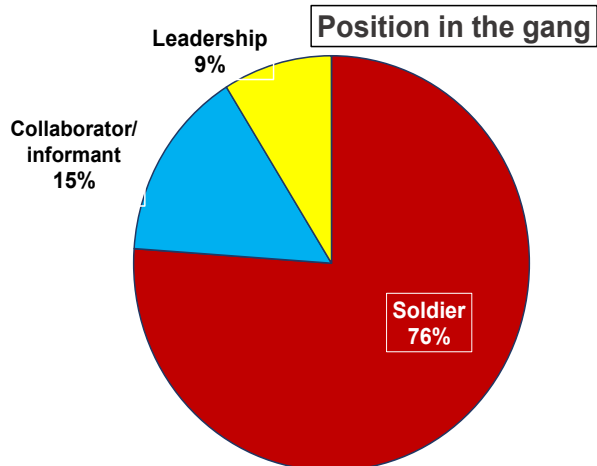
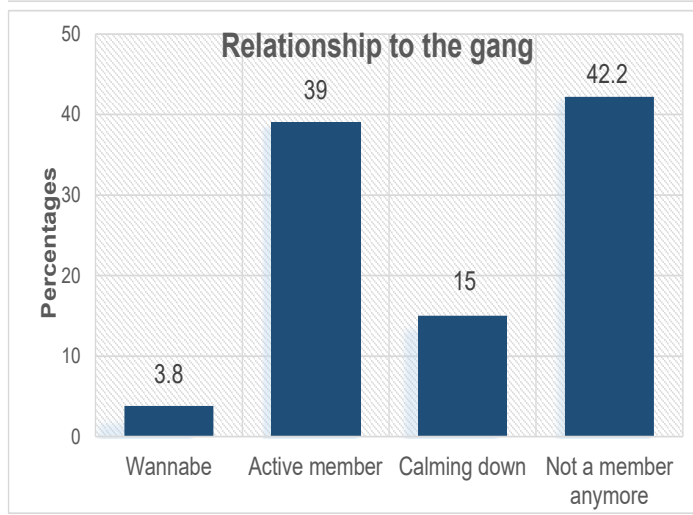
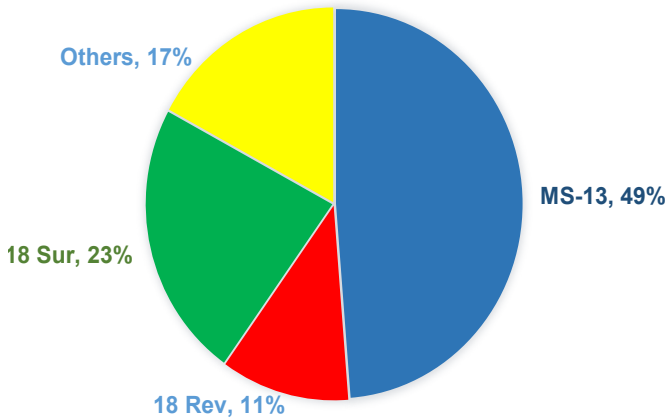


The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador

Can a member of a Salvadoran youth gang, locally known as “maras,” leave the gang and start a new life away from crime and violence?

Gang membership in the sample



To answer this question, the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center and the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at Florida International University, with the support of the Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE), conducted a study with Salvadoran gang members and former gang members across the country. The study, which is based on a survey with a combination of a convenience and purposive sample of 1,196 respondents with records of gang membership and 32 in-depth interviews, reveals that desistance from the gang is possible in El Salvador but, in the short-term, it depends on two factors. First, it depends on the individual and active commitment of gang members to abandon gang life and stop partaking in violent activities. Second, it depends on the tacit or explicit consent of the leaders of the gang organization. Hence, in El Salvador, gang desistance—which, according to some authors, is the declining probability of gang membership—involves the acquiescence of the group.

