recruitment), logistics (e.g. weapons and food), and direction (e.g. command, control, and communication).[29] Another way of considering armed groups is to think of them as positioned along a spectrum that captures the respective group's relationship to the government, its level of organization, and its capacity to perpetrate wide-scale violence.[30] The use of a spectrum underscores, and tries to address, the difficulty of providing clear definitions for commonly used group labels (e.g. militias, rebels, or warlords), the challenges involved in ranking different types of groups (e.g. according to levels of violence or organization), and the fact that particular armed groups may move across the spectrum over time (e.g. by becoming more or less violent, changing their level of organization, or shifting from supporting the government to opposing it).

Situating gangs

An important question is how gangs relate to armed groups.[31] One tends to think of non-state armed groups as those that act in opposition to the government: groups

Berlin, October 2009; Richard H. Schultz, Douglas Farah, and Itamara V. Lochard, *Armed Groups: A Tier-one Security Priority*, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Occasional Paper 57, Colorado, September 2004; Anthony Vinci, 'The "problems of mobilization" and the analysis of armed groups', in *Parameters*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 49–62; Phil Williams, *Violent Non-state Actors and National and International Security*, International Relations and Security Network (ISN), Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich, 2008.

27 Michael V. Bhatia, 'Fighting words: naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violence actors', in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2005, pp. 5–22.

28 P. Williams, above note 26, p. 8.

29 A. Vinci, above note 26, p. 50.

30 Jennifer M. Hazen, 'Force multiplier: pro-government armed groups', in *Small Arms Survey 2010*, above note 12, p. 258.

31 It is important to note that not all gangs are armed, and not all armed gangs use guns. See S. Decker and D. C. Pyrooz, above note 12, pp. 144–145.

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engaged in civil wars – insurgents, freedom fighters, rebels – are the stereotypical non-state armed groups. Yet several more groups fall under the heading, although not all directly challenge the state. Other examples include gangs in Los Angeles, *maras* in El Salvador, and skinheads in Germany, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine. Gangs are certainly one type of non-state armed group, but how they compare to other non-state armed groups is less well understood. This differentiation is made harder by the fact that the label 'gang' is used broadly, covering an assortment of groups including youth gangs, motorcycle gangs, drug cartels, prison gangs, and organized crime.

The focus in this article is on youth gangs.[32] As with armed groups, there is no single definition of gang.[33] However, a number of definitions are often used. Klein describes a youth gang as

> any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighbourhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighbourhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies.[34]

Thrasher describes a gang as 'an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict'.[35] Hagedorn identifies gangs as 'alienated groups socialized by the streets or prisons'.[36] Gang definitions have been challenged on a number of points, in particular the inclusion of crime or violence.[37] However, the inclusion of criminal and violent activities is useful for distinguishing a gang from other types of youth group.[38]

Despite various concerns about being able to generalize, we can say that gangs share a number of characteristics. They are a predominantly urban phenomenon in larger cities, although they are now also found in smaller cities and

32 Unless otherwise noted, the term 'gang' refers to youth gangs, also often called street gangs. For a description of other types of gangs (e.g. motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, skinheads), see T. Delaney, above note 4, pp. 13–34.

33 For various definitions of 'gang' (and a discussion of competing definitions), see Robert J. Bursik and Harold G. Grasmick, 'Defining and researching gangs', in Arlen Egley, Jr. et al. (eds), *The Modern Gang Reader*, 3rd edn, Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, 2006, pp. 2–13; S. Decker and D. C. Pyrooz, above note 12, p. 131; J. Greene and K. Pranis, above note 5, pp. 9–11; J. M. Hagedorn, above note 23, pp. 23–31; M. W. Klein and C. L. Maxson, above note 15, pp. 5–9.

34 Malcolm W. Klein, *Street Gangs and Street Workers*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971, p. 13, quoted in M. W. Klein and C. L. Maxson, above note 15, p. 6.

35 Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1927, p. 57.

36 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 23, p. 31.

