

Pandillas Callejeras:
A Qualitative Study on Texas- México Gangs
in Semi-Rural Border Communities

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Abstract

Organized crime is one of the United States security priorities, including Mexican cartels and transnational gang drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) along the Texas-México border. Organized crime behaviors along the Texas-México border have garnered global attention due to the ever-evolving criminal operandi that generate illicit revenue. In this article, Texas-México organized crime is evaluated by analyzing several criminal groups: Mexican drug cartels, US-based gangs, and hybrid-neighborhood gangs. This article employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to N = 96 police investigative reports collected from the Texas-México border and provided by the Zapata County Sheriff's Office. From the 96 investigative report data, two groups were generated to form gang-related reports (N= 48), and non-gang reports (N = 48). The qualitative analysis included thematic analysis and conceptual mapping using the computer-assisted qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA. The police investigative reports consist of official Sheriff Deputy narratives explaining the observed behavior of individuals engaging in border crime. The police investigative reports included two Texas-México border crimes: migrant smuggling and drug crimes, both of which were analyzed to qualitatively explain gang and non-gang behavioral differences. The qualitative results found Tango Blast gang members to predominate the gang incidents along the Texas-México border but also indicated support for the manifestation of hybrid-neighborhood gang drug trafficking in higher populated border towns. The non-gang group demonstrated a higher number of migrant victims with migrant smuggling incidents. The study findings provide implications for theory, policy, and law enforcement programs with future directions for police executives and public safety stakeholders.

Keywords: Texas-México border; criminal street gang; human smuggling; drug crime; qualitative research.

Introduction

According to primarily official data, organized crime issues in the United States, specifically at the southwest Texas-México border continue to persist, consequently raising homeland security concerns (Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), 2020). Two unclassified government reports by the Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS) (2018) and the DEA (2020) found Mexican cartels and U.S. criminal gangs to be associated with human smuggling and drug trafficking along Texas-México borders. Available scholarship helps to highlight some of the important issues about organized crime groups on the border. For example, the corroborations between Mexican cartels and US-based gangs involve several interconnected criminal activities facilitated through criminal partnerships (Smyth, 2022; Tapia, 2020) along the Texas-México border (Sullivan, 2015). Further, the organized crime literature has found a transnational relationship between the employment of criminal gang members as foot soldiers by Mexican drug cartels to harbor and transport contraband (Portugal, 2023; Reyna, 2020; TXDPS, 2018). Portugal (2023) and Reyna (2020) describe criminal transnational partnership between larger-scale criminal organizations such as Mexican cartels and smaller-scale criminal gangs (Dudley, 2020).

Due to concerns of organized criminal groups on the border, the U.S. government provides financial assistance through federally granted funds to local and state law enforcement agencies nationwide to deter increases in crimes (Yilmaz, 2022). The phenomenon of criminal street gangs and the demand from the Texas border crime has also affected Mexico (De Hoyos et al., 2017; Feixa, 2006; Lomnitz, 2005; Savenije, 2007). Criminal street gangs, or *pandillas callejeras*, are known to be recruited by Mexican drug cartels due to their street-level feasibility in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and other forms of organized crime (De Hoyos et al., 2017, p. 37). Like the US, *pandillas callejeras* are attributed to being associated with underprivileged familial ties and residing in underdeveloped communities (Feixa, 2006; Lomnitz, 2005). The aftermath created by organized criminal groups has raised public safety concern, with law enforcement assets used to increase public care and security (Stewart & Oliver 2021; Stewart & Morris 2009).

For over a century, gang research has found evolving gang taxonomies that go beyond youth and street gangs by assessing the involvement of prison gangs (Mitchell et al., 2017; Tapia, 2020). The convergence and development of street gangs and prison gangs share similarities from a sociological perspective (Mitchell et al., 2017). This study is a portion of what gang research in the U.S. have found to be a developing trend of criminal gang taxonomies, criminal involvement, and the manifestation of a sub-segment of the gang population (Gundur, 2022; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; NGIC, 2011). The current project explores gang-related incidents from police reports within the borderland communities in South Texas and uses the term organized crime and criminal street gang interchangeably. The synonymous use of the terms was due to the nature of the official gang data, who shared a degree of criminal organization factors pertaining to migrant smuggling rings and transnational drug trafficking organizations. Concerning grounding of the study, it is worth bearing in mind that one of the authors is a South Texas resident who has a clear

understanding of social and cultural behaviors observed along historically recorded border town gang areas such as Laredo, Zapata, Rio Grande City and McAllen (Balli, 2007; Jones et al., 2023; Mata et al., 2002; Sánchez Valdés & Pérez Aguirre, 2018; Slack & Campbell, 2016; Quezada, 1999; Tapia, 2020; Vulliamy, 2010).

Literature Review

Gang Definitions

The term "gang" has no universal definition but varies depending on scholarly research and criminal justice practitioner definitions (Curry, 2015; Klein & Maxson 2006; National Institute of Justice 2011). According to the Department of Justice (DOJ) (2020), Title 18 United States Code section 521(a)(A) defines criminal street gangs as ongoing groups, clubs, organizations, or associations of five or more individuals that have as one of their primary purposes the commission of one or more criminal offenses. The National Institute of Justice (2011) describes the primary purpose of violent gangs is to engage in criminal activity and use violence to further the criminal organization's agenda. The federal legal definition of criminal street gangs establishes a relationship between five or more members who, together, have the purpose to engage in crime. However, different federal agency definitions, such as those established by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, may require a minimum of three members (Martinez Jr., 2023).

There is variation in official state definitions of what a gang is, but there is some consistency in the language utilized (Barrow & Huff, 2009). Most definitions identify gangs as having at least three members engaging in offending behavior, with a leadership hierarchy, and with both a name and symbol (Huff & Barrows, 2015). Yet, there is regular disagreement among researchers on how gangs should be defined. Scholarly research provides different degrees of gang interpretations that range from early youth involvement (Decker & Pyrooz, 2014; Finelli, 2019; National Institute of Justice, 2011) to much more criminally developed prison gangs (Decker & Pyrooz, 2019; Tapia, 2015; Sullivan & Jones 2023). In a California-based study, Taylor (2013) adopted a similar structure to the Texas definition, requiring three or more people to come together in association and communicate a philosophy that they will commit violent acts on people. Additionally, Taylor (2013) excluded motorcycle gangs, hate groups, and terrorist-type organizations, due to differentiating wording from government definitions. Some scholars argue that if the definition needs to be broadened, there will be issues in conducting research and potential issues with constitutionality (Short, 2009; Spergel, 2009). Several researchers in the U.S. and abroad have also established the Eurogang definition (Maxson & Esbensen, 2012), which defines a gang as "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity (pg. 5)". But this definition is also criticized for being crime-focused, and some scholars argue that the term street-oriented is code for marginalized groups (Ortiz, 2023).

Ruralism of the Texas border

Research highlights that rural communities along the Texas-Mexico border, often referred to as colonias, face significant challenges, including high crime rates and substance abuse (Chinchilla & Payan, 2019). These issues were not officially recognized by the state of Texas until the late 1980s, when legislators began addressing extreme poverty and underdeveloped conditions in border communities (Ward, 1999). To better allocate welfare and special resources, the Texas legislature established a formal definition of colonias, ensuring that qualifying communities received necessary support (Lewis, 2015; Rios, 2020). These irregular, low-income housing settlements are primarily inhabited by immigrants who acquired underdeveloped land and lived in substandard conditions, often lacking basic infrastructure such as proper plumbing or concrete foundations (Lewis, 2015; Ward, 1999). Even today, research shows that many southern Texas border communities continue to live in colonia conditions, facing persistent barriers to necessities like running water and electricity (Braier, 2020; Chinchilla & Payan, 2019; Rios, 2020; Payan & Cruz, 2020).

While colonias, mostly rural underdeveloped settlements along the US-Mexico border, exist in other states such as California, Arizona, and New Mexico, Texas is often considered to have the most severe cases due to the border's geography. The rural border geography consists of some unpaved roads and thick brushy areas that limit city services such as internet access (Durst, 2015). Historically, immigrants have played a crucial role in the U.S. workforce, yet they have also faced discrimination and discouragement from migrating (Donelson & Esparza, 2007). Following the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned Chinese labor imports, industrialists turned to Mexican nationals as a source of cheap labor in the U.S. (Donelson & Esparza, 2007, p. 41). This shift established a new pattern of immigration and contributed to the formation of many colonias in Arizona and Mexico (Donelson & Esparza, 2007). Although Mexican workers were valued for their labor, they were often segregated into separate housing due to widespread racism (Donelson & Esparza, 2007).