The study builds on previous academic scholarship on gangs in El Salvador and Central America as well as on the general criminological literature on youth gangs. The results indicate that youth gangs remain a predominantly male phenomenon and that the average age of joining the gang does not seem to have changed significantly in comparison with data from 10 years ago. Nearly 40% of the subjects interviewed for this study are active members of the gang, while the rest are in different stages of calming down and leaving the gang.

Approximately 50% of the subjects interviewed in the survey belong—or have belonged—to Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13); 23% expressed their loyalty to the 18th Street Gang Sureños; while only 11% mentioned they were part of the 18th Street Revolucionarios. The rest of the interviewees indicated past or present membership in peripheral gang groups: Mirada Locos, Mara Máquina, Mao-Mao, etc. Across the survey and in-depth interviews, MS-13 emerged not only as the largest gang organization but also as the most structured and regulated national group. MS-13 members interviewed in this research report the highest levels of participation in criminal activities and also have the lowest levels of intentions to leave the gang.

Contrary to the widespread view that Salvadoran gangs are comprised of a large number of deportees and returned migrants from the United States, the study found little evidence of a direct influence of migration in the composition and the dynamics of local gangs. Almost all of the surveyed gang members and subjects of this study were born and raised in El Salvador, and very few maintain regular contact with their peers in the United States.

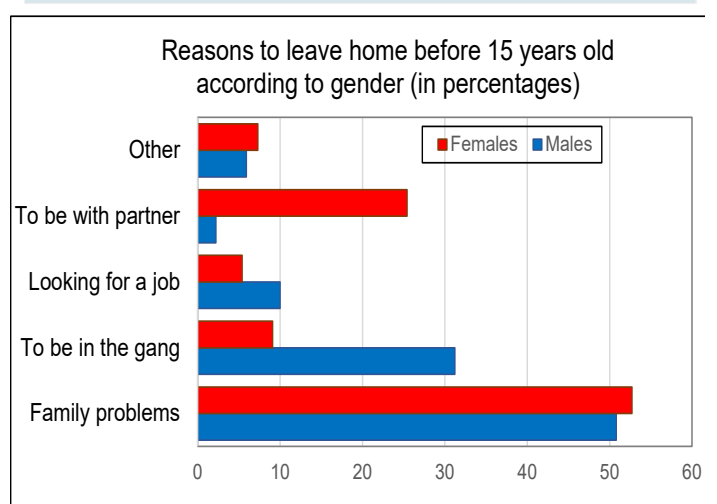
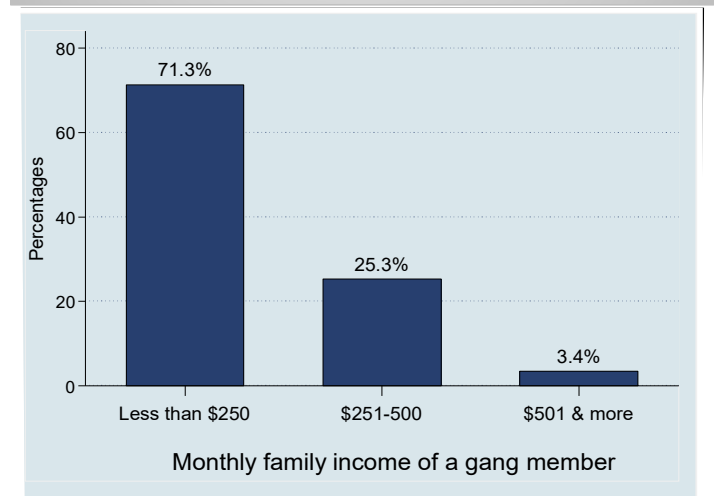
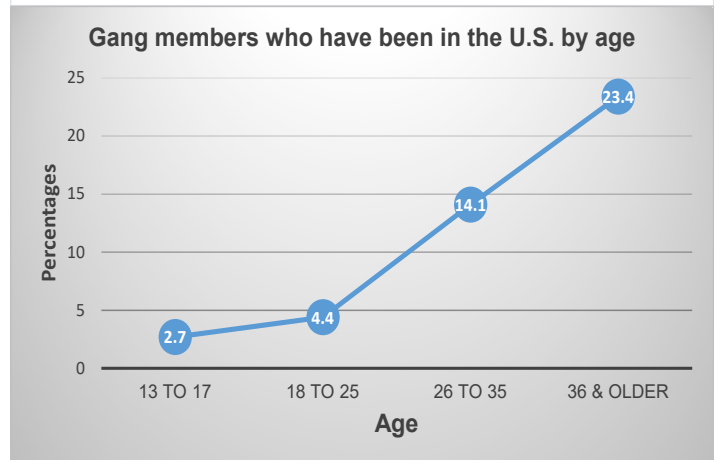
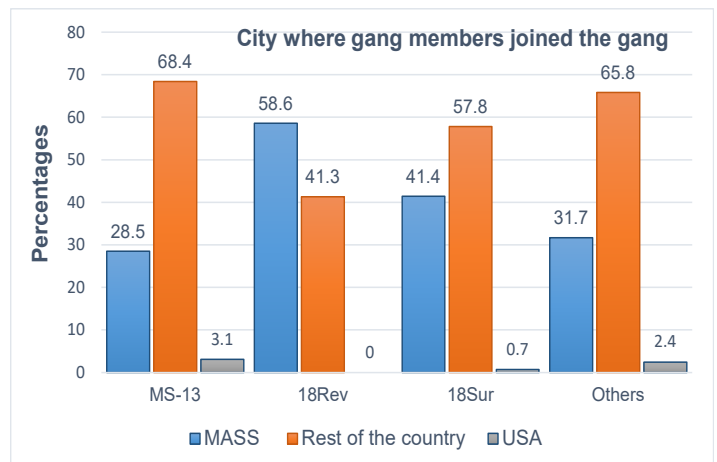
The vast majority of people with a record of gang membership interviewed for this study come from the most underprivileged sectors of Salvadoran society. Most respondents dropped out of school before turning 16 and did not even complete middle school. Seven out of ten are from households with a monthly income below \$250 and more than 80% have not had a regular job, either in the formal or informal sector. In addition, most respondents come from dysfunctional and disintegrated families. Nearly half of gang members and former gang members reported having run away from their family's home before turning 15 years old, primarily due to domestic violence and family problems. Furthermore, more than half of gang members have children of their own, with a higher prevalence of parenthood (nearly 90%) among females affiliated with gangs.