37 Mercer L. Sullivan, 'Are "gang" studies dangerous? Youth violence, local context, and the problem of reification', in James F. Short and Lorine A. Hughes (eds), *Studying Youth Gangs*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 2006, pp. 15–16.

38 See Malcolm W. Klein, *The American Street Gang*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 23–28.

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non-urban areas.[39] They tend to be groups that are marginalized from broader society. While a gang tends to be of a single ethnicity, no single ethnicity defines a gang.[40] Gang members tend to be young, in the age range of 12 to 30.[41] Gangs have long been assumed to be predominantly male though, while this is still true, evidence suggests that females are playing an increasing role in gangs.[42] Most gangs are loosely organized and moderately cohesive, and those that are more cohesive tend to be more delinquent.[43] Gangs rarely specialize in their offending; instead they engage in various delinquent acts, with violent crime being the least common activity.[44] The longevity of a gang ranges from a few months to decades.[45] The goals of gangs vary, but a key characteristic that distinguishes gangs from other non-state armed groups is that they do not seek to overthrow the state.

Institutionalized gangs

Early research on gangs suggested that they would simply run their course and would often dissolve as members aged; gangs were seen as temporary and part of a normal cycle of youth development.[46] Thus, while they might constitute a short-term nuisance to communities, they were not seen as a long-term threat to law and order. However, the identification of 'institutionalized gangs' in the 1980s challenged these views, prompting a discussion of developmental or evolutionary models of gangs and the concern that youth or street gangs could, over time, evolve into criminal organizations.[47] Although institutionalized gangs remain rare, their ability to sustain themselves, their involvement in extensive criminal activity and their capacity for large-scale violence have made them a focal point of policing efforts and government concern.[48]

Institutionalized gangs have been called super gangs, criminal business organizations, and corporate gangs, and are characterized as being highly organized and formal organizations.[49] In many cases this is an exaggeration. Institutionalized

39 M. W. Klein and C. L. Maxson, above note 15, p. 108; David Starbuck, James C. Howell, and Donna J. Lindquist, 'Hybrid and other modern gangs', in *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, December 2001, p. 2.
40 F.-A. Esbensen, above note 4, pp. 3–4; M. W. Klein above note 38, p. 29.
41 F.-A. Esbensen, above note 4, p. 3; M. W. Klein, above note 38, p. 29; Irving A. Spergel, 'Youth gangs: continuity and change', in *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 12, 1990, pp. 217–219.
42 M. W. Klein and C. L. Maxson, above note 15, p. 109; Joan Moore and John M. Hagedorn, 'Female gangs: a focus on research', in *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, March 2001, p. 2.
43 M. W. Klein and C. L. Maxson, above note 15, p. 110; M. W. Klein, above note 38, p. 2.
44 M. W. Klein and C. L. Maxson, above note 15, p. 110.
45 M. W. Klein, above note 38, p. 29; Rob White, 'Understanding youth gangs', in *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No. 237, Australian Institute of Criminology, August 2002, p. 5.
46 I. A. Spergel, above note 41, pp. 177–179, 199.
47 See Deborah Lamm Weisel, *Contemporary Gangs: An Organizational Analysis*, LFB Scholarly Publishing, New York, 2002, pp. 73–77.
48 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 23, p. 20.
49 John M. Hagedorn, 'Gangs in late modernity', in J. M. Hagedorn, *Gangs in the Global City*, above note 22, p. 304; Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *Community justice and the gang: a life-course perspective*, unpublished paper, available at: http://www.streetgangs.com/academic/venkatesh_paper.pdf (last visited 1 June 2010); R. White, above note 45, p. 2.

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gangs are not necessarily hierarchical with a single figurehead or a military-style chain of command. They are not, or at least rarely, 'godfather-run, centralized, efficient crime syndicates'.[50] They do tend to have a formal structure, but this often resembles a network more than a unified chain of command.[51] Institutionalization encompasses two elements: longevity and normality.[52] Longevity refers to the capacity of the group to sustain the gang over time;[53] normality refers to the gang becoming recognized as a normal part of the neighbourhood. What is fundamental to institutionalization is the gang's ability to perpetuate itself through the ongoing induction of members, the replacement of members who 'mature out', and the development of a sense of identity. Thus the gang exists independent of any one leader or leaders, which ensures that it persists even as membership and leadership change.

