

Youth Violence in Central America: Lessons from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras

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The Northern Triangle of Central America is currently the most violent region in the world. Youth in particular are bearing the brunt of this violence, the level of which is comparable to or higher than in the armed conflict settings of Iraq, Somalia, or Sudan. Young men and women are most susceptible to armed violence, and those living in marginal areas are particularly at risk. As a result of such exposure, youth can become both perpetrators and victims of the hostile environment.

The hopelessness brought about by unemployment and the general lack of opportunities causes young people to become alienated from mainstream society and to turn to gangs and illicit economies as alternative sources of stability, identity and livelihood. This gang culture has stigmatized young people, leaving them to be seen as an unsolvable problem within their host countries, and their contributions to society are often considered to be irrelevant.

This stigmatization is all the more accentuated by the “iron fist” approach, known as *mano dura*, which has been the dominant response to gangs by the Guatemalan, Honduran and El Salvadorian authorities. *Mano dura* responses tend to be reactive, pay little attention to root causes of violence or crime, and focus on punishment rather than prevention and transformation. To this extent, they are also responsible for many human rights abuses that occur within these countries.

This Brief focuses on the role of gangs and their diverse influences on youth, and the practical lessons of policies against youth gangs. Overall, the Brief underlines the need for a more holistic approach towards youth violence. It calls for a more systematic partnership between international, national, regional, local and municipal actors as a means of advancing coordinated policy and practice on this pressing issue for Central America and many other regions worldwide.

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Changing the optics on youth gangs

There is an urgent need to shift the public's optics on youth gangs in order to break such stigmatization. A critical element of this shift is to understand the differences between 'youth gangs' and 'organized crime' – two distinct phenomena, yet the former are often seen as part of the latter. In organized crime, many participants are motivated solely for monetary reasons; in gangs, money can play a role, but it is only part of a larger social relationship. Gang members are also looking for a source of identity, assurance of protection, and a sense of belonging.

Gang life often involves the accumulation of significant amounts of cash, which is then usually spent relatively quickly. *Clicas*, which are small unities within a gang and function in relative autonomy, will obtain cash and then proceed to spend it on families, lawyers for members in prison, or their communities. A thousand dollars made can be spent quickly in "living la vida loca" (living the crazy life), while nothing is invested or saved. In contrast, organized crime has a sophisticated financial system that can be part of a transnational network, the amount of their wealth extraordinary compared to that of gangs. In some cases, they even pay services for their communities that are expected to be provided by the State.

Another element of this misperception is that in the Northern Triangle of Central America, gangs are seen as intolerable and menacing forces. The majority of the population has its preconceptions about gangs. This has, in turn, led to an increasing stigmatization of gangs as a scapegoat for almost all the crimes committed. Consequently, the public mindset has demonstrated a high level of suspicion and rejection towards gangs and refused to help them.

Much of this distortion comes from government portrayals of the problem. For example, the El Salvadorian police claimed that for every 100 murders committed in 2010, gangs were responsible for 11. This figure stands in contrast to the dominant policy and media focus on gangs as main perpetrators of murders, while there is no debate about who is responsible for the other 89 murders. Such depiction is evidence of the serious problems underlying crime investigation and reporting in Central America.

The media is also responsible for the distortion of the image of gangs. Coverage is usually one-sided against gangs, and like the government, journalists portray an image of gangs that is negative and misrepresenting of the entire story. A critical action point, then, is to intensify the outreach to journalists in an effort to help balance the coverage of gang violence, and work against the profound stigmatization. Adopting a peacebuilding lens may be an additional and more credible step in this direction. Peace must involve all groups of society in order to build trust. Populations must recognize that such a process will take time, especially if restorative justice is to take shape.

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Yet forging consensus on restorative justice is by no means an easy task. While many governments ask “why should we invest in these people?”, others simply reject the prospect of restoration given the type of crimes committed. With this in mind, much work lies ahead in order to better explain the complex linkages between gangs and violence, the processes and trade-offs involved in working towards a better future.

Transforming youth from violent pasts to peaceful futures – how far can we go?

Project evidence from the field suggests that many gang members have repeatedly expressed a desire to enter into a new relationship with society. They want to change and rehabilitate, but are struggling to find a way to escape the only life they know. As an entry point to help facilitate these exits, it is important to understand the nature of gangs. In most cases gangs are inorganic units that lack a central command of control. Members are sometimes divided, which makes it much harder to comprehend the *clicas* and their structure. As a result, much confusion remains over how best to handle their presence and influence in specific settings.

In Central America, gangs are an important element of social fabric. In fact, some gangs are considered to be the only remaining elements of social cohesion in certain areas, particularly those in which the State has remained absent. Additionally, they provide security and prevent police brutality against those living within the gang's area of control. In Honduras, for instance, many neighborhood gangs are lauded for their presence.

The challenge for peacebuilders, then, is to understand that there are gangs that have been violent and have committed crimes, but that these gangs also have positive contributions. Such a perception of gang culture stands in stark contrast to the typical image portrayed by the governments and media. Peacebuilders should use these positive elements as a starting point for the transformation of gangs from within, especially by fostering a change in behavior with regards to the use and meaning of armed violence in gang culture.