Violence and criminal activities remain essential components of gang life. Murder and extortion are the most common crimes gang members are accused of, with nearly 67% of the respondents being accused of committing these types of crimes in addition to assaults, armed robberies, kidnappings, and rapes. In some gangs, most notably MS-13, numerous assassinations and the capability to control new territories through the use of extortions, threats, and strategic murders are critical strategies for ascending within the gang structure. In the past, gang members only had to complete a "mission" to join the gang. In contrast, and according to the information collected by the study, today gang members would have had to commit more than one murder even to be considered as a potential candidate for gang membership.

More than two-thirds of the respondents have been arrested more than once and have spent time incarcerated in the Salvadoran detention centers. A significant share of the gang member sample (45.5%) also reported being attacked and injured by police officers and security forces in the last years, in addition to rival gangs (28.2%), friendly gangs (13%), and other actors.

Gang structures are significantly more developed now than they were 10 or 20 years ago when the gang phenomenon started to expand in El Salvador. They also seem to be more structured and tend to regulate the life of the average gang member more strictly than in most of the cases reported in the literature elsewhere, especially in the United States. Gangs operating at the local level preserve some levels of autonomy that allows them high levels of adaptation and transformation in the face of challenges and threats. Again, MS-13 stands out among the gang groups due to its high level of organization and territorial control.

MS-13's structure includes different levels of management, which typically start with the clique as its lowest operational level (i.e. at the neighborhood level). Some cliques have managed to expand beyond their original neighborhood structure, to what they call "sectores," which function as a franchise of the initial clique. The next organizational level is the "programas," which operate at the regional level.