There is a tendency for both researchers and law enforcement officers to focus on larger, more violent, and more institutionalized gangs. Arguably these gangs are the most problematic in terms of security, which justifies a focus on them. However, this focus also tends to equate gangs with criminals or organized crime, which leads to a criminal justice approach of jailing gang members and heavy-handed policing tactics in many countries.[54] In most places, such military-style tactics (e.g. *Mano Dura* in El Salvador) have not worked well.[55] Although they may initially reduce gang violence, they do not appear to have a sustainable impact on reducing gang presence.[56] Instead, an emphasis on heavy-handed tactics can increase violence and gang cohesion. The use of the military to fight drug gangs in Mexico, for example, has provoked higher levels of violence.[57]

Some researchers have suggested that gangs should be understood and treated as a form of insurgent group, arguing that cities face 'another kind of war' and that gangs are out to 'neutralize, control, or depose governments'.[58] Supporting evidence for this is extremely weak. Gangs share few characteristics with insurgent groups. Most importantly, gangs do not share the primary goal

50 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 23, p. 19.
51 *Ibid.*; D. L. Weisel, above note 47, p. 73.
52 John M. Hagedorn, 'Gangs, institutions, race, and space: the Chicago School revisited', in J. M. Hagedorn, *Gangs in the Global City*, above note 22, p. 23.
53 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 23, p. 8.
54 Robert K. Jackson and Wesley D. McBride, *Understanding Street Gangs*, Thomas Higher Education, Belmont, CA, 2000, pp. 28–29.
55 Jennifer M. Hazen and Chris Stevenson, 'Targeting armed violence: public health interventions', in *Small Arms Survey 2008: Risk and Resilience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 289 and 293; Oliver Jutersonke, Robert Muggah, and Dennis Rodgers, 'Urban violence and security promotion in Central America', in *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 40, 2009, pp. 382–385.
56 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 23, p. 20.
57 See e.g. Sandra Dibble, 'Mexican military on drug war's front lines', in *San Diego Union Tribune*, 1 February 2009, available at: http://www.newssafety.org/index.php?view=article&catid=345%3Amexico-security&id=11589%3Amexican-military-on-drug-wars-front-lines&option=com_content&Itemid=100298 (last visited 23 June 2010); Duncan Kennedy, 'Mexico extends army's drugs fight', in *BBC News*, 28 May 2008, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7424797.stm (last visited 23 June 2010).
58 Max G. Manwaring, *A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty: Gang and Other Illicit Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica, and Brazil*, Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, December 2007, pp. 1–2.

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of insurgents: to seize state power. They are not a 'new urban insurgency' that 'must eventually seize political power to guarantee the freedom of action and the commercial environment they want'.[59] They have not declared wars on governments or states. They have not sought to overthrow governments. In fact, in many places gangs seem more intent on either remaining under the radar of law enforcement or collaborating with state actors (including law enforcement) to ensure that they are not harassed and can continue their economic ventures.

Applying a conflict lens to gangs

This section assesses whether a conflict lens should be applied to the study of gangs. In particular, it focuses on four concepts often used in discussions of armed groups, and especially of insurgents: ungoverned spaces, the relationship to the state, the role of violence, and group sustainability.[60] This analysis provides a cautionary note to those who normally research issues of internal conflict and armed groups that simply applying a conflict lens to urban violence may not be appropriate. It is a warning to policy-makers and practitioners, who seem to be shifting their attention and their funding to focus on armed groups in non-conflict settings – which undoubtedly means a focus on gangs – that they are approaching uncharted waters and should move forward with caution. It will be necessary to question prior assumptions, approaches, modes of thinking, and typologies of groups and violence. It is not simply a matter of shifting the conflict lens to focus on gangs.

