



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

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Executive Summary

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? 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 record 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 extortions 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—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 that occur 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.

Introduction

Why do Salvadoran youth gang members decide to leave a gang? What conditions are related to the processes of abandoning gang life and the criminal activity that accompanies it in contemporary El Salvador? To answer this question and several others, Florida International University's Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) and Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (JGI) with the support of the Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE) conducted a 10-month study in 2016. This research project sought to understand the current gang phenomenon in El Salvador with a special emphasis on the conditions that lead to what some gang theorists have called "gang desistance," which is "the declining probability of gang membership" (Decker 2016).

The present research revolves around two data collection techniques: first, a series of in-depth interviews with subject-matter experts, including individuals with a record of gang membership; second, a general survey with gang members and former gang members conducted in several detention centers and rehabilitation facilities across the country. In collecting the information, the research team applied a mix-methods approach and conducted nearly 1,200 survey interviews with active and former gang members in jails, prisons, rehab programs, and juvenile correction centers as well as more than 30 in-depth interviews with former gang members and subject-matter experts.

The study focused on the following themes:

- Understand the context of gang and gang violence in El Salvador.
- Examine the profile of gang members.
- Comprehend why individuals join gangs in El Salvador.
- Assess the possibility of leaving a gang.
- Determine what factors would help motivate individuals to leave a gang.
- Identify the mechanisms to leave a gang and the role of society for facilitating gang desistance.

While there is a tremendous amount of literature on gangs, much of it is based on research that has been conducted in Europe and the United States (Klein 2007; Scott 2014; Venkatesh 2008; Decker et al. 2014; Decker and Curry 2002; Decker et al. 1998; Covey 2003; Sheldon et al. 2001; Klein et al. 2000; Valentine 1995; Howell and Griffiths 2015; Weerman et al. 2015; Thrasher 1927). In El Salvador, research on gangs has been conducted since the 1990s and has revolved around surveys, ethnographic work, and focus groups. However, much of the work, including the survey research, on gangs in El Salvador is outdated and was conducted several years ago (Cruz and Carranza 2006; Cruz and Portillo Peña 1998; Cruz 2007; Cruz et al. 2004; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman 2001; Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff 2003; Smutt and Miranda 1998). The research team used the prior survey research as references and built on the previous experiences of experts who have applied surveys in this country (Cruz et al. 2004; Cruz and Carranza 2006; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman 2001; Aguilar 2007). Based on a survey

with individuals who have a record of gang membership, this project provides cutting edge data in order to understand the gang phenomena in El Salvador in 2016 as the context in the country has become more difficult as gang violence has increased.

This research project consisted of two main data-collection techniques. First, the research team interviewed 32 subject-matter experts for around 40 minutes on average to collect contextual information about the current gang phenomena in El Salvador. Twenty-two of the subject-matter experts were former gang members in the process of rehabilitation in different programs across the country.¹ Second, the researchers conducted surveys with inmates incarcerated in prisons, jails and rehabilitation programs. The nature of the population of this study and the safety considerations regarding the subjects and the research team imposed some limitations on the survey sample design. Therefore, the research team used a combination of “convenience sampling” and “purposive sampling.” That is, the design of the sample was based not only on the researchers’ knowledge about the gang phenomenon in El Salvador while the selection of the centers were selected based on the ease of access.² The team selected detention and rehabilitation centers that housed active and former gang members that were not placed under the extraordinary measures (*medidas extraordinarias*) imposed by the government in its strategy against gangs. In addition, the Salvadoran government granted the research team access to a number of facilities. In total, the research team conducted 1,300 survey interviews, which came to 1,196 valid surveys with former and active gang members in six prisons, three police jails, and two rehabilitation programs. The fieldwork occurred in the following prisons: i) Centro Penitenciario y Preventivo y de Cumplimiento de Penas de La Esperanza; ii) Centro Penitenciario Preventivo de Sonsonate; iii) Centro de Readaptación para Mujeres de Ilopango; and iv) Centro Intermedio de Ilobasco, which houses adult gang members who started to serve their sentences when they were minors. In addition, the research team conducted interviews in two juvenile centers: i) Centro de Internamiento de Menores de Tonacatepeque; and ii) Centro de Menores El Espino. The three police jails included in the research are located in the metropolitan municipalities of Lourdes-Colón, Mejicanos, and San Salvador (Ciudad Futura). Finally, the team had access to the employees of the company named League Collegiate Outfitters and the members of the Christian church Elim. In both places, gang members and former gang members were interviewed following the designated protocols approved by Florida International University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The survey interviews were conducted using a questionnaire with 112 questions or items, and touched on different aspects of the personal and collective life in the gang.³ The interviewers who applied the surveys are natives of El Salvador and have experience in this type of research. Survey researchers did not spend many days in the prisons and jails as the results could have

¹ To protect the anonymity of the informants, gang members, and former gang members in the in-depth interviews, the research team avoided recording the names of the interviewees, except for an Informed Consent Form, which was kept separated from the interview transcripts. In the case of gang related individuals, the research team identified them as “*Pandilleros*.” They were randomly assigned correlative numbers for identification purposes. In the other cases, they were labeled according to their primary occupation: Academic, NGO official, government official, etc.