Rural Gangs

It has been suggested that rural gangs have always existed, but research has predominantly focused on gangs as an urban phenomenon (Dukes & Stein, 2003). Although somewhat outdated, the 2012 National Youth Gang Survey found that nearly 20% of rural counties reported gang-related issues (Egley et al, 2014). However, it's important to note that this survey, which gathers data from law enforcement agencies, asked only if gangs were present without providing a clear definition of what constitutes a gang (Scott, 2020). Glosser (2016) explored the motivating factors for gangs to move into rural communities and found social inequality as a key player for gang activity and deviant behavior.

The rise in gang activity across the United States over recent decades can be attributed to factors like drug issues, migration, immigration, and the media's portrayal of gangs as appealing groups to join (Miller, 2001). Another factor contributing to the formation of rural gangs is the opportunity for financial or economic strain (Glosser, 2016; O'Dea et al., 1997).

Criminal rural gangs are a relatively new research interest, which started during the mid-1990s but has not yet garnered sufficient attention from researchers (Glosser, 2016). Furthermore, gangs need individuals to recruit, which may help explain why some rural communities have gangs, while others do not (Glosser, 2016; Weisheit & Wells, 2001). Research has also shown that rural gangs tend to be less street-oriented than urban gangs (Glosser, 2016; Howell et al., 2002; Weisheit & Wells, 2004).

While transnational gangs along the U.S.-Mexico border, the ongoing violence, and the extensive reach of their criminal activities arguably pose a threat to the United States (Carpenter & Cooper, 2015; Franco, 2007), there exists a paradox within the gang phenomenon on the U.S.-Mexico border (Durán, 2018). Research indicates that despite the turf wars between drug cartels and its violence, American gangs have not mirrored the rivalries of Mexican gangs, nor has there been a significant spillover of violence (Howell & Moore, 2010). Additionally, an (2018) highlights inconsistencies in law enforcement reports and the heightened politics of fear surrounding gang-related activity at the El Paso, Texas border, which has contributed to a negative perception of youth gang involvement (Durán, 2018). This fear has been manipulated by media outlets and used as a strategy to secure federal and state funding, fueling the demand for resources to address border issues, including gang activity (Correa-Cabrera et al., 2014). However, Durán's (2018) research shows that, despite the widespread belief of increased gang activity on the U.S.-Mexico border, the level of gang involvement in Southern New Mexico and West Texas border regions did not exceed that of other areas in the country.

Research on gangs has examined the prevalence of gang involvement in both urban and rural areas, focusing on community and neighborhood factors as predictors of gang activity (Watkins & Taylor, 2016). While some studies have explored how urban gang involvement influences the rise of gangs in rural areas, such research remains limited (Zevitz & Takata, 1992). Empirical studies have also addressed the spread of gangs and the migration of gang members to other regions (Tapia, 2014; Watkins & Taylor, 2016). A key finding across these studies is that gang involvement is influenced not only by geography and population density but by a range of factors that draw youth into gangs (Glosser, 2016; Tapia, 2014; Tapia, 2020; Watkins & Taylor, 2016). Both location and population size can increase the risk of gang involvement (Watkins & Taylor, 2016). On the other hand, some studies have pointed out that rural areas may face additional social and economic pressures that heighten the likelihood of gang involvement (Brown et al., 2023). Given the rural nature of the U.S.-Mexico border region, this study aims to compare incidents reported by law enforcement to improve comprehension of both gang and non-gang incidents, as well as an increased understanding for how gang incidents vary along highways compared to those in a neighborhood setting.

Gangs at the Texas-México Border

Most of the research on the border focuses on El Paso (Durán, 2018a; Gundur, 2019) or the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) (Finklea, 2018). El Paso is in the western part of Texas, bordering Juarez, México (Tapia, 2020), while the Rio Grande Valley is defined

geographically by four counties, Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy County (Leslie Jr, 2016; Ryabov & Merino 2017). The Rio Grande Valley consists of a Mexican American majority (Ryabov & Merino, 2017) and has historically faced challenges such as poverty and discrimination (Durán & Campos, 2019). The Texas-México border areas have unique geographical characteristics that require criminal gang research to consider its social stratification that include poverty and racial discrimination (Durán, 2018b). Contemporary Texas-México border gang research has explored the economic disadvantage and discrimination facing Mexican Americans being stereotyped as criminal gang members (Durán & Campos, 2019).

Public media has been known to portray Texas-México border residents as criminal gang members (Richardson, 1996) and assumed most Mexican Americans are associated with criminal gangs (Durán & Campos, 2019). The economic disadvantage placed on former gang inmates trying to reintegrate back into society is challenging, and even more so when they return into a community that is racially stratified (Durán, 2013). Additionally, Gundur (2019) examined the Paso del Norte area by approaching Juarez and El Paso as plazas, prisons, and the streets to understand the physical setting of organized crime. Gundur (2019) found that criminal actors who move between the settings develop and evolve their criminal strategies to the available protection to succeed in their illicit activities.

Although there are different perspectives among gang researchers on whether street gangs can be considered organized crime groups (Decker & Pyrooz, 2014), research has identified that prevalent street-operating gangs have grown and created more robust ties with far more organized Mexican cartels (DEA, 2021; Jones et al., 2023; Sullivan, 2015; Tapia et al., 2014; Tapia, 2014). It is crucial to note recent Texas literature suggests changing gang structures from hierarchical gangs (Skarbek, 2014) to new structures, referred to as "hybrid" gangs (Glosser, 2016; Jones et al., 2023; Tapia 2020). However, the threat to public safety between the increased number of loose structured gangs and their corroboration with more prominent transnational Mexican cartels is prevalent (Tapia, 2020; TXDPS, 2018). The large population of gangs and gang members may be due to the size of the prison system, of which Texas is one of the two largest prison systems in the U.S. (Pyrooz & Decker, 2019; Skarbek, 2014).

The Texas Department of Public Safety (2018) estimated an approximate count between 4,000 and 6,000 Tango Blast gang members in Texas, working as contractors for the Mexican cartels' drug trafficking, and the smuggling of migrants.¹ The Texas Mexican Mafia gang was formed in 1984, and the membership structure was traditionally hierarchical, from foot soldiers to captains (Fong, 1990). The Tango Blast is a recently developed gang that emerged from the same need for protection from the prison system but deviated from the traditional hierarchical gang structure (Tapia et al., 2014; Gundur, 2020). The meaning for Tango Blast comes from its abbreviation, who for ideological or functional reasons, stands

¹ It is important to acknowledge that gang databases have been found to overestimate gang membership due to a variety of issues including limited data needed for gang members classification, incorrect classification, and having outdated records of gang membership (Brown, 2008; Spergel, 2009; Marston, 2018).

for "Together Against Negative Gang Organizations" (Tapia et al., 2014, p. 260). Tapia et al. (2014) and Gundur (2020) suggest that Tango Blast could develop into a larger organization, which was soon found accurate by the unclassified 2018 Texas Gang Threat Assessment (TXDPS, 2018).

Finklea (2018) and Jones et al. (2023) highlight the importance of improved comprehension and analysis of criminal gang-cartel partnerships at the border. Cartel del Noreste (CDN), a faction from Los Zetas cartel, conducts criminal operations using smuggling routes to the southwest border into Laredo, Texas (DEA, 2021; Sánchez Valdés & Pérez Aguirre, 2018). El Cartel del Golfo also operates at the southwest Texas border, closer to the southernmost area of Texas border towns such as Brownsville (Jones et al., 2023; Sánchez Valdés & Pérez Aguirre, 2018). Feldman and López (2022) state that cartel del Golfo was not as violent until the cartel created a separate faction that served as their enforcers, Los Zetas (Longmire & Longmire, 2010).