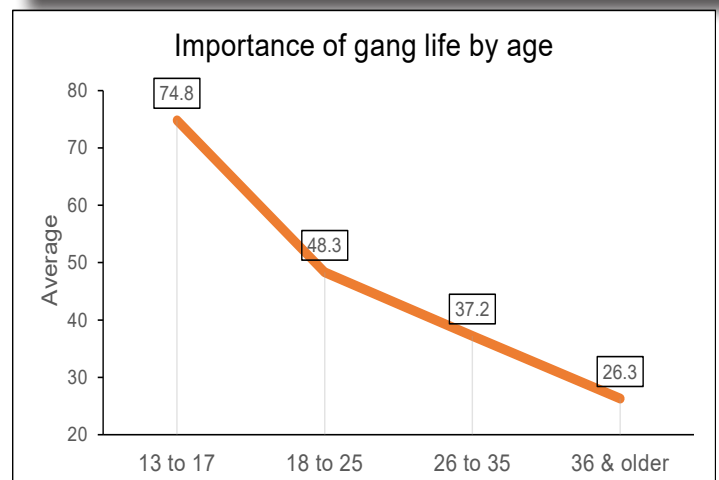
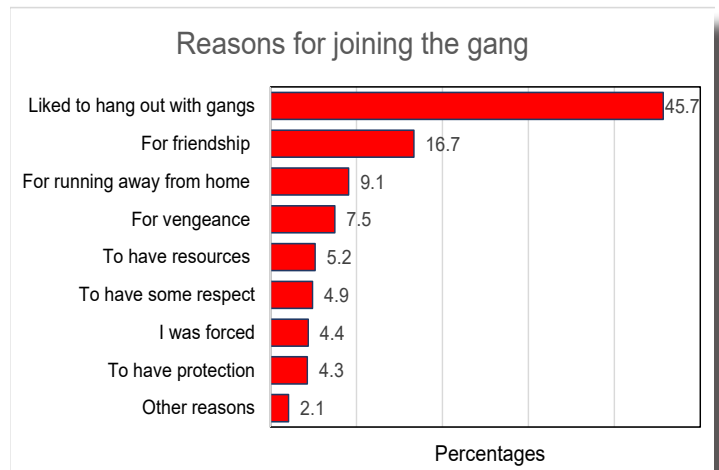
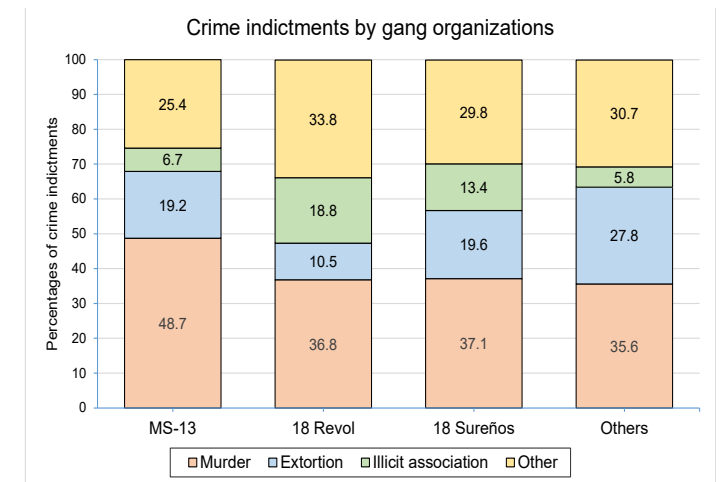
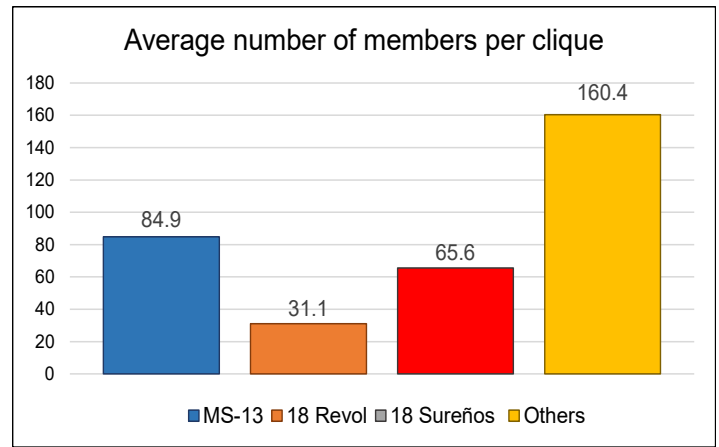