² Purposive convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method used when the researcher conducts a deliberate selection of the subjects based on the knowledge of the topic and the limitations imposed by the nature of the population.

³ The survey questionnaire and research instruments are available upon request to the PI, Dr. José Miguel Cruz.

been contaminated if the word spread as a result of prisoners talking among each other. The surveys are based on grounded theory method (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), which enables the development of various conceptual categories that help in the formation of the survey questions. The research team went through four rounds of full board review with the IRB to ensure that all ethical practices and norms were followed during the project. All researchers and interviewers completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certificate and received training before participating in the research. Following the protocols of the protection of human subjects, all interviews with subjects in the survey and key-informants were conducted after obtaining an informed consent, including a parental/guardian consent and verbal child consent signed by a child advocate in the case of minors.

It is important to note that partaking in research involving gang members is sensitive in nature. Therefore, no names or identification information was recorded during the interviews. The design of the study was multi-stage. The first stage consisted of the selection of prisons or other places to conduct the fieldwork. The research team explored the possibility of access to the maximum security prisons where most of the national gang leaders are imprisoned, but due to the emergency measures enacted by the government to control the prisons, it was not possible to visit such centers. The second stage was the selection of human subjects to be surveyed within each prison. Once in the center, the field research team met with the prison directors to request access to all the inmates with known record of membership in a youth gang. During those meetings, the field research team discussed the conditions of the center's infrastructure, the logistics for accessing the subjects, and the safety protocols. The specific logistics varied depending on the center, but they provided the appropriate measures regarding access to the potential subjects following the security protocols developed by the research team and approved by the IRB. The leaders of the research team clearly explained the goals of the study to the participants and answered any questions before and after the survey that the individuals had. This helped ease any concerns of the participants. In addition, the research team worked hard to ensure the safety of all individuals involved in this project. All inmates randomly selected to participate in the survey had the option of not partaking in the study. Finally, all of the surveys were anonymous and there is no way to link the names of the individuals interviewed with the responses in the survey to protect the rights of the human subjects. The interviewers recorded the responses with paper and pencil.

The team of interviewers was comprised of 20 people who have extensive experience in social science research and passed the CITI's certificate on Social/Behavioral Human Research Course. The team of interviewers underwent a training process that included the procedures to approaching inmates, obtaining informed consent, and doing the interview using the developed questionnaire. The team of interviewers also conducted mock interviews among themselves to practice the application of the survey. In addition, the interviewers were always accompanied by a group of fieldwork supervisors, including the main researchers of the study, who verified the application of the protocols and oversaw the work of the team without intruding in the interviews.⁴

⁴ The survey was implemented and processed by ERAK Consultores, a company with considerable experience in this type of surveys, under the supervision of the FIU-FUNDE research team.

The information collected by the survey interviewers was then input into a database. The information processing of the survey involved the codification, digitization, and construction of the database, which was also cleaned and validated by office supervisors. The team only processed questionnaires fulfilling two characteristics: a) it had to be complete without any unanswered questions, and b) it had to include responses from active or former gang members. This quality control led to the exclusion of more than 100 questionnaires that did not meet these requirements.

This report is divided into four main sections. The first section provides an overview of the context of the research, the current situation of violence in El Salvador, the role of the gangs, and the policies enacted to combat gangs and gang-related violence. The second section describes the basic demographic characteristics of the survey sample. It is important to note that, given the nature of the sample design, this study does not make claims of representativeness of the gang population in El Salvador. Hence, the demographic profiles refer exclusively to the subjects included in the survey. The third section presents the results that deal with the dynamics of gang life: why the respondents joined the gang, the benefits of gang life, and the determinants of the member's commitment to the gang organization. The fourth section addresses the central question of this research initiative: what are the conditions that facilitate gang desistance in El Salvador? Hence, the section analyzes the results of the study regarding the process of abandoning the gang.

1. The context of the research

Several Central American countries have been plagued by high levels of violence and bloodshed in the last two decades (The World Bank 2011). El Salvador has a long history of violence as a result of the civil war, which lasted from 1980 until 1992 (Wood 2003a; Baloyra 1983; Baloyra-Herp 1995; Pérez 2003; Buergenthal 1994). Violence has not subsided despite the end of the civil war as El Salvador—and other Central American countries—have large numbers of gangs that have contributed to the high levels of crime and violence. In fact, there are an estimated 70,000 gang members in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Seelke 2014). El Salvador, in particular, has been an epicenter of gang activity (Cruz et al. 2000; De Cesare 1998; Dudley 2014; Smutt and Miranda 1998). The origin of the gangs dates back to the civil war when some of these organizations emerged in neighborhoods in El Salvador. Today, some estimates point to more than 30,000 gang members in this country. These individuals participate in a variety of illicit criminal activities and are viewed as responsible for most of the homicidal violence that occurs across the country. The two most powerful gangs are Mara Salvatrucha (also known as MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (*Barrio 18*), which today is divided into two rival factions: The *Revolucionarios* (Revolutionaries) and *Sureños* (Southerners). These three gangs are sworn enemies and much of the violence occurs as a result of fighting for control of territory and other illicit activities (Wolf 2011; Seelke 2009; Savenije 2009b; Cruz 2014).