According to Jones et al. (2023), Los Zetas were the enforcers of the cartel del Golfo and consisted of members who had military training (Beittel, 2022). Cartel del Golfo recruited the starting members of Los Zetas, who were deserters from the Mexican Airborne Special Forces (Beittel, 2022; Jones et al., 2023). Los Zetas were trained in conducting military exercises using surveillance tactics, urban warfare, explosives, and high-tech communications (Amicis, 2011). According to Elkus and Sullivan (2012), Los Zetas have established groups to operate in several Texas cities, including Laredo, Dallas, and Houston. El Cartel del Golfo, the opponent to Los Zetas and CDN, is one of the biggest cartels (Teiner, 2020) but has weakened due to law enforcement intervention efforts (Beittel, 2022). Cartel del Golfo is based on the Texas-México border between Matamoros, Tamaulipas, and Brownsville, Texas (Beittel, 2022; DEA, 2021).

Current Study

Gang researchers and scholars provide different perspectives on the relationship between criminal gang organizations and criminal behaviors. This study focuses on Texas-México border crime arrests at the incident level using the Zapata County Sheriff's Office arrest report database called Border Incident Assessment Report (BIAR). Zapata Deputies collected the border incident assessment reports during calls of service, and border crime arrests. However, they were attributed explicitly to border crime categories, human smuggling, drug seizures, motor vehicle pursuits, criminal gang activity, and other criminal incidents encountered along the Texas-México border town.

A qualitative comparative case study approach was used to assist the analysis and synthesis of the similarities and differences between two study groups (Goodrick, 2014), non-gang and gang-related narrative groups. The complexity and limited rural Texas-México criminal gang research warrants a comparative case study approach, allowing an intensive exploration of the phenomena (Bradshaw & Wallace, 1991). The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, was used for qualitative coding, using parent and child codes. Parent codes is a qualitative term used to describe the main code category,

and child codes are the subcategories (Saldana, 2021). Researchers independently conducted their coding of the report narratives during the first and second phase. After the end of the phases, a qualitative intercoder reliability was conducted where the researchers measured the level of agreement code designations using MAXQDA (Saldana, 2021). The intercoder function assesses the consistency and trustworthiness of the coding process when there is more than one researcher conducting the narrative coding.

Research Questions

This study poses two research questions.

1. How does crime type vary between incidents involving gang members and incidents without gang-involved individuals?
2. What are the crime behavior differences between gang incidents occurring in neighborhoods and gang incidents that occur on major roadways?

The research questions are essential to explore the relationship between border crime types and gang members involved. Gang behaviors observed during an arrest incident can provide insight into the criminal characteristics attributed to gang *modus operandi*. As mentioned earlier in this paper, gang typologies and structures vary according to agencies' and scholars' interpretations. Examining the criminal characteristics recorded after a criminal incident and arrest, supplements the physical observation of an actual gang crime. The first research question explores the difference between gang member behaviors by comparing them to non-gang members' behaviors observed during the incident. The second research question expands the analysis by distinguishing case differences when it comes to gang incidents that occur within neighborhoods compared to those that occur on major roadways.

Study Population

Residents of Zapata County, also known as "Zapatenses," live in a small semirural community with a history of resettlement following the construction of the US-Mexico Falcon Dam in the 1950s (Jeffrey, 2000, p. 3). The county has a long history of border-related crimes, including public corruption, migrant smuggling, and organized criminal activity (Quezada, 1999). The Mexico border is near the residences of Zapatenses, who in some cases are less than a mile away (Jeffrey, 2000). Due to its semirural characteristics, Zapata County is primarily composed of agricultural land (Garza & Long, 2021). Since the 1930s, public corruption and the influence of "border bosses" have been widespread in South Texas counties, including Zapata County (Quezada, 1999, p. 3). For instance, Quezada (1999) documents cases where undocumented migrants were smuggled from Reynosa, Mexico, to South Texas counties for illicit voting practices (Quezada, 1999, p. 39). The foundations of organized crime today can be traced back to the early influence of these border bosses, who used migrant smuggling to facilitate corruption and secure political power.

Zapata county has several small townships and are interconnected with the city of Laredo through US Highway 83 and are interconnected to the Rio Grande River borderline

(Garza & Long, 2021). Two maps were generated using a free open portal data, the online geographic information system ArcGIS, from the 2020 Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) online database to provide a visual understanding of the Zapata County spatial characteristics, such as the proximity to the Rio Grande border (Figure 1). The Zapata County townships include San Ygnacio, Ramireno, Zapata, and Lopeno (Figure 2). Zapata is a rural to suburban county with a small population size of 13,849 and \$34,406 median household income (US Census Bureau, 2022).

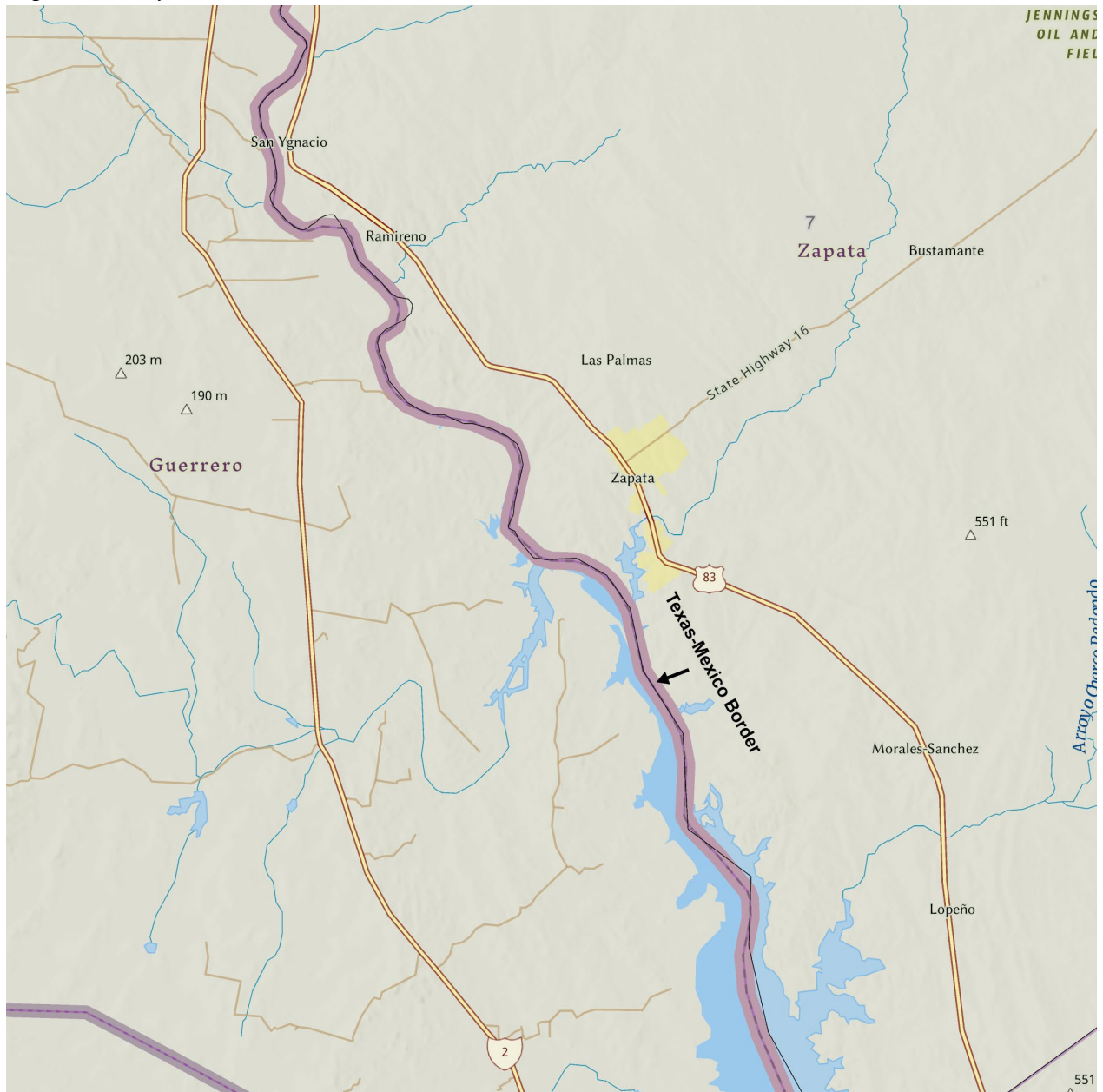
Operationalization

All gang members from this study were designated gang affiliation by Texas commissioned law enforcement based on two factors: (1) subject's self-admission and (2) gang-associated tattoo. This allowed for a direct comparison of gang and non-gang incidents. A direct comparison of gang incidents was also accomplished based on the incident geographic location. This included events where a subject committed a crime while traveling through the county of Zapata on US Highway 83, State Highway 16, FM 2687, 496, or 3074; and who self-admitted and demonstrated a gang-tattoo insignia associated to a prison gang. These incidents were compared to gang incidents occurring within neighborhoods using the same gang member classification but were differentiated by the event where a subject committed a crime within the street or neighborhood level that occurred in one or more of the six Zapata neighborhoods.²

² The 48 gang narratives included Mexican drug cartel incidents and were coded as part of the gang incident theme but was not included in the analysis due to its low representation in cases.