Ungoverned spaces

The term 'ungoverned spaces' was coined by a former US Secretary of State, George Shultz. Since then, it has risen to prominence in the vocabulary of the US military and in discussions of failed states and feral cities.[61] The concept is intended to capture the lack of effective state presence in particular countries or cities. For the US government, the primary concern is that ungoverned spaces can provide a safe haven to terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda, and to other armed groups and gangs, which could capitalize on the lack of government presence in areas in which they operate.[62] Ungoverned spaces are perceived as threats to the state because they

59 Max G. Manwaring, *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*, Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, March 2005, p. 2.

60 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 49, in comparing gangs to other armed groups, argues that gangs should be treated as social actors not terrorists.

61 See Jonathan Di John, *Conceptualizing the causes and consequences of failed states: a critical review of the literature*, Crisis States Research Centre, Working Paper Series, No. 2, January 2008; Richard J. Norton, 'Feral cities: the new strategic environment', in *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Autumn 2003, pp. 97–106.

62 See e.g. Robert D. Lamb, *Ungoverned Areas and Threats from Safe Havens*, Final Report of the Ungoverned Areas Project, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Washington, DC, 2008;

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allow for the establishment and expansion of power of an armed group, the free reign of its activities, the resetting of the rules in those areas, and the flourishing of illegal activities that often contribute to supporting and sustaining the armed group.[63] In other words, ungoverned spaces provide a staging ground for armed groups to plan, prepare, and launch attacks against the state.

The term is misleading, however, since absolute ungoverned areas are rare. 'Ungoverned' refers to the lack of effective state governance, not the lack of governance in total – that is, anarchy. 'Ungoverned' states or areas are characterized by poorly controlled borders or airspace, lack of government authority beyond the capital or city centres, little or no provision of security by the state and limited protection of citizens from violence, weak political systems, deficiency in the rule of law, and the inability to establish a legitimate monopoly of power.[64] The extent to which a state or territory exhibits these characteristics varies. This variation can be depicted along a continuum:

> At the benign end of the continuum are otherwise healthy states that have lost control of some geographic or functional space within their territories … At the other end are failed states, in which the institutions of the central government are so weak that they cannot maintain authority or political order beyond the major cities and sometimes not even there.[65]

In many developing countries, the state simply does not reach far from the capital city. The lack of state presence may be unavoidable, resulting from a lack of capacity, resources, and manpower to effectively administer distant towns and cities. It can be intentional, resulting from a concentration of power in the capital and a choice to ignore peripheral areas. It can also result from motives of profit. Ungoverned spaces are, and have been, created and tolerated for a variety of purposes: for example, to reduce border disputes, to enable corrupt politicians to facilitate dubious financial transactions, and to facilitate the drug trade.[66] The economic profits generated in and through ungoverned spaces create a constituency committed to maintaining these spaces.[67] This constituency can include anyone from a local vendor interested in selling his goods to a local leader who can tax local economic activities to the national politician who profits from

US Department of Defense, *US National Defense Strategy*, Washington, DC, June 2008. Also see Stewart Patrick, 'Weak states and global threats: fact or fiction?', in *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2006, pp. 27–53; Angel Rabasa et al., *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2007, pp. 1–2.

63 Troy Thomas, 'Control roaming dogs: governance operations in future conflict', in *Military Review*, January–February 2006, p. 80.

64 A. Rabasa et al., above note 62, p. 1; Laura Tedesco, *The Latin American state: 'failed' or evolving?*, FRIDE Working Paper 37, May 2007, p. 1.

65 A. Rabasa et al., above note 62, p. 1.

66 Anne L. Clunan and Harold Trinkunas, *Ungoverned spaces? Alternatives to state authority in an era of softened sovereignty*, paper delivered at International Studies Association annual meeting, San Francisco, 26–30 March 2008, available at: http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/5/1/3/5/pages251351/p251351-1.php (last visited 23 June 2010).