Finally, the top level in the organization is the national “ranfla.” The “ranfla” includes a group of leaders who manage the entire gang structure and serve as a decision-making board. According to some informants, the “ranfla” is divided into two sub-structures: one that is formed by leaders serving time in the national prisons, and the other which is comprised of principals operating on the street. In contrast, the 18th Street groups are less well-structured regarding their organization. In many cases, it was difficult to establish a unique organizational pattern based on the statements of the experts interviewed. However, and according to some informants, the 18th Street groups divide their organization in “canchas,” which operate at the neighborhood level and the city level, and “tribus,” which extend to the regional scale.

Most of the people interviewed in the survey (76.2%) held what can be considered a regular (homeboy or soldier) position within the structure of the gang. However, nearly 9% of the respondents had some position of leadership, and 15% were aspiring members of the gang. Although the latter are not formally considered members of the gang organizations yet, their activities for the benefit of the gang and their loyalty to the gang clique and group highlight the significant role they play in the dynamics of gang survival and effort for territorial control.

The size of the clique varies significantly depending on the gang organization, the neighborhood, and other factors. According to the results of the survey, the average number of members in a Salvatrucha clique is 85, while the 18th Street groups tend to have fewer members per clique. The average number in the Sureños is 66 compared to 31 in the Revolucionarios cliques. The largest reported cliques seem to be comprised of the peripheral gang groups: members of the Mirada Locos and other organizations tend to have bigger cliques with an average size of 160 members per clique.

The results of the study suggest that Salvadoran youths keep joining the gangs as a result of problematic families, lack of opportunities, and a heightened perception of deprivation of social respect and affection in their communities. Gang organizations tap into such shortages to recruit and maintain an army that becomes instrumental in the control of new territories and the waging of war with enemies, including the police and security forces. However, from the standpoint of the gang members and former gang members, the main reasons why people continue joining the gang still revolve around the excitement from hanging out with peers and the development of social respect and public recognition. Young kids continue joining gang organizations because they provide assets that were not provided by their families and community, namely: friendship, protection, resources, and self-confidence. Thus, the gang becomes the center of the lives of the youngsters who joined at early ages. This view of the gangs remains unchallenged during the adolescent years, but starts to fade as the