These gang organizations originally emerged in the United States. The 18th Street gang was formed in the 1960s in Los Angeles, California by Mexican youth living in the city. On the other hand, MS-13 emerged in the early 1980s by Salvadoran immigrants who lived in Los Angeles (Moore et al. 1978; Franco 2008; Vigil 1988). In an effort to combat gangs in Los Angeles and address the security problem, the U.S. government began deporting undocumented gang members back to El Salvador as a result of the passage of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996. Consequently, this is one factor, among many, that resulted in the proliferation of MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs throughout Central America (Wolf 2011; Seelke 2015; Wallace 2000; Cruz 2013). In 2012, for instance, Guatemala had an estimated 17,000 gang members from 18th Street compared to 5,000 from MS-13. On the other hand, Honduras had 5,000 individuals in 18th Street and 7,000 people in MS-13. Finally, El Salvador had 8,000 18th Street members and 12,000 people in the MS-13 gang (Seelke 2015; Wolf 2012b; Bruneau et al. 2011).

Gangs have proliferated in a context characterized by violence and impoverishment. In 2014, El Salvador had a national poverty head count ratio—the measure of the percentage of the population that lives below the poverty line—of 31.8%. The country has also faced economic hardships, particularly after the 2008 global economic crisis: the percentage of annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth decreased in the country by 3.13% in 2009. While the economy has rebounded in recent years, annual GDP growth has remained quite low: 1.95% in 2014 and 2.5% in 2015. The Gross National Income (GNI) per capita has increased over time from 2,160 in 2000 to 3,940 in 2015, yet challenges still exist. In addition, it is important to note that not all communities are the same in El Salvador, and there are differences between various communities

in terms of the challenges that they face. In sum, the country—like most of Central America—faces major socioeconomic obstacles (The World Bank no date).

In 2000, the El Salvadoran government launched *mano dura* (iron fist) policies to combat gangs in the country (Hume 2007; Ministerio de Seguridad Pública y Justicia 2007; Santacruz and Cruz 2001). Such policies resulted in increasing levels of violence. Steven Dudley, a journalist and crime expert, argues: “In El Salvador, this included rounding up thousands of youth based on their appearance, associations or address. Most of these arrests did not hold up in Salvadoran courts but served to further stigmatize already marginal communities and may have accelerated recruitment for the gangs themselves. Far more troubling, from a criminology standpoint was the effect *Mano Dura* had on the prison system, the mara leadership and its operational structures” (Dudley 2010). The government of Francisco Flores implemented the *Plan Mano Dura* policy in 2003, which enabled police officers to arrest suspected gang members based on their physical appearances as many gang members pledge allegiance and loyalty to the organization by having tattoos—often on their faces, hands, and other extremities. This strategy resulted in the prison population increasing from 4,000 to 8,000 in the first four months after the implementation of this policy (Stone 2012). Several authors contend that the *mano dura* and *super mano dura* policies resulted in the proliferation in the number of individuals incarcerated. They also maintain that such policies did not effectively distinguish individuals who were not members of gangs from active gang members (Lessing 2016; Cruz 2011; Wolf 2012a). One expert interviewed argued that *mano dura* strategies will lead to spikes in violence as gangs will not back down from the government. It is also important to note that, at different points of their history, gang members have responded to such public policies by changing some of the traditional gang practices and developing new structures and forms of operation. For instance, for some time after the implementation of *mano dura* programs, many gang members stopped tattooing their bodies and shaving their heads in order to make it more difficult for law enforcement and government authorities to identify individuals affiliated with gangs (Wolf 2012b). They also developed strategies to challenge the government and security forces that ranged from public calls to transportation curfews to negotiations with government representatives (Martínez and Sanz 2012; Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016).