67 *Ibid.*

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allowing these activities to take place. It can also include a variety of armed groups who take advantage of limited government presence in order to organize and operate. However, even in ungoverned spaces there is still some form of governance.

In areas where there are no formal governance structures, or where they are extremely weak and ineffective, some form of informal structure usually exists to fill the security vacuum left by government.[68] In some cases this comes in the form of local or tribal leadership, which is often considered benign and acceptable, though perhaps not preferable to state rule. Community groups might also provide security. In Nigeria, communities have organized vigilante groups (akin to neighbourhood watch groups in the United States) to patrol villages and deter crime because they cannot rely on the police, or because the police simply have no presence in the village.[69] In other cases, governance, of a sort, is provided by an armed group capable of imposing its will on the area in question. Armed groups vary in the level of governance they impose and the extent to which they provide social services. The role they play often depends on their goals and what they need to achieve them.

No armed group, except for those aiming to overthrow the government, prefers a complete absence of governance. Armed groups gain nothing from chaos or the absolute lack of governance. Instead, informal actors are more likely to prefer the under-provision of governance, or at least the assurance of a functioning economy and basic security, but nothing that would interfere with their illegal activities.[70] Despite notions that the 'bad guys' like to fill in where the state is completely absent, and that such groups seek out those areas, this is unlikely to be entirely true. In an environment with absolutely no services or administration, the group would have to provide these services at its own cost in order to carry out its activities. In anarchy, it would be hard (and costly) for informal groups to function.[71]

Often it is not a question of whether there is governance but of what type of governance is being exercised and by whom.[72] *Who* fills gaps matters because they become the centre of power in the community. *How* these gaps are filled matters because this determines the extent of the challenge to the state. Actors in these settings possess varying motivations for filling governance gaps and therefore pose different challenges to the state. Gangs, rebel groups,

68 Monika Francois and Inder Sud, 'Promoting stability and development in fragile and failed states', in *Development Policy Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2006, p. 143.

69 Jennifer M. Hazen with Jonas Horner, *Small Arms, Armed Violence, and Insecurity in Nigeria: The Niger Delta Perspective*, Small Arms Survey, Occasional Paper No. 20, Geneva, 2007, pp. 73–75, 90–91, and 106–107.

70 See Jessica Piombo, *Growing wild? Ungoverned spaces and terrorist proliferation in Africa*, paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, Chicago, 30 August–2 September 2007, available at: http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/0/9/5/2/pages209529/p209529-1.php (last visited 23 June 2010).

71 *Ibid.*

72 A. L. Clunan and H. Trinkunas, above note 66.

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organized crime, terrorists, and drug traffickers, depending on how they 'govern' and what services they provide, exhibit different levels of control over and support within the community. The more security and services the group provides, the more support the community is likely to give the group, and the less the community needs the government. This situation can erode support for government and diminish the value and legitimacy of a return of government to the area.[73]

Given the wide variation of armed groups – including insurgents, rebel groups, criminal organizations, and terrorists – it is difficult to generalize how they operate within ungoverned spaces. Criminal organizations and terrorists may enjoy the room to manoeuvre offered by such spaces, but they are unlikely to seek to establish effective governance over them. Lack of state presence is most marked in cases of civil war, where rebel groups control certain parts of a state. In rare cases, rebel groups have created a form of parallel government that offers some level of governance and may even provide limited social services, such as in Côte d'Ivoire.[74] These actions are not altruistic charity: armed groups provide services when they serve their larger goals. Gangs tend to operate in areas that are under-governed. In these situations, the determining factor is not an absence of government, or that government services are not available, but that both are inadequate. While this provides opportunities for gangs to take advantage of this gap in state control, the causal arrow points both ways; under-governed areas also contribute to the creation of gangs as a result of the insecurity there.

