

Blog Post Title: Understanding Entanglements between Evangelicals and Gangs
Author: Stephen Offutt
Author affiliation: Asbury Theological Seminary

Like David Bueno, I conduct research in El Salvador. I began a decade long research initiative in 2013 called the Religion, Poverty & Development (RPD) project. The first wave of results showed that the most acutely experienced aspect of poverty in lower class Salvadoran communities is violence, and that evangelical churches have a close and complicated relationship with gangs.

The idea that churches and gangs have a special relationship is not new. Bob Brenneman, in his book [*Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*](#) (Oxford University Press 2011), explained that gang members are uniquely allowed to leave the gang if they have an authentic conversion to evangelical Christianity – otherwise they are tied to the gang for life. I saw this dynamic at work in my own research; it spoke to the tremendously important role pastors and churches play in impoverished Central American communities.

But I also saw a lot of other interactions between evangelicals and gangs. The two groups inhabit the same marketplaces, schools, buses, parks, and even families, making relationships between them unavoidable.

How such relationships function can be surprising. In one example from my research, an evangelical woman (we will call her Maria) had uncles who were in the gang. They got angry with her and threatened her, her children, and her pastor with violence. This is not abnormal: gangs often victimize evangelicals (see photo 1).

Photo 1



Evangelical victim of gang violence showing where a bullet entered and exited his body.
Photographer: David Torres Ayala

But gangs sometimes provide solutions to the dilemmas poor evangelicals face in everyday life. Maria, for example, asked the local gang leader to get her uncles to stop bothering her. He

granted her request. That night Maria gave a testimony at prayer meeting, thanking God for solving the problem she had with her uncles.

Such evangelical/gang entanglements are not unique to El Salvador. They occur in poor communities around the globe: Haiti, Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil, Kenya, the Philippines, etc. In such places the proximity of churches to gangs provides unique opportunities for transformational development. It also creates pastoral and congregational needs that faith-based NGOs may be uniquely qualified to meet. These include counseling for victims of violence, training for pastors who counsel and disciple ex-gang members, and spaces for church members to think about how to interact with family members in gangs. My new book: [*Blood Entanglements: Evangelicals and Gangs in El Salvador*](#) (Oxford University Press 2023), provides a deeper look at the connections evangelicals have with gangs and recommendations that may be applicable in multiple country contexts.

Back in El Salvador, the government recently implemented a mass incarceration strategy to re-take control of poor communities. Of the over 60,000 people that have been put in prison in the last 12 months, there are numerous pastors and tens of thousands of youths from evangelical homes. El Salvador's social and religious context is in a period of rapid change.

New questions and ministry opportunities are thus emerging. How will this further complicate the evangelical/gang relationship (see photo 2). How can churches be planted in prisons? How can rehabilitation and reinsertion into society occur on a large scale? Perhaps future posts in this conversation will come from people with experiences in such efforts.

Photo 2



Gang member in a rehabilitation center holding a Bible and flashing a gang sign.
Photographer: David Torres Ayala

Author bio: Stephen Offutt's research interests include the intersection of religion and development, religious transnationalism, and churches and street gangs. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including the recently released Blood Entanglements: Evangelicals and Gangs in El Salvador.