The government negotiated a truce between the major gangs in March 2012. In November 2012, negotiators proposed the creation of zones of peace in various municipalities with the goal being that gang members would cease criminal activities and participate in programs designed to reinsert these individuals into society (Valencia 2015b; Whitfield 2013; Martínez et al. 2012; Martínez and Sanz 2012). One expert interviewed who works at a human rights organization explained that the truce had many problems, contending that any form of dialogue with gang members should be transparent. Violence decreased initially as the homicide rates declined from 12 per day in 2011 to 6.8 per day in 2013 (The Associated Press 2014). However, the homicide rate spiked after the breakdown of the truce. In 2015, El Salvador surpassed Honduras as the most violent non-warring country in the world with a homicide rate of 104 per 100,000 inhabitants (The Guardian 2015; Valencia 2010, 2015a). Violence particularly spiked in August 2015, and the country had one murder per hour (Watts 2015). Violence has also impacted the safety of law enforcement officials. In 2014, for example, 39 police officers were killed. This figure climbed to 49 during the first nine months of 2015 (Policia Nacional Civil

2015). The violence has also resulted in high levels of displacement. Between August 2014 and December 2015, gangs caused the displacement of at least 533 people (Albaladejo 2016b).

Moreover, women have been a target of gang-related violence. Angelika Albaladejo asserts, “In the past, sexual violence was primarily committed in the home by a family member. Now however, rape and sexual assault are increasingly committed by gangs and security forces” (Albaladejo 2016b). Gangs have been responsible for the rape and murder of girls who are often declared as “girlfriends of the gangs” (“*novias de las pandillas*”) (Albaladejo 2016a; Hume 2008). The first eight months of 2015 had 1,123 reported cases of sexual assault. The number of feminicides (i.e. the intentional killing of women) have continued to increase in recent years from 215 in 2013 to 475 in 2015.⁵

The highest court in El Salvador labeled gangs as terrorist organizations in 2015. Salvador Sánchez Cerén came to office on his hardline strategies against the gang truce. The new President assumed office and placed the leaders of the gangs in maximum security prisons. The number of attacks on police forces by gang members increased causing the government to redefine the national strategy against gangs (Kinosian 2016). Thus, the government of President Sánchez Cerén has implemented various law-enforcement measures, including intelligence-driven activities, to counter the gangs and gang-related violence. President Sánchez Cerén has stated that “[a]lthough some say that we are at war, there is no other path left.” Moreover, he has argued that a dialogue between the gangs and the government cannot occur (Gagne 2016).

Labeling the gangs as terrorists presents various challenges. First, how does one define a gang member? It is important to note that differences exist with regard to levels of gang involvement. In other words, not every individual is highly involved in the gang. Many experts interviewed were very critical of the politics of suppression as well as the labeling of gang members as terrorists. One expert contended that such practices make it hard for individuals to leave the gangs during times of war with the government. A former gang member who is now a pastor at a church mentioned that, while all gang members participate in illicit activities, it would be easier to focus the efforts of rehabilitation on gang members who do not occupy positions of leadership in the organization. Logically, gang leaders would not want to permit gang members to leave the gang during times of conflict and anticrime campaigns. Moreover, some experts have argued that it has become harder for human rights organizations, NGOs, and aid workers in El Salvador to operate as they face a variety of challenges. While there are many individuals and organizations in El Salvador who constitute civil society, working with gang members is not permitted under the current conditions according to the law. In addition, people who work with gang members run the risk to be labeled as “gang apologists,” which can complicate one’s reputation and deter people from working with gang members and helping them exit the gang life.⁶ However, as of January 2017, government officials are discussing new legislation that could be implemented by the administration and that would address the issue of reinsertion of former gang members into society.

Some experts have contended that suppression-only approaches designed to combat crime have not been effective as criminal activity and violence have continued over time.

⁵ The number 475 reflects January through October 2015.

⁶ Thanks to a subject-matter expert who pointed out this possibility in one of the interviews.

Moreover, such tactics have led to an influx of prisoners caught up in the prison system. In 2000, El Salvador had 7,754 prisoners in the country as the number of prisoners has proliferated from 12,073 in 2004 to 24,662 in 2010. By 2014, there were 28,334 prisoners in the country. The number of female prisoners has also increased from 371 in 2000 to 2,445 in 2010. By 2016, there were 3,250 female prisoners in the country. The prison population rate in El Salvador has increased from 130 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2000 to 181 per 100,000 people in 2002. By 2008, El Salvador had a prison population rate of 321 per 100,000 inhabitants. The rate continued to increase from 428 per 100,000 in 2012 to 442 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2014 (Institute for Criminal Police Research 2016).

Many individuals in the penitentiary system are in pretrial detention and have not been charged, which contributes to overcrowding. The number of prisoners in pre-trial or “remand imprisonment” increased in absolute terms from 5,147—54.3% of the total prison population in 2001 to 8,924—26.6% of the total prison population. As a result, prisons in El Salvador are notoriously overcrowded. In 2012, the prisons had an overcapacity rate of 29%, demonstrating the severity of the problem (Organization of American States 2012). In 2016, the El Salvadoran government declared a state of “extraordinary measures” in an effort to combat the gangs in the prisons (Lohmuller 2016). The Minister of Justice and Public Security, Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde, contended that “[t]hey [gangs] are going to be subjected to a higher security regimen, with greater control to make sure communication from inside the prison system is stopped” (AP 2016). The goal of the new measures is to combat the leadership of the gangs. Michael Lohmuller argues, “If implemented effectively, isolating the gangs’ top leadership, nearly all of whom are behind bars, from the outside world could potentially throw the gangs into disarray” (Lohmuller 2016).