In some cases gangs provide a form of governance, dispute resolution, and security.[75] Over time, this can erode the capacity of the government to act in these areas and embolden and empower a gang, and eventually lead to its entrenchment in a particular community. However, while gangs do tend to be armed actors, who want to control certain aspects of neighbourhood life (e.g. economic activities, local neighbourhood dynamics, territorial claims with competing groups), they rarely directly challenge the state. Therefore, unlike armed groups in civil wars (where that *is* their intention), gangs pose a different challenge to the state – not one of survival in the crudest sense, but in terms of presenting an alternative to government in areas where government is weak and ineffective. This poses an indirect threat to the state in that it undermines governance, democracy, and law and order in these areas.

Relationship to the state

Many armed groups can pose a direct threat to the state. This is especially true in cases where their goal is to overthrow the government, secede, or in some other

73 E. D. Arias and C. D. Rodrigues, above note 23, pp. 77–78.

74 See Daniel Balint-Kurti, 'Côte d'Ivoire's *Forces Nouvelles*', Africa Programme Paper, Armed Non-state Actors Series, Chatham House, London, September 2007.

75 E. D. Arias and C. D. Rodrigues, above note 23, pp. 65–73.

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way change the governing structure of the state. This is not the case with gangs. Certainly, gangs with great involvement in the informal, and in particular illegal, economy seek to have friends inside government and the police to pave the way for smooth business operations. But this is far different from aiming to take over the government and become the governing power. The relationship between the gang and the state – and, importantly, the level of the challenge that the gang poses to the state – depends on four factors: the goals of the gang; the relationship of the gang to political and security officials; the desire of the state to impose control in ungoverned areas; and the relationship of the gang to the community in which it operates.

The goals of gangs vary and can be numerous, including the creation of a brotherhood and family, economic gain, ensuring security, and in some cases engaging in politics. It is rare for a gang to seek to overthrow a government. Despite concerns about gangs becoming insurgents,[76] there are no examples of a gang organizing and arming in order to depose a standing government. Gangs do engage in clashes with law enforcement and, in some instances, with state military forces. However, these clashes result from government efforts to impede or eliminate the gang's illegal activities, and tend to originate from the state. Gangs do not appear to seek violent confrontation with the state, which would be expected if they did desire to depose the government. Thus there is no direct physical threat to the state. However, survival and economic goals could create indirect challenges to the state. It is not uncommon for a gang to seek to maintain control over the areas in which it operates. In many cases this is a neighbourhood, not a large territory. Gangs will seek to defend their territory from other gangs, and may aim to control economic activities within the neighbourhood, but such actions rarely deny state actors access to the territory.

The second important factor is the nature of the gang's relationship to the government or to political leaders. In most instances, such activities are on a small scale. Most gangs are loosely organized groups, whose involvement in criminal activities at times brings them into contact with law enforcement, but which otherwise remain largely outside of politics. In some cases, gangs possess links to politicians and have been used as political tools to help politicians win elections, intimidate opponents, and implement policies.[77] In such situations, the gang does not pose a threat to the state but instead acts to further the interests of the state, or at least certain political interests. Gangs may also collaborate with politicians or security officials in order to ensure the smooth operation of their economic activities, such as drug trafficking. Such collaboration may be with certain elements of the state and not others, leading to mutually beneficial relations with collaborators but to conflictual and often violent relations with other elements of the state. It is the role of institutionalized gangs in the broader 'infiltration' of the

76 M. G. Manwaring, above note 59, develops an argument for linking gangs to insurgency.
77 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 49, pp. 302–303; J. M. Hazen, above note 30, pp. 262–267; I. A. Spergel, above note 41, p. 240.

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political system and security sector that raises the most concerns about corruption and insecurity.

The third factor is the desire of the state to control ungoverned spaces, whether because of internal or external pressure, which often entails efforts to rein in gangs. Gangs most often exist and operate in neighbourhoods that are already largely marginalized from mainstream society. Such areas tend not to have a strong government presence. They could be considered as being at the lower end of the spectrum of ungoverned, but most of them do not generate challenges to the state and gangs operating in them focus their attention internally on the neighbourhood, not externally against the government. Governments are unlikely to pay much attention to those areas or their gangs. Instead, they are more likely to focus on areas where identified gangs are engaged in high levels of homicide or where institutionalized gangs and organized crime operate and use the lack of government presence to their advantage, for example, to conduct drug trafficking, smuggling, or other large-scale illicit activities. In the former areas, law enforcement has often used a mix of negotiations and policing to reduce violence;[78] in the latter areas, it has engaged in a 'war on drugs' and a 'war on gangs'.