Figure 1*Zapata County**

*Zapata County Map generated using ArcGIS open portal data from the 2020 Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) online database. Polygon layer depicting Southern Texas-México border counties.

Figure 2*Zapata County Border to México**

*Zapata Border to México Map generated using ArcGIS open portal data from the 2020 Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) online database. Polygon layer depicting the Zapata-México border area. The purple vertical line depicts the Texas-México borderline.

Data Analysis

The comparative case study employs exploratory analytic methods to examine open-ended incident narratives recorded by law enforcement officers to capture the leading facts of the arrest near the border. An open coding approach is used to identify various codes and

themes in the provided police narratives. In this case, each narrative maintains a similar structure of an arrest report with the officer's observations during the criminal incident. This process creates parent and child codes based on the incident descriptions, which results in a codebook. The codebook was utilized to code the incident descriptions and identify overarching themes. The comparative case study findings bridge academic and practitioner understanding of the Texas-México border crime and criminal gang *modus operandi*.

Coding and Thematic Development

This data includes reports made by deputies during regular patrol enforcement along border towns within Zapata County. There were 220 incidents in total, 48 (22%) of those incidents were gang related. This is a high percentage of gang incidents but is consistent with research that highlights the over-identification of gang members by law enforcement (Barrows & Huff, 2009). The large number of gang incidents also allows for a direct comparison of gang incidents by geographic location.³ This study utilizes a mix of quota sampling, and purposive sampling, and to minimize issues with validity, 48 non-gang incidents were randomly selected for comparison. Therefore, about 44% of the incidents (96 out of 220) are utilized in this study. This was found to be sufficient for saturation among the incident reports and provides for a direct comparison of equal sized groups. The data were collected from 2019 to 2022 for border town crime incidents. The police data provided reports consisting of demographic statistics with case narratives collected by the deputy officers. The current study includes 48 gang incidents and using excel RAND the researchers selected 48 non-gang incidents from the remaining incidents in which to compare. Researchers conducted a raw data overview of the report narratives to familiarize themselves with the data before evaluating themes and codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a result, the 48 gang report narratives were analyzed using a micro-analysis, which is the process of coding every sentence with the InVivo or Process coding approach (Saldana, 2021).

During the first cycle phase, general memos and InVivo techniques were conducted to understand overarching themes. Researchers agreed that the police narratives have a consistent narrative writing process: date and place of the location, observation of the crime, actions taken by officer, and resulting arrest. The qualitative analysis was then conducted through the second cycle of coding, where each researcher provided their segmented coding and generated the overall parent codes with child codes. This continued until the researchers reached a consensus. To fully comprehend the coding process and the evolution of themes, it is necessary to show examples of original codes and their evolution into their final form for coding the incident reports.

Most incident reports identified various codes, including "Drug Crime" and "Modus Operandi." The coding definition for "Drug Crime" was "an event where a person illegally possesses dangerous a drug," with sub-codes specifying the drug type. The "Drug Crime" code started without subcodes, which were added later to differentiate drug crime types. This is like "Modus Operandi," which was defined as "crime classifications by criminal

³ It is acknowledged that the data have limitations, this issue is revisited in the discussion section of the study.

methodology, which may include a particular style, or technique," which then includes subcodes such as "Stolen Firearm," "Smuggling Route," and "Gang Recruiting Migrants." The "Modus Operandi" code also began without subcodes, added later to improve incident and incident-type comprehension. The original codebook also included "Gang Incident," which was defined as "a criminal event involving a gang member," but due to the complexities of gang and organized crime issues, this code was expanded to include "Prison Gang" and "Neighborhood Gang" with different subcodes for the different gangs. Additionally, a separate code-named "Mexican drug cartel" was created to differentiate incidents that are cartel-related. A Mexican drug cartel incident was defined as involving admitted members and associates.

Conceptual Mapping

In the following analysis, the research questions are explored through conceptual mapping and theme excerpt examples based on the codebook that was developed. A concept map tool produced with MAXQDA, called "MAXMap," provides a visualization of the analytical process of each case narrative representing the different elements of the data: codes, documents, memos, and coded segments. First, a two-group model (Figure 3) was created to visualize the association between themes and sub-themes of gang and non-gang cases. Alternatively, the dark blue color schemes represent the parent codes, and the light blue codes represent a categorical child code. The single-case models also depict code frequency differences based on the width of the associated arrow: a thicker arrow indicates a higher frequency. The two-group model was created using the MAXMap features to distinguish differences and similarities between non-gang and gang cases. The two-group model provides increased code images when higher frequencies in the data between the groups have higher frequencies.

Group Overarching Themes

The qualitative results indicate a total of nine noticeably frequent differences between gang and non-gang cases, two of which were attributed specifically to non-gang cases, and the other seven themes to gang cases. MAXQDA generated a two-group model, gang and non-gang, demonstrating their theme differences and similarities based on the codebook frequencies (Fig. 1). The shared theme associations between gang and non-gang narratives were five: Modus Operandi, Pretextual Contact, Migrant Smuggling, Interagency Assist, and Victims involved during an incident.

Research Question 1: How does crime type vary between incidents involving gang members and incidents without gang-involved individuals?

The contrast between both case groups demonstrates conceptual differences when associated with a drug crime, victim typology, and modus operandi, as provided by the Two-Group Contrast Model referred to as MAXMap (Fig. 3). Both cases have individual criminal characteristics shared in similarity and differentiated; for example, the Two-Group Model depicting code relationships between groups contrasts them by displaying undocumented

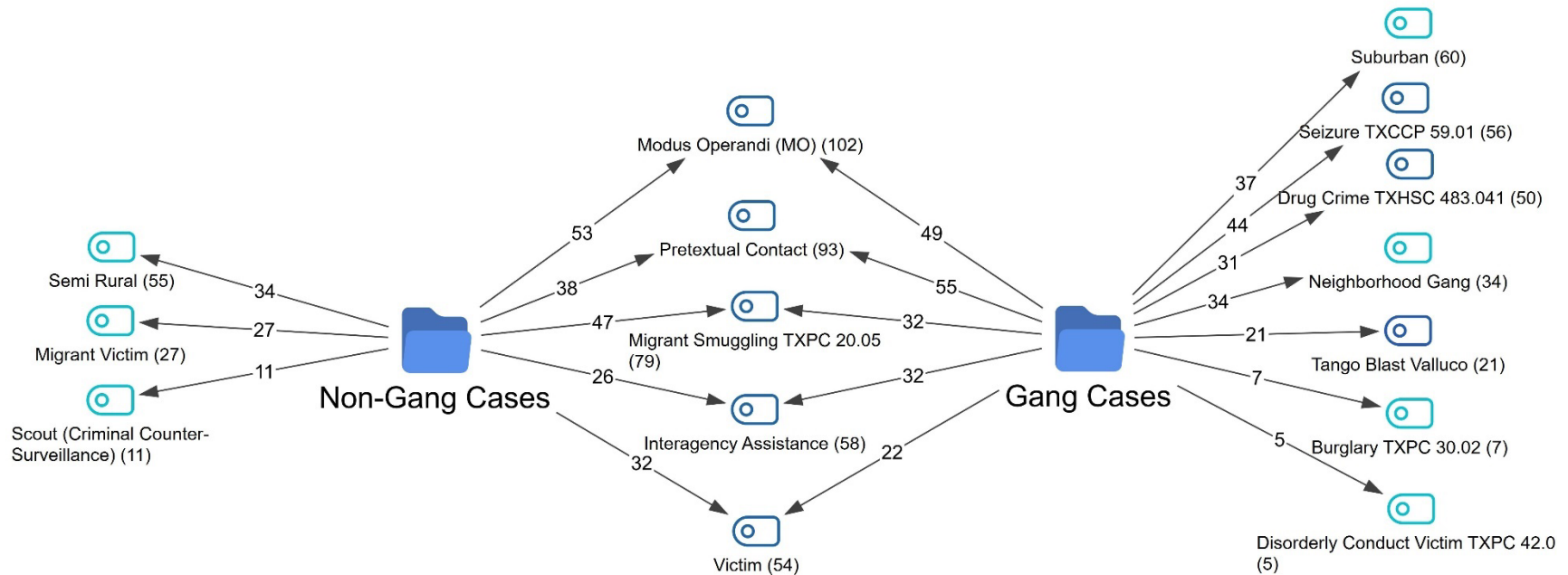
migrant victims, migrant smuggling, and scout criminal counter-surveillance incident characteristics attributed to the non-gang groups (Figure 3). The victimhood of migrants and scouting were differentiating characteristics MAXQDA identified between both groups: non-gang cases and gang cases. In contrast, the MAXQDA Two-Group Model analysis provided seven unique characteristics attributed to gang cases: seizure, drug crime, neighborhood gang, Tango Blast, burglaries, weapon contraband, and disorderly conduct incidents. However, the results of Tango Blast and neighborhood gangs were due to the unique group identifier gang activity. MAXQDA differentiated the two gangs from the rest of the gangs, including the qualitative analysis, identifying the two major gangs from the case group.