2. The Salvadoran gang member profile

This section presents the characteristics of the gang members and ex-gang members surveyed in the study. Although it is important to remember that this research does not make any claim of representativeness of the entire population involved in gang activities in El Salvador, the results presented here provide an unrivalled approach to the current profile of the people associated with gang organizations in El Salvador. Furthermore, because of the size of the sample, it is possible to make comparisons between different population gang organizations and identify some trends. The survey sample mostly comes from gang members or former gang members that are imprisoned in adult penitentiaries as well as juvenile detention centers.

2. 1. Demographics

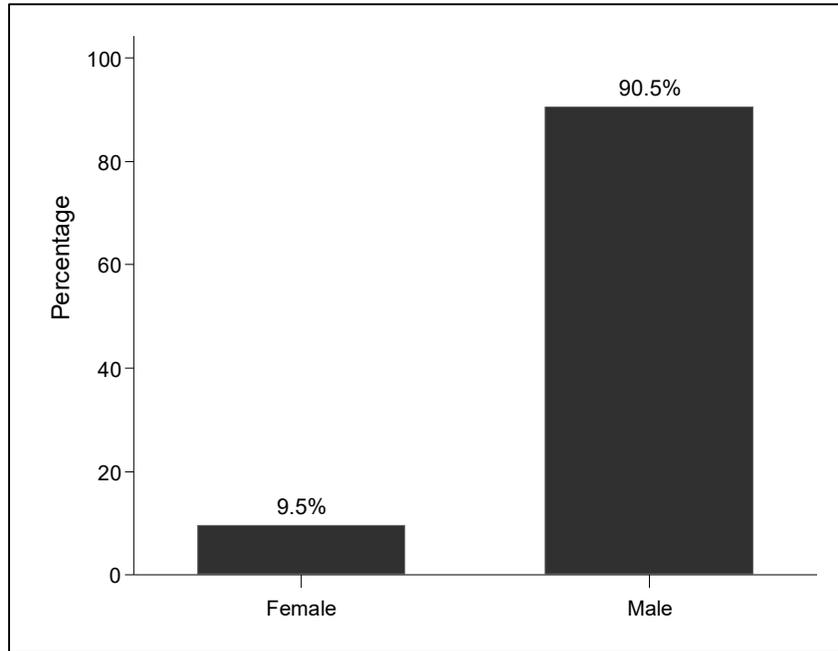
Youth gangs in El Salvador remain predominantly a male phenomenon: 90.5% of the gang members surveyed by the research team are male (see Graph 2.1). Gangs recruit young people who, due to a number of structural factors, find themselves in search of a collective identity, material resources, family, friends, or a higher social status. The interviewees' ages ranged from 13 to 56, but the majority (75%) were 30 years old or younger at the time of this study (see Graph 2.2). Most of the respondents (82.9%) belong to the three major Salvadoran gangs: MS-13, the 18th *Revolucionarios* and the 18th *Sureños*. As can be seen in Graph 2.3, the MS-13 gang has the highest membership, accounting for almost half (48.7%) of the interviewed gang members. 23% of the respondents belong to the 18 *Sureños* gang, and 17.1% form part of the minor gangs, such as La Mirada Locos, Mao Mao and Máquina. The rest of the respondents (11.1%) are members of the 18th Street *Revolucionarios*. In terms of the position within the gang hierarchy, the majority (76.2%) of the surveyed gang members are "soldiers", 15% are collaborators or informants, and 8.9% occupy leadership positions.⁷

The average age of joining a gang does not seem to have changed significantly over the past decade as the average age of the survey respondents was 25.1 years old compared to 24.1 in 2006 (Cruz and Carranza 2006). However, it may have changed in comparison with data from previous years (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman 2001; Cruz and Portillo Peña 1998), but it is important to remember that such differences can be a result of the survey methodology.⁸ Most gang members joined the gang during adolescence. The average age of joining a gang is 15 years old and has remained the same over the past decade (Aguilar 2007; Cruz and Carranza 2006). Half of the respondents entered a gang at the age of 15 years old or younger; 39.6% of them joined a gang between 13 and 15 years old, making this age group one of the highest at risk populations (see Graph 2.4). Moreover, 76.6% of gang members entered a gang while still minors (younger than 18 years old). According to these results, female respondents are likely to