The fourth factor is the nature of the relationship between the gang and its host community. This includes both what the gang provides to the community and how much support the gang receives from it.[79] The acceptance and identification of a gang with a particular neighbourhood does not necessarily equate with widespread community support. Communities may tolerate, or even support, gangs because of a security or economic function that they perform in the community. However, gangs may be less supported than they are feared, and normality may result from an inability to change the situation and a reluctant acceptance of the gang's authority. The more beneficial the presence of the gang, the more likely the community is to support it, even if it does not support all of the gang's activities.

The relationship of the gang to the state is directly linked to the challenge it poses to the state. In situations where the gang poses no or little threat, the state is likely to allow it to persist. In situations where gang activities disturb normal daily life – for example, through high levels of homicide or crime – the state is likely to crack down to the extent that the gang retreats to a less visible role. In situations where gangs openly and actively try to control illegal trade (e.g. drugs, trafficking, money laundering), engage in extremely high levels of violence, or collaborate with politicians and infiltrate the state, the state is likely to view the situation as a more direct threat to its sovereignty and stability. Few gangs reach the level of posing this kind of threat, and most that do are not youth gangs but drug-trafficking and organized crime organizations.

78 In the US, a number of cities have followed the Boston model of Operation Ceasefire. See National Institute of Justice, *Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire*, US Department of Justice, Washington, DC, 2001.

79 J. C. Howell, above note 9, p. 5.

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The role of violence

In war, violence remains the primary means by which an armed group gains territory, defends itself against attack, and seeks to overthrow the government. Violence is also a tool to instil fear in populations. This fear makes populations more malleable and gives the armed group an element of control through which it can extract resources and reluctant support. Armed groups have used violence to forcefully recruit members. They have also kept new recruits by making them commit acts of violence against their communities, ensuring that they cannot return home. Commonly, when an armed group cannot pay its soldiers, it allows them to loot for their salary. Armed groups use violence in many ways in war, and not all of them are to the benefit of the population.

In an urban situation, gangs use violence in ways that are similar to armed groups' use of violence in war. Gangs can use violence, or the threat of violence, to create fear in a community and to control the neighbourhood. They often engage in clashes to defend their territory; such clashes tend to take place along the borders of gang territories, where two gangs meet. Gangs direct their violence toward other gangs for territorial defence and to protect the group from physical attack, but also to defend the gang's honour and reputation, and to settle vendettas. However, there are important differences in how gangs use violence compared to armed groups.

Many gangs appear to have rules for how and when violence can be used, and rules for how violations are punished.[80] Gangs do not use violence to recruit members, who usually join the gang by choice, although in some cases insecurity and peer pressure can encourage enlisting. While the initiation of new gang members can be violent, the intent is not to harm but rather to prove their bravery and commitment to the gang. Some gangs have rules about how or whether members can leave the gang. In some cases the departure is violent, similar to the initiation process, but in very few cases is death the punishment imposed for leaving. Violence is not used to pay or reward gang members, as in armed groups, but members have used violence to resolve their own personal disputes or for economic gain.

The targeting of violence is also different. Whereas armed groups may move through areas and have no attachment to particular towns, gangs tend to be territorially based and protect their 'turf' and the people living in it.[81] They often use violence to protect their home community from external (and internal) threats. The one exception is drug gangs, which act more like adult criminal organizations and are largely responsible for 'gang' homicides and 'gang' drug wars.[82] In addition,

80 Dennis Rodgers, '*We live in a state of siege': violence, crime, and gangs in post-conflict urban Nicaragua*, DESTIN Working Paper Series, No. 02–36, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, September 2002, p. 6.