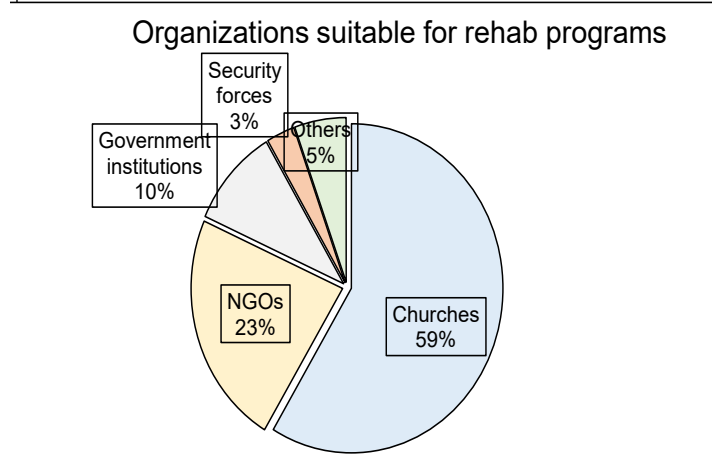
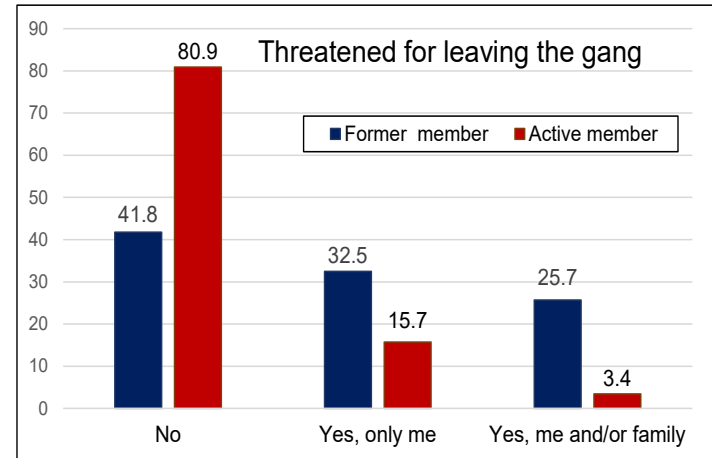
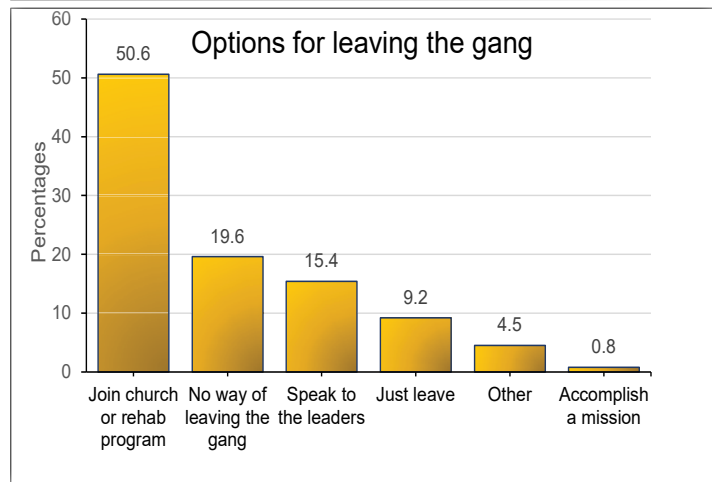
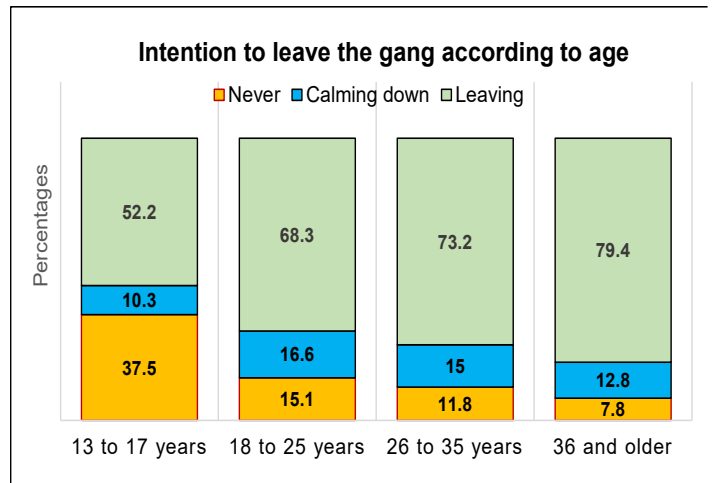


person matures, forms a family of his/her own, and faces the hardships brought by gang violence and law enforcement persecution.

Depending on their status in the gang, people with a record of gang membership have two ways of understanding separation from the gang. First, a gang member can “calm down”: they no longer participate in gang life and the activities of the gang organization. However, they are still considered to be members of the gang. This is the accepted way in which the gang organization, especially leaders, refer to the process of abandoning the gang. It assumes that gang members will always belong to the gang organization, even if they decide to leave and obtain permission from the leaders to step away from the clique and the gang structure. It also assumes that these individuals will always maintain the identity of the gang. However, the separation from the organization can also—and frequently is—understood by the actual deserters as a genuine process of abandoning the gang (“salirse de la pandilla”). Thus, the defectors no longer consider themselves to be connected to the gang in any way.