The inter-relationship between small neighborhood gangs and gangs such as Tango Blast Vallucos represents a complex organizational element of the relationship. Prison gangs and well-known street gangs are forming even more minor factions of neighborhood gangs that may become more challenging to identify for the criminal investigative process. The neighborhood gangs were found to be the notable gangs prevalent in police encounters. Even though the modus operandi may be a shared relationship between both groups, the criminal characteristic of gang members in possession of firearms during an incident and disorderly conduct present a venue for public safety risks. The key types of crimes contrasting gang cases from non-gang cases offer a conceptualization of crime activities concerning whether gang activity is the case.

Victim differences between gang and non-gang members were observed to be mainly distinguished by two factors: migrant victimhood by non-gang perpetrators and home invasion by gang members. Gang violence includes assassination attempts (Feldman & López, 2022) and victim abductions (Jones et al., 2023), which are consistent with this study's victim thematic findings. Gang violence is due to various forms of retaliations between each other that lead to criminal acts (Gundur, 2018) such as violence against police, public homicides, robberies, and other firearm crimes (Hughes et al., 2022). In contrast, non-gang members were found to induce migrant victims through violence and exploitation, which has also been found to be consistent with recent migrant smuggling literature (Cantalapiedra & Campos, 2023). These distinguishing findings may be due to migrant smuggling, where illicit migrants hire small-scale smugglers (Campana, 2020) to facilitate their journey into the US.

Figure 3

*The Two-Group MAXMAP model**



*The Two-Group MAXMAP model was autopopulated by MAXQDA which was generated based on group theme frequency differences and similarities. The dark blue color signifies the parent code, and the lighter blue color signifies the child code.

Burglary in Connection to Gang Cases

The theme for burglary was non-existent for non-gang cases, the sole theme involving criminal gang activity. For example, the following burglary excerpts were from different reports but associated with the criminal gangs Tango Blast and Texas Mexican Mafia. For the gang cases, when the burglary theme is identified, the following is described:

- *The victim stated that several tools, a trailer, and a toolbox were taken from his property.*
- *Someone had entered his building and property in Zapata city without his consent and stolen several tools.*
- *Victim 1 stated he had been "pistol whipped" by the individuals and threatened.*

Criminal gang literature has found burglaries to be associated with types of crimes engaged by criminal gangs (Ashton & Bussu, 2020; Wright & Decker, 1997). Gang burglary literature has expanded the relationship between burglaries and their environment, such as smaller streets and elevation patterns (Haberman & Kelsay, 2021). A closer examination of gang activity near roadways and residential characteristics could provide further knowledge, such as Agnew's (2020) specialized gang groups who illicitly take advantage of roadway characteristics such as speed limits for burglary feasibility.

Drug Crime and Gangs

Drug crime was a theme difference between the groups, an overarching theme for gang cases that could be the reason seizures were also attributed to this group. In the cases of drug crimes, law enforcement officials must seize the narcotics or equipment related to the incident, and as a result, the seizure becomes contraband. Drug crime excerpts directly from the investigative narratives are provided below to emphasize the three associated categories:

- *K9 alerted to the odor of an unknown illegal substance from the vehicle.*
- *A black tar substance believed to be Heroin on the front passenger side inner door panel.*
- *Two bundles believed to be marihuana were recovered. The two bundles had a total weight of 45 lbs.*

Historically speaking, Laredo, Texas, and other Texas-México border towns have been known to be areas prone to gang drug trafficking (Balli, 2007) due to the international point of entry with the country of México (DEA, 2021). This study found drug crimes to be a differentiating theme between gang and non-gang reports. Consistent with previous literature such as Sánchez Valdés and Pérez Aguirre (2018), Guzman et al. (2023), and Tapia (2020), criminal gangs engage in drug-related crimes for criminal revenue. The proximity to the Texas-México border may also be a contributing factor to the thematic analysis where a drug crime was

found to be a distinguishing characteristic for gang cases. It is important to note that the drug crime excerpts provide a different number of drugs seized, ranging from personal use, such as possession of marihuana, and two bundles of marijuana weighing 45 pounds. In some cases, individuals were transporting drug bundles for profit, but other gang members had drugs for personal use, such as a marijuana cigarette.

All the official reports detailed prevalent crime types based on whether it was gang or non-gang. The results indicate that non-gang members had more smuggling of migrants, migrant victims and engaged frequently more in organized crime incidents, such as scouting for law enforcement during a thwarted crime along the border. In this case, Table 1 demonstrates gang members have more than double the amount of drug-related events than non-gang cases. Furthermore, the extent of relationships between dangerous behaviors such as gang members engaging in disorderly conduct, burglarizing, and possession of a firearm while being confronted by law enforcement raises a major concern for public and law enforcement safety.

The theme frequency between drug crime and migrant smuggling provides a clear picture of the differences between both incident groups (see Table 1). Migrant smuggling was identified 46 times in the non-gang reports and 32 times in gang reports. Even though non-gang cases demonstrated a higher number of migrant smuggling, drug-related crimes were consistently higher, with 76 identifications and non-gang 41 times. Drug crimes offer the most distinguishing theme that differentiates both incident groups.

Table 1*Gang V. Non-Gang Theme Frequency**

Incident Group	Themes with frequency	Number of Reports
Gang	Migrant Smuggling (32)	15 (31.3%)
	Drug Crime (76)	21 (43.8%)
	Operator Assist (45)	21 (43.8%)
	Officer Safety Challenges (24)	16 (33.3%)
	Interagency Assist (64)	26 (54.2%)
	Seizure (110)	37 (77.1%)
Non-Gang	Migrant Smuggling (47)	26 (54.2%)
	Drug Crime (41)	14 (29.2%)
	Operator Assist (28)	11 (22.9%)
	Officer Safety Procedures (1)	1 (2.1%)
	Interagency Assist (72)	29 (60.4%)
	Seizure (31)	15 (31.3%)

*N=48 Gang Reports, N=48 Non-Gang Reports. The number of report percentages is relative to the total number of reports per each incident group

Crime Location: Semirural vs. Suburban

The location of the criminal incident on the Texas-México border differed notably between gang and non-gang cases. To further comprehend the relationship between crime

location and gang activity, the following direct excerpts from the coded investigative narratives are provided:

- *Pick-up truck load up illegal aliens north of Las Palmas on U.S. 83. The off-duty agent was able to follow the vehicle into the Zapata townsite.*
- *Several subjects lay in the brush area of the "B and J onion fields" in San Ygnacio, Zapata County.*
- *Older model red in color SUV by FM-496 at the USDA tick bath loaded up with possible undocumented migrants.*

Gang-related incidents were related to the most populated border towns, and non-gang incidents were attributed to the less populated semirural areas. This difference in locations with non-gang incidents may be attributed to the higher number of migrant smuggling cases when compared to gang incidents. The difference in locations may be due to the gang incidents' number of drug seizures occurring from the street level and residencies. Consider the following excerpts regarding the illicit distribution of drugs by gang members from residences:

- *Deputies observed a residence located at Juarez Avenue to be suspected of being the stash house.*
- *Suspect 1 stated that the illegal narcotics belonged to him and that he was selling them from his residence.*
- *Investigators located approximately 4.8 ounces of Hydro marihuana inside the residence. A female identified as Suspect 1 took ownership of the narcotics.*

Several individuals may operate from the same residence as a neighborhood-level gang to join the illicit activity. And the criminal proceeds from the narcotic trafficking may be related to partnerships between different gang members hoping to generate illicit income.