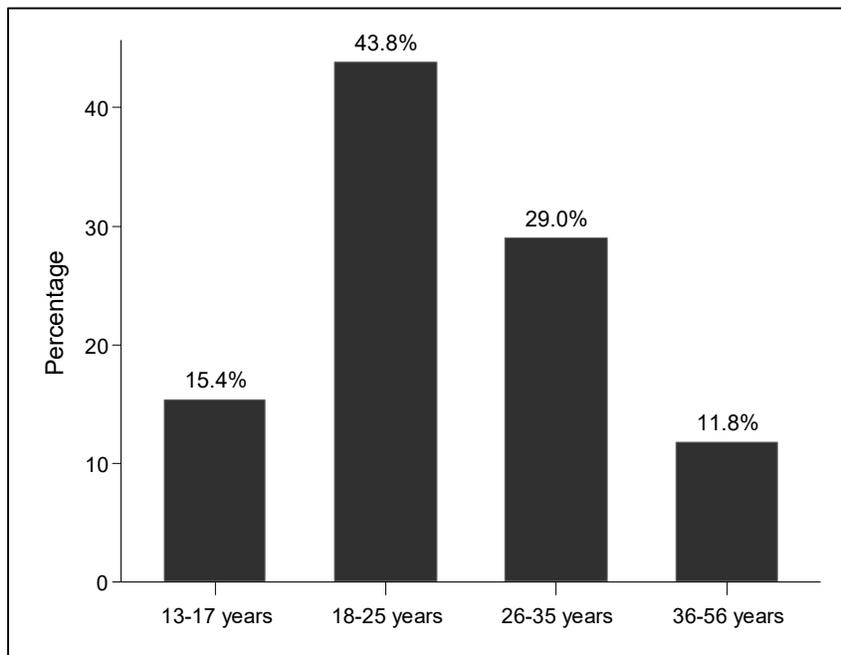
⁷ See Section 3 for more details about the structure of a gang.

⁸ In 1996 and 2001, the surveys were conducted with youth in the streets, whereas the 2006 and 2016 surveys were mostly carried out inside prisons (see Cruz and Portillo 1998; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman 2003; Aguilar and Carranza 2008).

join a gang at later stages in life than males; the average age of joining a gang for males is 15.6 years old and for females 18.3 years old (see Graph 2.5).



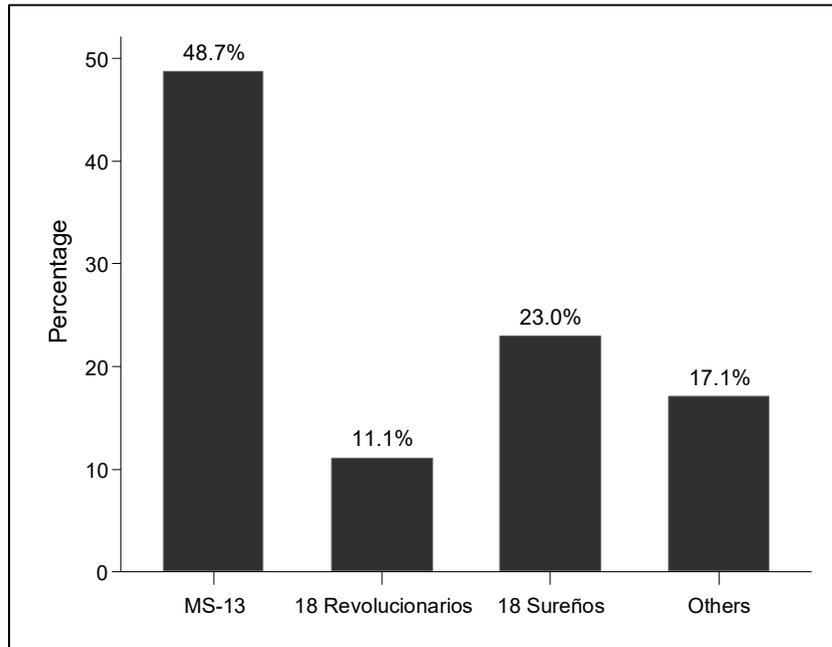
Graph 2.1. Gang membership by gender



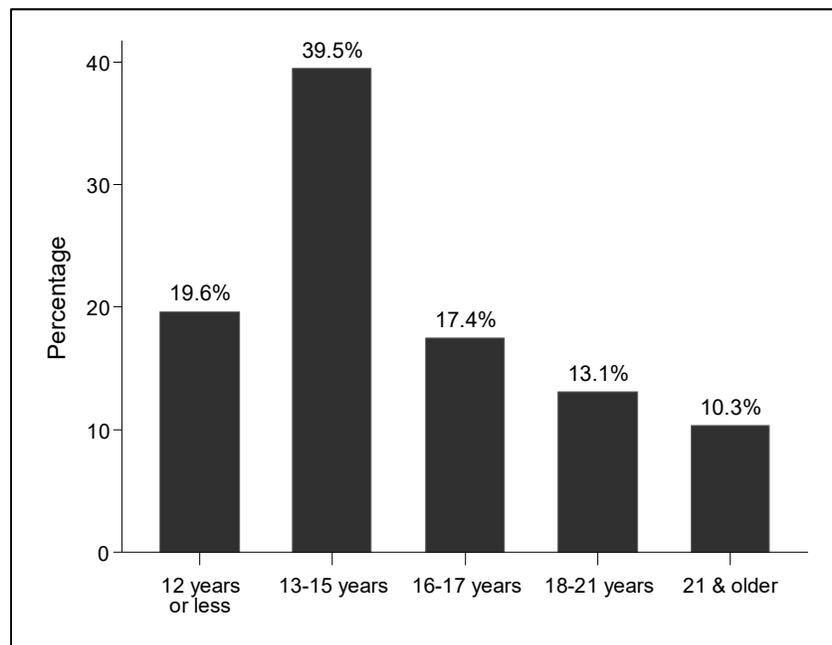
Graph 2.2. Age distribution among gang members