Gang desistance is possible and it seems more common than usually believed. However, the findings of this research also indicate that although the decision to leave the gang is seemingly an individual choice, it also depends on the gang organization’s acquiescence. In El Salvador, the progression toward gang desistance has to be constantly negotiated with the overwhelming power of the gang. This entails a delicate and lengthy process of negotiation with gang leaders. In most cases, desistance is a delicate process of separation: gang members expecting to leave the gang reduce their participation in gang meetings and gang activities, start visiting the church, or devote more time to their families. All of these extra-gang activities are conducted with utmost attention to the sensibilities of the gang organization by sending clear signals of loyalty and disposition to cooperate.

According to the results of the survey, intentions to leave the gang are associated with the following circumstances. First, gang members harbor greater intentions to exit the gang if they experience their first incarceration at an older age. Second, plans to abandon the gang increase with time while inside the gang and as the person is exposed to the hardships of gang life at an adult age. In other words, intentions to abandon the gang do not appear just as a function of age, but as a result of the duration of active gang membership. However, the willingness to leave a gang becomes especially pressing if the gang member manages to find a job in the informal economy and is touched by a religious experience, usually in the Evangelical churches. Both occurrences—in informal jobs and religious affiliation—seem to play the most significant role in convincing people to leave the gang.



Having the desire to leave a gang is not enough as former gang members face a litany of challenges and obstacles, the main one being the gang organizations themselves. The results of the survey show that an important percentage of former gang members said that they were threatened by their own peers when they decided to leave the gang. According to the data, more than 58% of former gang members have received threats against themselves or their families for abandoning the gang. Other challenges include the total absence of personal skills to work in a stable job, the lack of viable opportunities for training and employment, the constant threat from former gang rivals, the harassment of the police and security forces, and social discrimination for their past deeds and appearances (tattoos).

The religious experience plays a major role in the path toward gang desistance. It provides a protective space that allows aspiring deserters to reestablish links with the community, build their families, and seek educational and labor opportunities without the harassment of the gang organization. It is not surprising, then, that many of the successful cases of desistance in El Salvador occur under the path of religious conversion and integration to an Evangelical church. However, gang members willing to leave the gang need to show an absolute commitment not only to their religious faith but also to the values associated with a pious life. Results show that this is not easy for many individuals. Gang organizations tend to police the moral life of their former gang members and, in many cases, exert an unrelenting control on the life of desisters, even when they no longer belong to the organization.

In any case, the majority of the respondents surveyed (58%) believe that the church is the most appropriate organization to lead rehabilitation programs. On the other hand, 23.1% contended that NGOs should lead rehabilitation programs. Only 9.8% of the individuals surveyed responded that the government should lead such rehabilitation programs. Debates existed among experts interviewed about the degree of political will to solve the gang problem. Some experts contended that the government does not have the political will required to address the gang phenomenon. Yet other subject matter experts interviewed asserted that the government lacks the necessary capacity to address this problem, which is profoundly complex in nature.

There are various lessons about gang desistance. League Collegiate Outfitters is a model for how to reinsert former gang members into society. The company provides former gang members with hope and the opportunity to change their lives, because it has the ability to insert gang members in a protective environment. League offers not only employment, but also—and more importantly—educational opportunities and helps ex-gang members—and other employees—with any problems that arise. The company does not discriminate against employees for their physical appearances (e.g. tattoos) or criminal histories. Some people with tattoos expressed the challenges present as former gang members and ex-gang members could spot someone in the street and attempt to harm them. Moreover, some individuals who left the gang and began working in the company faced various legal problems and articulated fears of being detained by the police and incarcerated. Thus, ordinary tasks, such as walking home or taking a bus, become obstacles for gang members. The leadership at League has helped former gang members who have experienced legal problems and has provided intense levels of support in an effort to assist the employees working at this factory.

This study was conducted with support from the United States Department of State under Federal Assistance Award S-INLEC-16-GR-0042. The opinions expressed in this study are those of the authors and do not reflect the view points of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) or the U.S. State Department.