Research Question 2: What are the crime behavior differences between gang incidents occurring in neighborhoods and gang incidents that occur on major roadways?

Neighborhood gang incidents and major roadway gang incidents demonstrated several differences overshadowed mainly by two gangs: Texas Mexican Mafia, and Tango Blast. To demonstrate the differences between neighborhoods and major roadways, two subcode models were generated by the MAXQDA auto population feature (Fig. 3). Each model provides the number of incidents involving the gang names, the highest gang frequency represented by a thicker line than the rest. Following the MAXQDA conceptual mapping example, six excerpts expand the differences between both gangs as conferred with Figure 3. Based on the frequency of the incidents, the Texas Mexican Mafia operated mostly at the street level, where they were encountered by traffic stops during mobile smuggling and drug trafficking activities (Fig. 3). Contrary to the Tango Blast gang, Texas Mexican Mafia members preferred to engage in organized crime involving the use of transportation along the main highways parallel to the

Texas-México border. The Tango Blast were involved regularly within the neighborhood level because the incidents were related to drug distribution from their own residences. Based on Figure 3, Tango Blast was more than four times the number of gang membership during neighborhood incident encounters. It is important to note with this analysis, the Tango Blast membership may be attributed to associated cliques but are represented under the same Tango Blast umbrella.

These six excerpts provide a general overview of the differences between neighborhood and major roadway gang incidents. The neighborhood gang excerpts consist mostly of drug and illicit currency transactions from residents or neighborhood-level occurrences:

Neighborhood Gang Excerpts to Consider

- *Further found inside the home was \$1551 in US Currency which is believed to be funds gained from illegal transactions (Tango Blast Valluco).*
- *Deputies arrived on the scene and were told by witnesses that a male subject identified as Suspect 1, had been seen recklessly discharging his firearm in the yard of his residence located in Medina addition. (Tango Blast Valluco).*
- *Deputies had prior knowledge that Suspect 1 had five active felony warrants. Deputies approached the said address, and Deputies observed Suspect 1 running on foot. (Tango Blast Valluco).*

The investigative narratives constitute organized crime by using residential areas to store and sell narcotics. However, some of the instances from the neighborhood gang level themes consisted of prison gang members, Tango Blast being the most frequent as demonstrated by the two-model comparison (Fig. 2). Highlighting the level of reach and control prison gangs can have in a community by establishing residences that distribute illegal drugs. The criminal activities as demonstrated by the example excerpts detail how the encounters occurred with gang members, which all three examples provide the same geographic placement, within the same neighborhood in Zapata, Medina Addition. Violent tendencies were also described by the narratives, where gang members discharged firearms in a residential area, and in some instances included a Felony fugitive status with active arrest warrants for the commission of prior crimes.

The major roadway gang excerpts expand the differing behaviors from the latter by consisting of vicinities away from the neighborhoods and consisting of motor vehicles as a form of modus operandi.

Major Roadway Gang Excerpts to Consider

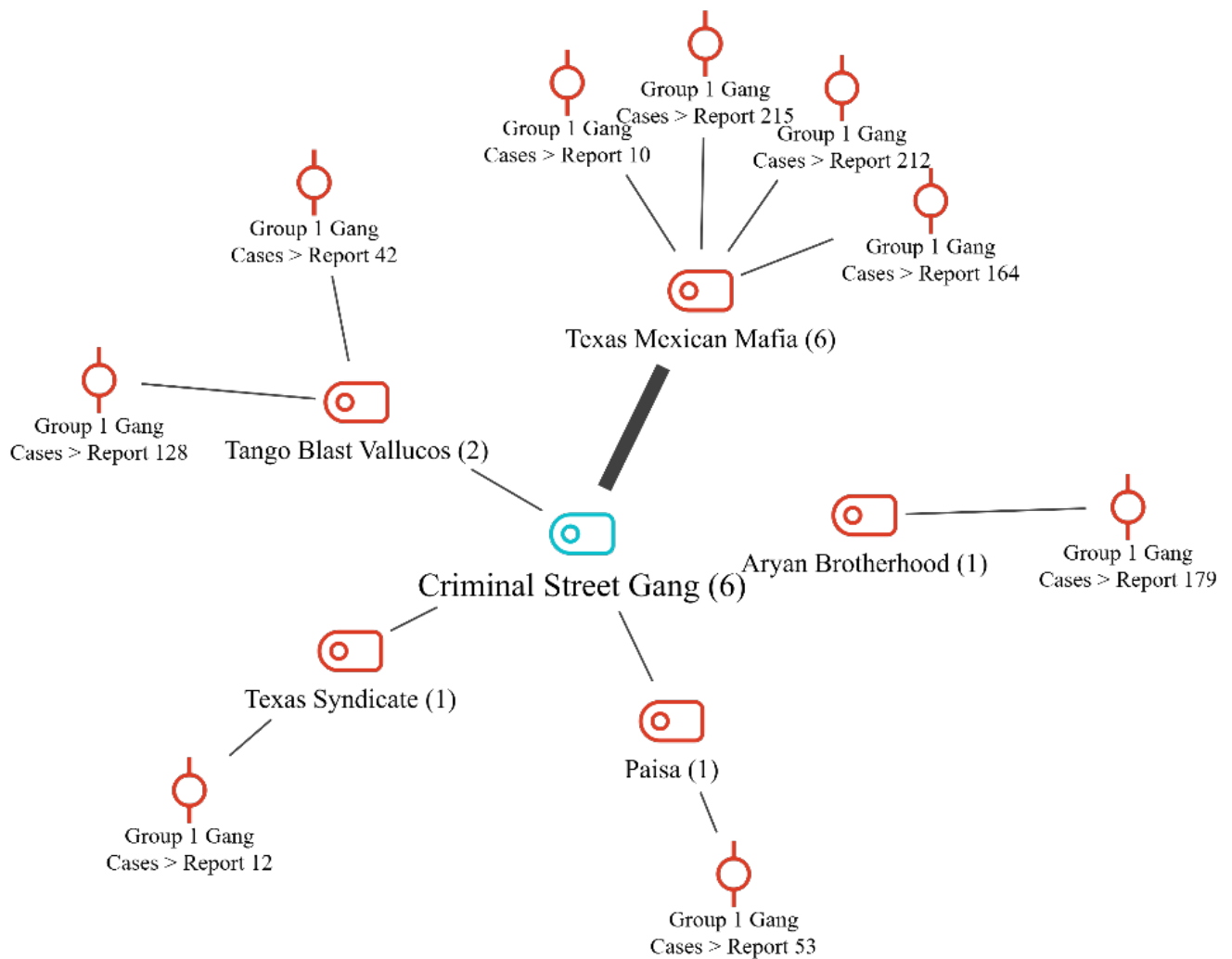
- *Deputy 1 observed a grey in color SUV parked on the west side of the road of Farm Road 496. Deputy 1 observed multiple individuals exiting the brush area dressed in black running toward the grey SUV (Texas Syndicate).*
- *Deputy conducted a motor vehicle stop north of Lopeno Texas on a 2010 white in color Ford registered out of Roma, Texas. According to prior criminal involvement, the license plate was associated with a smuggling ring out of Roma, Texas. (Tango Blast Valluco).*
- *Deputies observed a black Dodge passenger car commit a traffic violation on 20th Avenue. The black passenger failed to stop and leading deputies to a high-speed pursuit (Texas Mexican Mafia).*

These incidents differed from neighborhood gang incidents by their modus operandi of geographic placement and method of illicit revenue. This could be due to the different crimes in which they are participating or could possibly suggest different territories in which different gangs and/or different gang types operate. The excerpts provide examples involving the use of motor vehicles, and their encounters with law enforcement through traffic stops on main highways, mainly US Highway 83, which in some instances are less than a mile away from the Texas-México border, the Rio Grande River. The violent tendencies were also observed from the major roadway gang narratives, where they refused to stop their vehicle and engaged in high-speed pursuit with border law enforcement. Most of the gang narratives were about migrant smuggling activity and organized crime, as dictated by the first example excerpt. The Texas Syndicate gang members engaged in organized crime by coordinating with illicit migrant smuggling organizations to pinpoint migrant smuggling routes and loading up in the vehicle driven by the Texas Syndicate member.

