



Is the mano dura working in El Salvador?

by Andrew Thompson

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What happened?

In the first six months of this year the murder rate in El Salvador fell by an impressive 62.8%, to 585, a major achievement for the country's maverick president, Nayib Bukele.

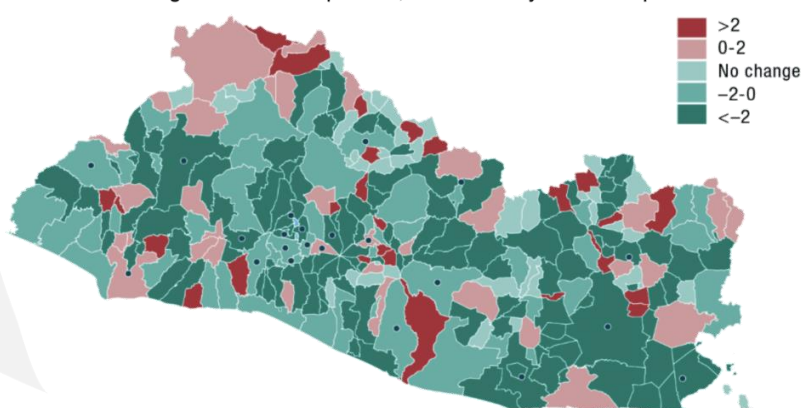
The details

The interesting question is why homicides have fallen so sharply. El Salvador has been one of the most violent countries in the world, with the death rate peaking at 103 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015: now it is poised to bring that down to under 20 this year. One option is to take the president, who has just completed his first year in office, at his word. Bukele says this is a success for his *mano dura* (hard-line) crack down on the country's gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (which in turn is divided in two main factions). His US\$600mn Territorial Control Plan has deployed 7,000-strong police and army units to patrol 22 violent hot spots.

He also tightened controls on imprisoned gang leaders and launched the "cubes" – glass-walled youth clubs in poor areas designed to persuade unemployed young men not to join the gangs. The crackdown is wildly popular and may well win Bukele a congressional majority in legislative elections due in February 2021.

Figure 2: Change in Homicides Per Capita since Bukele Took Office

El Salvador Change in Homicides per 100,000 1 January 2019-30 April 2020



Description of data: Change in monthly per capita homicides before (1 January 2019 to 31 May 2019) and after (1 June 2019 to 30 April 2020) Bukele took office. Territorial Control Plan prioritised municipalities are marked with a dot.
Source: El Salvador's Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

But something doesn't quite fit. The fall in homicides is happening across the country, not just in the 22 priority areas. Hard line crack downs have been tried before with mixed results. A report by [International Crisis Group \(ICG\)](#) suggests various other factors could be involved. It says there may be an informal and fragile truce in place between the gangs and the authorities. In certain areas de facto gang control over local communities may have resulted in a kind of enforced peace. The COVID-19 lockdown may have also played a role. The key point ICG makes is that the progress made so far could be temporary and reversible. It urges Bukele to take further steps to address the social causes of crime, and if the improvement continues, to open a dialogue to persuade gang members to hand over their weapons.

What does it mean?

There is a danger that a confrontational tone in the coming election campaign might reignite the cycle of violence that has marked the country for at least the last four decades: but there is also a real opportunity for crime reduction.

About the Author

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As well as being a Canning House Associate Fellow, Andrew is a former foreign correspondent (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro) and a broadcaster for the BBC's Latin American Service. Working through La Rambla Research Ltd., he writes about economics, political risk, and business in Latin America.



These stories are also available on Andrew's blog site, [La Rambla Research](#).