

AI-powered Social Media Monitoring for Curbing Gang Violence

In August 2023, assassins murdered Fernando Villavicencio, a candidate for the Ecuadorian presidency. Villavicencio was an outspoken opponent of the extranational drug cartels, corrupt governments, and Ecuadorian street gangs that together fuel the international narcotics trade. Ecuadorian police have since charged six cartel-and-gang-involved Colombian nationals with Villavicencio's murder.¹

The same day, a New York City jury found Melvi Amador-Rios guilty of ordering the beheading of a local teen. Amador-Rios, a leader of the notorious MS-13 street gang, was enraged when the victim, also an MS-13 member, refused to murder another child.²

Wreaking everything from individual horrors and regional migration crises to the destabilization of entire nations, gang activity continues to plague North, Central, and South America.

New technological capabilities bolster gang activity. "Cyberbanging" is a term used to describe street gangs' use of social media to recruit new members, plot crimes, and intimidate rivals. Gang members post on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. They communicate on Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), and Flickr. The chat capabilities of video game consoles including PlayStation5 and Xbox enable private, international communication.³

The results are devastating, particularly in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Doctors Without Borders reports that in these Central American countries, gangs

"wreak levels of violence unprecedented outside a war zone." The organization notes that murders, kidnappings, and rapes are "daily occurrences."⁴ In short, Central American gangs terrorize the citizenry. And what do people do when they're terrified?

They run.

The Brookings Institution notes that gang violence — rather than the more traditional search for economic opportunity — now drives immigration from Central America.⁵ It fuels the United States' ongoing immigration crisis.⁶ According to the Council on Foreign Relations, more than 541,000 undocumented migrants arriving at the southern United States border in 2022 hailed from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.⁷

Managing a flood of undocumented people seeking asylum is one problem wrought by gang violence. But the United States has longer-standing gang problems that are being exacerbated by cyberbanging. Using social media platforms, Mexican cartels have coordinated the movement of heroin to street gangs in Las Cruces, New Mexico.⁸ In Philadelphia, police believe that a series of street shootings occurred only after gang members had heckled each other online.⁹ And in Chicago, police estimate that gang-related homicides accounted for 41 percent of all that city's murders in 2021.¹⁰

With a rise in both cyberbanging and gang activity, it's no surprise that law enforcement is increasingly turning to social media monitoring to spot and curb gang activity.¹¹

AI-powered social media monitoring can help curb gang violence

To identify key words and terms associated with threats of gang violence, and to alert law enforcement officials to those threats, Babel Street Insights rapidly and persistently scans publicly and commercially available information (PAI/CAI) sources published in more than 200 languages. This data originates from more than a billion top-level domains; the deep and dark web; and other commercially and publicly available sources. Among these sources are dozens of social media platforms; real time interactions generated on millions of message boards; and online comments. Insights can then be used to gain a more precise understanding of the real people behind online user names. Advertising technology-based geolocation and telemetry data is available to qualifying government organizations.

Insights' AI-powered analytics capabilities can also help enrich data already appearing in government-run databases, such as the United States' Regional Information Sharing Systems gang database.

Babel Street Insights Synthesis can help investigators better understand gang connections. Synthesis rapidly maps key relationships within social networks. It automatically examines hundreds or thousands of relationships within a specific social network or discussion group, uncovering previously unknown or hidden connections, and identifying those participants who wield the most influence. Once influencers are identified, Synthesis empowers users to delve deeper into those influencers' publicly available online profiles and activities.

Together, these products provide law enforcement officials with deeper insight into the people behind online gang threats — offering powerful investigative assistance to front-line professionals working to stop gang violence. They can further help government organizations close the Risk-Confidence Gap, or the widening divide between the escalating volume and variety of data that must be examined to identify gang threats, and the resources organizations have to monitor that data.

¹ Cabrera, Jose Maria Leon et al, "6 Colombians Arrested in Assassination of Presidential Candidate in Ecuador," The New York Times, August 9 2023.

² Schnitzer, Kyle, "MS-13 gang leader found guilty of ordering NYC teen's gruesome slaying," The New York Post, August 9 2023.

³ Kolb, Joseph J., "Using gang activity on social media to drive intelligence-led policing," Police1, December 20 2018.

⁴ Medecins Sans Frontieres, "Forced to Flee Central America's Northern Triangle: A Neglected Humanitarian Crisis," May 2017.

⁵ Bermeo, Sarah, "Violence drives immigration from Central America," The Brookings Institution, June 26 2018.

⁶ Martinez, Sofia, "Today's Migrant Flow is Different," The Atlantic, accessed August 2023.

⁷ Roy, Diana, "Ten Graphics That Explain the U.S. Struggle with Migrant Flows in 2022," Council on Foreign Relations, December 1 2022.

⁸ Kolb, Joseph J., "Using gang activity on social media to drive intelligence-led policing," Police1, December 20 2018.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Chicago Police Department, "2022 Annual Report," accessed August 2023.

¹¹ Hua, Vinh, "Law Enforcement's Growing Use of Social Media to Target Gang Activity," Fordham Urban Law Journal, November 11 2015.

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Babel Street provides unmatched, analysis-ready data regardless of language, proactive risk identification, 360-degree insights, high-speed automation, and seamless integration into existing systems. We empower government and commercial organizations to transform high-stakes identity and risk operations into a strategic advantage.

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