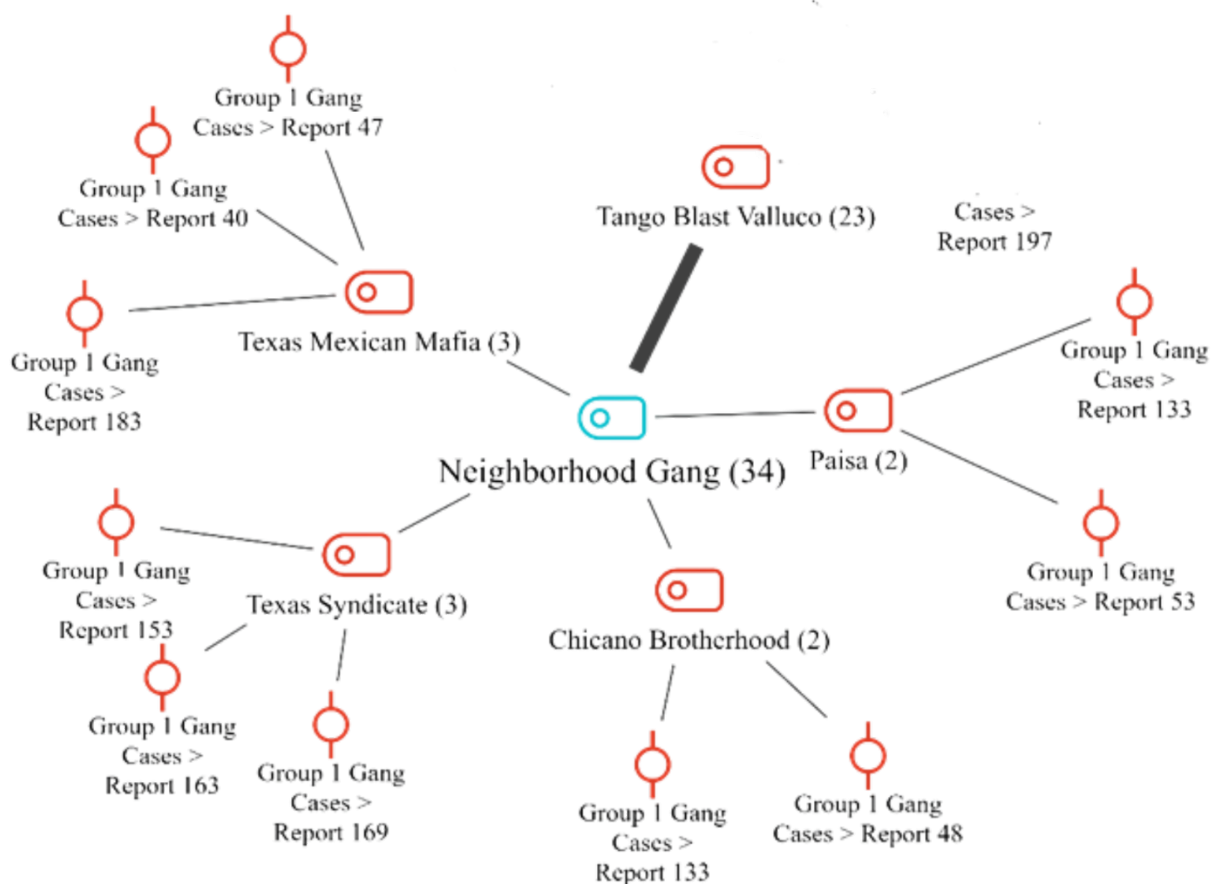
Figure 4

*Gang Incidents by Location**

Major Roadway Gang Sub-code Model



Neighborhood Gang Sub-code Model



*The two subcode models were run independently, and auto populated using the MAXMap function. The thicker lines signify a higher frequency. The red color signifies the child code of the light blue codes.

Summary of Findings

The theme frequency analysis and the MAXQDA theme mapping analysis provide two notable findings: (1) gang cases were attributed to drug crimes and more populated areas, and (2) non-gang cases were primarily engaged with migrant smuggling attempts which may be a reason for higher reported migrant victims. The findings are related to each group's most common crime type, such as migrant smuggling for non-gang cases. The findings add knowledge to understanding criminal gang behaviors from the Texas-México border, which mainly consists of drug crimes, burglary, and robberies.

In the case of the gang group, the MAXMap generated a visualization of the qualitative thematic excerpts where incidents involving gang membership were more prone to erratic and violent behavior. For example, two distinguishing themes for the gang group were burglaries and disorderly conduct. In both themes, several cases included the use of firearms during the

commission of crimes. In some burglaries, gang members utilized firearms against victims and in disorderly conduct some gang members discharged a weapon in their backyard. For these two reasons, MAXMap was able to provide a conceptual map of the incident characteristics that differed from the non-gang group. Another distinguishing theme from the gang group was drug crimes and the higher number of incidents taking place in more populated residences. The higher number of suburban incidents associated with gang cases may explain the themes neighborhood gangs and Tango Blast as a differing attribute.

The non-gang groups were mostly associated to three themes, undocumented migrant victimhood, incidents taking place in semirural areas and engaging in organized crime as criminal counter-surveillance (scouts). For these instances, one can articulate a relationship between the three themes by nature. As Table 2 theme frequencies demonstrated, non-gang groups had a higher representation for migrant smuggling, which in turn yielded higher migrant victims and engaged in criminal counter-surveillance along semirural parts of the Texas-México border. The excerpts provided for migrant victimhood suggest concerns for the illicit nature of migrant smuggling because it takes place in dry semirural areas of Texas. In summation, the gang group demonstrates distinguishing differences from the non-gang group in criminal incidents. The themes attributed uniquely to each group were to a certain extent related to each other, such as the case of drug crime and drug seizure themes attributed to the gang group.

The findings for neighborhood gang incident differences from major roadway gang incidents were attributed by the location characteristics from the narrative incidents. In this case, neighborhood gang incidents involved similar gang names such as Texas Mexican Mafia and Tango Blast but were secluded to criminal activities from within residences. In comparison, criminal street gangs such as the Texas Mexican Mafia were most prevalent in the major roadway gang incidents. For example, the Tango Blast was the most prevalent among the neighborhood gang incidents, which may be due to loosely structured memberships, facilitating criminal organization at the residential level.

Discussion

The limited use of official data for gang research has been one of the reasons there is an incomplete understanding of gangs (Mitchell et al., 2022). For this reason, the official gang data used for this study provided an opportunity to understand Texas-México border gangs. A limited amount of US gang research covers the southwest Texas-México border, most of which are from government reports such as the DEA (2021) and the TXDPS (2018). The purpose of this research was to shed light on criminal street gangs from the southwest Texas-México border by using official gang data representing the border gang characteristics.

The number of gangs identified in the study were mostly US based prison gangs and even a lower number of individuals identified themselves as associated to Mexican cartels. However, the study resonates with Portugal's (2023) and Reyna's (2020) description of U.S.-based gangs'

criminal partnerships with Mexican Drug cartels. The findings also indicate support for Tapia's (2020) articulation of the U.S.-based gangs' involvement with transnational drug cartels as a means for criminal revenue along the Texas-México borders. Mexican Drug cartel members such as El Cartel del Golfo and cartel del Noreste were consistently arrested during violent behaviors and involved in incidents with higher currency contraband; however, details of the number of cartel members were not expanded or included in this study due to its lower representation than U.S. based gang incidents. The group differences between gang and non-gang cases provides an understanding of the differing incident characteristics resulting in higher drug-related offenses. However, the Mexican drug cartel findings offer support to Beittel (2022) and the DEA's (2021) indications of Mexican drug cartels existing in Texas-México border towns and facilitating drug and migrant smuggling crimes.