81 *Ibid.*

82 James C. Howell, 'Youth gang homicides: a literature review', in *Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 45, No. 2, April 1999, p. 227.

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armed groups tend to target civilians in civil wars. By contrast, most gang violence tends to target other gang members. Clashes with state forces happen, but these are not inherent to the goals of the gang: gangs do not engage in violence as a means to try to overthrow the government.

Sustainability of the group

The notion of sustainability pertains to the question of group longevity. In many instances gangs do not last more than a few years, yet some are able to perpetuate themselves over decades. The question is what enables some gangs to persist over time. In the conflict literature, explanations of armed group sustainability focus on factors such as insecurity, economic opportunities, organization, access to resources, and irreconcilable differences with the state. Similar factors seem to contribute to the perpetuation of a gang. At least four factors play a role in sustainability: institutionalization (which has already been discussed), security concerns, normalization of the group, and economic opportunities.

Security concerns contribute to the creation of a gang and are a common reason for sustaining it. Gangs often emerge in difficult circumstances and in response to a threat posed to individuals, who then group together to become gangs. Conflict then provides a reifying force: something that not only binds individuals together through a common purpose but keeps them together when the threat persists. It also provides an incentive for new members to join the gang. Gangs often emerge in areas of high poverty, discrimination, and marginalization. These conditions contribute to insecurity, and gangs offer a form of security by providing another form of social institution for individuals separated from mainstream institutions.[83]

Thrasher described the normalization of the gang as an organic process that resulted largely from collective behaviours that, over time, generated 'the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory'.[84] In this sense, normalization refers to the development of the gang itself. As discussed earlier, normalization is also a part of institutionalization and refers to the external normalization of the group whereby gangs become normal features of neighbourhoods where they are tolerated, if not liked, and allowed to continue their activities.[85] Internal and external normalization develop patterns and structures that are reified through repeated behaviour, thereby contributing to the solidification and perpetuation of the gang.

Sustainability also depends on the ability of the gang to establish itself as an economic player. Many gangs engage in activities in the informal market. Yet there is a difference between being involved in the informal market and being

83 I. A. Spergel, above note 41, p. 171.
84 F. Thrasher, above note 35, p. 57.
85 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 52, p. 23.

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an organized crime enterprise. Most youth gangs are involved in petty crimes; some may offer a form of employment or income. By contrast, institutionalized gangs 'support and enrich themselves by the underground economy'.[86] In many cases, involvement in the informal market includes participation in the illegal drug trade;[87] it may also include other activities such as prostitution, local taxation of street vendors, the imposition of security fees, or the provision of security services for hire. Most institutionalized gangs are not highly organized criminal syndicates. Those that do reach this level tend to be gangs that have evolved into drug cartels or organized criminal groups. This evolution, and the fact that these groups often exhibit characteristics and behaviour different from those of youth gangs, suggests the need to reconsider how we conceptualize and analyse special sub-sets of gangs.

Conclusion

Part of the problem in trying to understand gangs is the ease of lumping all of the bad guys together. Gangs resemble other armed groups. They are engaged in criminal and violent activities like other armed groups, though usually on a much smaller scale. They operate, when engaged in these activities, outside the law. They also operate in cities where extremely high levels of violence, though not all gang-perpetrated, raise concerns about gang presence. As a result, it might be tempting to use the same analytical frameworks. Instead, there is a need to distinguish between and among different armed groups, including gangs.

Wide variation exists among armed groups, as it does among different types of gang. The challenge is to develop a better framework for understanding these differences, as well as group similarities, in order to start disaggregating groups into more easily understood phenomena. Some gangs – the institutionalized and very violent – may in fact share characteristics with insurgencies, and thus the conflict lens and armed group framework might apply. But very few gangs reach this level, suggesting that such an approach is neither appropriate nor useful for understanding the thousands of gangs that exist in communities across the globe.

86 J. M. Hagedorn, above note 23, p. 19.
87 Steven D. Levitt and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, 'An economic analysis of a drug-selling gang's finances', in *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 115, No. 3, August 2000, pp. 755–789.

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