



# Education in Risk Situations: Gangs and New Challenges for Schools and Teachers

## Executive Summary

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**S**alvadoran public schools face disturbing problems of insecurity. According to the Ministry of Education (MINED), between 2014 and 2018, schools reported preoccupied levels of robbery/theft, drug use, gang presence, weapons, extortion, and rape. Even though the MINED does not establish causes, it is very likely that these events are related to each other, and that many of them are linked to the presence of gangs in the schools' surroundings.

In the past, high dropout rates among students with ties to gangs was a concern; it seemed that these youth preferred the streets over formal education. However, gangs never left the school; in fact, they usually consider public schools as an integral part of their territory. The consequence, among other things, is a complicated relationship among the school, family, and the surrounding community; and fear of possible

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interference or retaliation from gang members when students interpret teachers' actions as an affront. These tensions negatively affect learning processes, pedagogical authority, and the relationship between teachers and students.



### The research

Little is known about how the presence of gangs in surrounding communities influences public schooling in El Salvador. To

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this end, this study focuses on the changes in dynamics and relationships among the educational community in the context of gang presence. Specifically, it explores the functioning of the school and the interactions between teachers and students. The objective is to describe and analyze how the presence of gangs and the sense of insecurity that this may provoke affect the daily functioning of the school and the role of teachers. Likewise, based on its results, this study also wants to provide input for educational policies that strengthen school functioning and the pedagogical undertaking of teachers.

The methodology is exploratory and qualitative with a case study design. The main research tool is the semi-structured interview, conducted with principals, teaching staff, parents, and technical assistants from the MINED. Six schools participated in this study, from both rural and urban settings, located in three subnational departments or states.



## Results

The study highlights five key findings which demonstrate the influence of gang presence in the areas surrounding public schools.

### Erosion of pedagogical authority and the emergence of an inverse coercive authority

Gang presence boosts the emergence of new relations of authority and power in the classroom. Students who are close to the gang, or with family members tied to it, tend to instigate social dynamics that question or lessen the authority of a teacher. Their defiant, disruptive, or even threatening behaviors in the classroom impede the pedagogical pretensions of teachers. At the same time, other students view these behaviors as attractive and let themselves be

influenced by them, therefore diminishing their efforts and interest in learning. This way of imposing oneself on teachers and captivating other students can be understood as a manifestation of an “*inverse coercive authority*.” The erratic or threatening conduct of these students interrupts and impairs the teaching and learning processes, creating disorder, anxiety, and fear in the classroom.

### Threatened educational relationships: insecurity, anxiety, and fear

When the direct interaction in the classroom is affected by threats —implicit or explicit— directed against the teacher, the pedagogical relationship becomes permeated by fear. The inverse coercive authority feeds on anxiety and fear experienced by educational staff, which decreases

even more the pedagogical authority of the teacher. Additionally, the relationship of trust, which is fundamental for teaching and learning, erodes between students and teacher. Maintaining distance becomes a strategy through which teachers protect themselves in insecure situations.

### School, quality of education, and faltering participation of students

The quality of education that a public school can offer is diminished by the deterioration of pedagogical relationships and the accompanying detriment of the classroom environment. The erosion of educational processes affects not only students related to the gang, but all students. Education loses the quality of being appropriate and effective. At the

same time, the inverse coercive authority imposes itself on the students who do want to advance in their studies. The fear this generates can make them abandon school; even more so if the gang in the zone where the school is located is a rival with the one where students reside.

### Scarce resources to achieve quality and educative integration

Public schools lack the proper means and resources to counteract the influence of the inverse coercive authority, maintain discipline in the classroom, and implement attractive approaches to education. For many schools, the school handbook is an important resource at their disposition. The handbook can be understood figuratively as a “stick” used by the teachers in an authoritarian manner, to impose discipline and sanctions on students who err. However, the reality is much more complex. The handbook can also function as a “shield” to protect teachers against erratic or threatening conducts from students. The fact that the school handbook has been approved collectively by the educational community, justifies the enforcement of sanctions without revealing poor will by teachers.

The school usually turns to parents or caretakers to find a solution for the hostile behavior of students. But often, those responsible for the more problematic students are the least responsive. Some schools attempt—in a discreet manner—to suspend the enroll-

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ment of certain students to dispel troubles they cannot manage. The success of these different strategies, however, does not depend only on the school, but also on the attitudes of parents and gang leaders, who exert stronger influence over young people.



### Teachers: fear, individual strategies, and risk of isolation

Teacher’s anxiety and fear influence the educational relationship and the way they develop educational processes. “Having patience” with students and their erring behavior, “not showing fear” and “not complicating one’s life” with teaching and assessing students who do not want to learn or disciplining those who promote an inverted coercive authority are individual strategies to achieve a manageable situation inside the classroom. Some teachers feel alone in the search for solutions and isolate themselves because of a lack of trust in their colleagues.

Professional training does not prepare teachers for the clash between their pedagogical authority and an inverted coercive authority. The effects of everyday fear and anxiety are harmful for the health of teachers. Some suffer from stress, demotivation, insomnia, and hypertension. In order to feel accompanied, to vent their emotions, or to find moral support, they seek support from a psychologist, church members, or family members. Also, they yearn for more presence and support on behalf of the MINED.



### Policy Recommendations

The study highlights that gang presence in the surrounding community is not an individual problem of students, teachers, or principals of public schools. It is a situation that the entire school population faces. Therefore, it has to be approached involving the school, its community, and the education system. Economical resources, physical conditions, social relationships within the school and with the educational and surrounding communities condition the possibilities for generating effective answers to the situation of insecurity and the presence of an inverse coercive authority.

Maintaining close relationships with parents, the local community, local authorities, and state

and non-governmental organizations is vital. A cohesive relationship among teachers constitutes another factor that influences the efficacy of the school’s response. Leadership and governance from the principal are key to unite the teachers and encourage them to support each other in face of problems in the classroom. Situations of insecurity demand specific skills of the school principal, especially in the areas of leading and negotiating socio-educational processes with the educational community and designing local school policies that favor learning processes and pedagogical relationships between students and teachers. Above all, as a priority, they need support with implementing policies that generate an attractive school environment for students who come from families and situations of socio-economic hardship. ◀

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