This is of course, easier said than done. Such a process of gang transformation is often met by significant systematic challenges.

For one, there is a significant lack of skills within many members of gang populations. Not only are youth short of the basic abilities required for finding a meaningful job, but they also lack basic inter personal skills for living in society. Trauma and psychological problems are other impediments. With so much of the population refusing to work with gang members, a major challenge is finding the appropriate sectors of the economy that would be willing to give those gang members who have expressed openness to change an opportunity to reinsert themselves into society. While there remains a real ‘gangophobia’ in many parts of Central America, the peacebuilding community must become better equipped to drive processes that ultimately aim at the transformation of gangs from their violent pasts into more hopeful futures.

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A key challenge for the transformation of gang members is the immense lack of skills within gang populations

Making prevention more effective

Beyond a reactive agenda that tries to tackle the issue of existing gang members, policy must also act preventively to ensure that gangs do not attract new members and potentially incite further violence. Lessons from existing programming efforts suggest that such prevention can become more effective through the generation of additional evidence points, better monitoring, and additional research.

In order for governments to be more willing to work on the prevention of youth-related violence, there needs to be better evidence that explains the impact of prevention strategies and programmes have on society. Once this issue is better supported by facts and data, there can then be a better approach to creating preventive measures.

Monitoring is another key element to prevention. A proper evaluation must first understand objectively what works and what does not. Monitoring implies victimization surveys, creation of baselines, and the constant collection of data. With proper monitoring, indicators can be more easily flagged. However, more work needs to be done to harmonize and professionalize monitoring systems across Central America, and how to transfer the evidence to appropriate decision makers. What is clear already is that monitoring is a good investment in the short and long term. In the short term, participation in monitoring allows for ownership of affected populations and accountability mechanisms for those implementing policy. In the long term, trends analyses can contribute to track effects of policy intervention and changes in attitudes, while at the same time informing new policy.

Towards an inclusive and holistic approach

Youth violence is a complex, multi-dimension phenomenon. The best results will be those found when different approaches are taken together, and all aspects of this violence are considered. For instance, armed violence reduction and prevention frameworks put forward by the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development illustrate that such a more holistic approach can focus on 'direct' approaches that seek to address the instruments, actors and institutional environments enabling armed violence; and on 'indirect' approaches that address proximate and structural risk factors giving rise to armed violence.

What is more, the experience from Central America shows that efforts towards a more holistic approach must engage policy-makers at national and municipal levels while at the same time working directly with affected communities. By linking research with holistic understanding, policymakers can then use this information to create an improved systematic approach that tackles structural problems and particular inequalities within in the societies of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

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Political dialogue with key actors as a means of generating consensus must be also continued. Since political actors tend to hold the common image about gangs and portray that image onto their populations, leaders and media alike must consider changing the optics on youth gangs as a way of inspiring hope for the future. The peoples of this region, especially those who believe this peace to be impossible to achieve or refuse to work with gang populations, must become more aware of the potential and alternative avenues for peace to grow. This can be fostered by encouraging bipartisan media reporting. This can also include submitting more proposals that request better access to more viable and alternative forms of justice, rehabilitation, and reconciliation. Peacebuilders should begin addressing the question *How can we transform the social fabric in which gangs are immersed?* in order to make efficient proposals.

Another question that could be further engaged in future dialogues is: *What are the linkages between masculinity and levels of violence?* The social construction of violent masculinities is the basis of underlying cultural violence, which then legitimates both direct and structural violence. If peace is to take form, it will be important to understand how gender affects the creation, manifestation, and brutality of violence.

Overall, gang life has become a daily reality for the civilian populations of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Youth are subsequently labeled as both victims and perpetrators – yet the latter does not render them obsolete. While gangs are responsible for some level of violence, it must be acknowledged that they are a social network, a source of identity, and a guarantor for security in many instances. In this context, peacebuilding efforts should begin by changing public perceptions about gangs, and work towards a more inclusive approach. These attempts imply a more intense research, advocacy, and networking effort by the peacebuilding community in Central America and by international partners.

Working towards a more inclusive approach requires a more intense research, advocacy, and networking effort by the peacebuilding community in Central America and by international partners

About this Brief and the authors

This Brief is based on the meeting *Youth Violence in Central America: Lessons learned from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras* co-organized by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and Interpeace in Geneva, 01 June 2012. All views expressed in this Brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Interpeace or the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform.

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Interpeace

Created in 1994, Interpeace is an international peacebuilding organization, headquartered in Geneva, which plays a discrete role in helping societies torn apart by conflict and civil war to build lasting peace. Interpeace operates as an independent non-governmental organization and in partnership with the United Nations on specific programmes. The organization works with 300 peacebuilders and works across Africa, Asia, Central America, Europe and the Middle East.

Geneva Peacebuilding Platform

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is an inter-agency network that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding issues and contexts. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform's network comprises more than 1000 peacebuilding professionals and over 60 institutions working on peacebuilding. <http://www.gpplatform.ch>.

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