Contrary to the widespread view of Salvadoran gangs as mainly a product of the deportation of undocumented Central American immigrants from the United States, almost all of

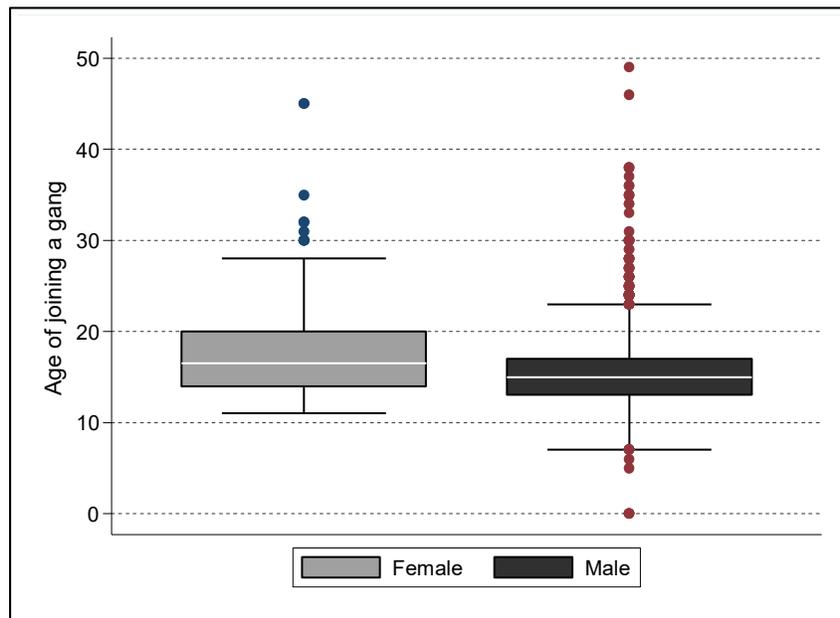
the surveyed gang members were born and grew up in El Salvador (Seelke 2014; UNODC 2007). In fact, less than 1% of the individuals surveyed grew up in the United States. Thus, the data appear to support the thesis that the contemporary gang phenomenon in El Salvador is predominantly a product of local structural conditions, such as poverty, income inequality, and family disintegration, among others (Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff 2003; Savenije 2009b) and is not exclusively an effect of forced migration (Cruz 2013).



Graph 2.3. Gang membership of survey respondents



Graph 2.4. Age of joining a gang



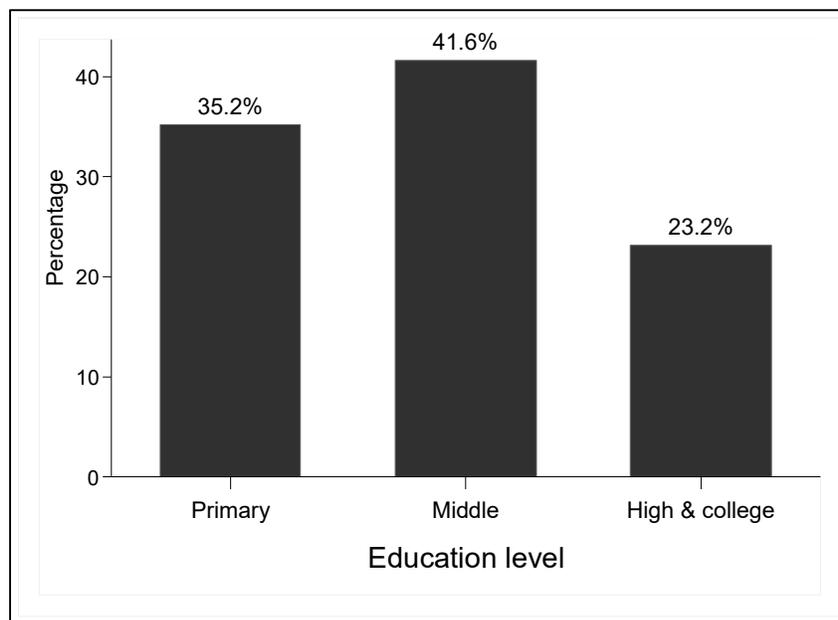
Graph 2.5. Age of joining a gang by gender