The differences between gang incidents in neighborhoods and those on major roadways is similar to that of criminal street gangs and/or organized crime organizations⁴ and neighborhood gangs (Gundur, 2022). Paarlberg (2022) argued that transnational criminal organizations have evolved due to the state and individual migration policies, which explain the different modus operandi of this study's criminal gangs and types of crime. Gangs in both locations adapted to their geographic placement on the Texas-México border (Gundur, 2019) and developed two different types of criminal behaviors associated with human trafficking and drug trafficking. Paarlberg's (2022) explanation of the transnationalization of crime can be attributed to the Texas-México migration policies, where neighborhood gangs adapted their MO to residential areas, while criminal street gangs adapted to semirural areas along long stretches of roadways near the border. Similarly, Campana (2020) found small-scale criminal organizations running human smuggling rings, providing the same argument as Paarlberg (2022). This indicates that the findings are consistent with current literature and attribute an understanding of organized crime from the Texas-México border.

As previously mentioned, Tango Blast is a younger prison gang that is differentiated from the traditional gangs such as Texas Mexican Mafia or Hermanos Pistoleros Latinos who have a hierarchical structure demanding control over its membership. Tapia et al. (2014) and Pedroza (2023) argued that the loose-structure from Tango Blast has caused a gang membership increase across the state of Texas. The loose structure from Tango Blast has allowed its members to venture out with other smaller organizations and organize drug trafficking within small-scale neighborhoods. Tapia (2019) argued that the expansion of Tango Blast as cliques surrounding major Texas cities such as Houston and San Antonio, which in combination with the criminal partnership with Mexican drug cartels, poses a threat to the criminal control of the Texas-México border towns. According to Kilburn et al. (2013), the city of Laredo shares more than its unique point of entry with its 'sister city' Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, such as the fear of 'spillover

⁴ For a more detailed description of neighborhood gangs, and organized crime organizations on the border see Gundur (2022).

crime' from Nuevo Laredo. The complexity of border towns and their geographic placement contributes to its legitimate economy through import and exports as argued by Kilburn et al. (2013), but as Pereda (2024) argued, the increased threat of transnational criminal organizations from areas such as Nuevo Laredo has garnered scholarly interest in exploring geographical crime influence of the Texas-México border town. However, the major differences of the criminal behaviors displayed between criminal street gangs and neighborhood gangs provides a closer examination of Texas-México border crime. As Pereda (2024) argued, the borderlands between México and Texas are subject to forms of control from organizations that may exist in prisons and Mexican drug cartels such as Los Zetas from Nuevo Laredo. The geographic placement of the borderlands then becomes areas of criminal influence (Gundur, 2019), but the behavioral understanding of the type of criminal gangs, whether neighborhood or street gang, increases the type of activities conducted. Therefore, the gang cases for this theme analysis may suggest a future spatial study to examine residential crime types occurring along Texas-México border towns, along with the differentiation if any, between criminal groups.

Criminal gangs have been found to be reactive in their behaviors due to their environment (Butler et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2022). Hughes et al. (2022) examined criminal gang processes in violence and graffiti, focusing on the gang's geographical and territorial boundaries. There is noticeable variation when comparing the geographical placement of criminal behaviors, such as the gang's graffiti location, and crime types. Like Hughes et al. (2022), geographical placement correlated with criminal gang activities, drug, and migrant smuggling, as well as different law enforcement responses from parties such as deputies and US Border Patrol agents. Therefore, one should consider the effects and relationship between the geographical placement of criminal gangs, whether criminal street gangs or neighborhood-level gangs, and the *modus operandi* (MO), which is shaped as an adaptive response. Due to the proximity of the Texas-México border, criminal organizations such as gangs can exploit the illicit market opportunities by engaging and organizing their MO to border-related crimes. Two of the most prevalent crime types in the US are drug crimes and migrant smuggling (Ladd & Jones, 2021; Maldonado, 2023). The southern US-México border is one of the top hot spots for both prevalent crimes and should incite further examination of the US and México criminal organization behaviors (Pereda, 2024).

Limitations

Various data sources contribute to crime research, including police reports, which provide incident narratives based on legal frameworks and the sequence of events leading to an arrest (Byrman, 2014; Jonsson & Linell, 1991). However, the collection of official crime data constitutes consequential limitations. The limitations of this study are attributed to the investigative and criminal approach of official police data. Structured for judicial proceedings, police reports follow a chronological format, incorporating both direct quotes and paraphrased statements from the defense and the plaintiff (Byrman & Byrman, 2018). This research sought to enhance the understanding of crime along the South Texas-Mexico border by integrating

descriptive statistical data from reported incidents with judicially attested practitioner observations. Traditionally, law enforcement agencies compile police reports by documenting demographic details such as the arrested individual's age, gender, race, ethnicity, location, criminal charges, and other relevant crime descriptors (Jonsson & Linell, 1991). Additionally, police report narratives must outline the circumstances that led to the officer's reasonable suspicion and probable cause, including details about all parties involved in the incident (Byrman, 2014). It is also important to note that law enforcement data has been criticized for overestimating gang membership (Barrows & Huff, 2009), and for having different ways in which gang members are identified depending on the region in the United States categorized (Scott, 2020).

Crime statistics are subject to natural changes involving demographics, agency policy, and the changing legal aspects of crime. It is challenging to assess demographic changes within a policing area and its surrounding societal factors impacting population representation. Another issue in assessing demographic changes is associated with patrolling efforts designated at different points of the County or area. As such, there may be different days or months when police agencies designate their officers to target an area where many incident calls were made. Considering the police agency for this study included officers from a small rural agency, it may impact patrol enforcement in rural parts of the County and suburban areas. Police agencies, whether state, federal, or local, are influenced by government policy and law changes.

In the case of the Texas Penal Code for Human Smuggling, monetary gain has changed from being required as a criminal element to enhancing the criminal charge. The possibility of having repeat offenders may also influence criminal gang data. It was unknown whether the data may have included repeat offenders due to the privacy and security of the data. Furthermore, the exact method in which the officers determined whether the incident was gang related is unclear, and future research would benefit from focusing on this process. The data for this study comes from Zapata County, which varies from very rural to suburban communities, and has a small population. Although this is arguably generalizable to most of the border region, it may not be generalizable to major border cities, where most people on the border tend to reside. Lastly, the biggest limitation of this study includes the use of only official data. Future work on the Texas/Mexico border would benefit immensely from interviews, surveys, and in-depth ethnographic study of both residents and practitioners residing in these primarily isolated and semirural communities.

Conclusion

Gang researchers provide different interpretations of what constitutes a gang. As gang research has developed, criminal gangs have also changed from prison to hybridizing street gangs in Texas (Bolden, 2014) and its México border (Tapia, 2020). The use of official gang data elaborated two common gang research dilemmas, which are whether a gang is criminal and

whether the criminal gangs are organized. The use of official gang data clears the issues of organized gangs because every incident included an organizational aspect involving drug trafficking or migrant smuggling rings. To further extend the organized crime concept for street gangs, a certain degree of collaboration or coercion between criminal street gangs and transnational criminal organizations (Mexican cartels) were evident along the Texas-México border (also see Gundur, 2022). The linkage of U.S.-based gangs participating with Mexican cartels creates a central Homeland Security issue due to the nature of violent acts committed by the cartels. Gang researchers should enter new venues in understanding street gangs' participation with larger-scale criminal organizations and their overall implications for theory and policy.

There are a variety of approaches to understanding gangs that government agency practitioners and academic researchers usually separate, such as the different state, federal, and research-based definitions. A combined practitioner and academic approach can provide a more precise and informed understanding of gangs and organized crime groups on the Texas-México border and could even expand on the existing gang research across the US. As mentioned previously, the Texas-México borderlands offer unique shared cultural behaviors between sister cities such as Laredo and Nuevo Laredo. Unfortunately, spillover crime is a tenet that comes with legitimate forms of economy at foreign points of entry. It is important to add, researchers and criminal justice practitioners argue over the manifestation or evolution of criminal street gangs into neighborhood gangs or hybrid gangs (Tapia et al., 2014), and neighborhood gangs deviate from the traditional criminal street gang and prison gang taxonomy (Tapia, 2020). The criminal characteristics of neighborhood gangs have evolved into displacing what is already known from the traditional forms of criminal street gangs (Skarbek, 2014). Ultimately, more research is needed to fully comprehend the distinction between not just gang crime and non-gang crime on the border, but between the various gangs and crime organizations that exist on the border, how these groups interact, and the role of geography in both gang crime and gang formation.

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