2.2. Education and labor

Poverty and a lack of education and employment opportunities are associated with gang membership. In El Salvador, the proportion of youth between 15 and 24 who neither study nor work (*ni estudian, ni trabajan*) is 25%, according to a 2016 World Bank study (De Hoyos Navarro et al. 2016). Approximately, one out of every ten young males falls within this category, and four out of every ten young females are *ninis* (Corvera 2016). This large number of disconnected youth are easily influenced by gangs. The average years of schooling among the gang members surveyed, 7.3 years, has remained the same when compared to the most recent survey conducted ten years ago; the average years of schooling was 7 in 2006 (Cruz and Carranza 2006; Ranum 2006). The data show that the vast majority of gang members (94%) do not complete high school. While 22.1% have attended high school, only 1.1% have attended an institution of higher education. Moreover, almost 25% have not completed elementary school, while 35% have completed elementary school but not middle school. Graph 2.6 shows the percentages of attendance of each level of education among the respondents. Gang members may drop out of school prior to or after joining the gang. The majority of the respondents (69.7%) stopped attending school before they joined the gang. On average, youth joined the gang 5.9 years after dropping out of school, which suggests a gradual and lengthy process of detachment from one key socialization institution: the school. Furthermore, more than half of them (54.4%) joined the gang within the first four years after dropping out of school. Therefore, in most cases, gang membership cannot be considered the cause of leaving school; it is rather a consequence of the confluence of factors that will be discussed in the following sections.

One of the most common features of a gang member is economic insecurity. Most gang members are unemployed and do not have a stable source of income. The majority of the youth

surveyed are from low-income families with 71.3% with a family monthly income under \$250, and 25.3% with household incomes between \$250 and \$500 (see Graph 2.7). In addition, 82.2% of the respondents are (or were) not formally employed (before being arrested) and only 13.7% have an informal job. The lack of employment opportunities is reflected in the fact that only 36.9% of the interviewees have received professional training. Most of them, 68.5%, were trained in manual labor and 22% received their training in the service industry. Former gang members, including those who have calmed down their gang activity, are more likely to have a formal job than active gang members. As can be seen in Graph 2.8, ex-members constitute the largest (41.3%) category among the formally employed individuals. Among those who reported to have a formal job (17.8% of respondents), the majority (52.1%) are manual laborers, 28.2% are small-business owners, and 15% are employed in a service industry. When asked where they would like to work if they had an opportunity, a large portion of the interviewees (30.9%) selected the manual labor option. Almost the same portion (30.5%) would like to own a business, while 10.5% would like to be a professional, such as a lawyer or a doctor. The last two groups particularly illustrate the disconnect between young people’s job aspirations and the opportunities available to them. The unfulfilled expectations lead many to turn to the gang as an alternative source of income.



Graph 2.6. Gang members’ level of education

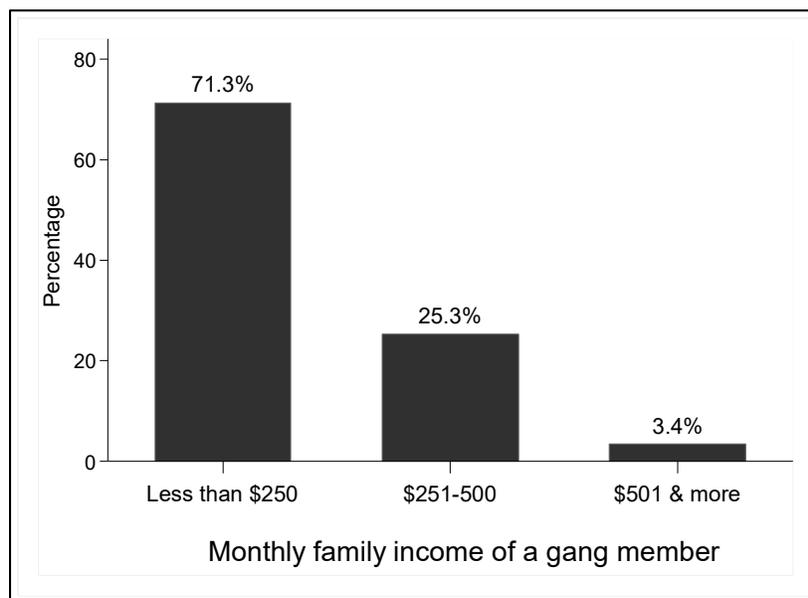
The gang members surveyed stressed the importance of employment and educational opportunities: 95.7% and 94.6% of the individuals consider having a good job and graduating from school or university, respectively, to be very important.⁹ One former gang member illustrated this point with an example:

“Some gang members decide to calm down while others do not because of differences in family support available to them. For example, I had a friend while in the gang. We

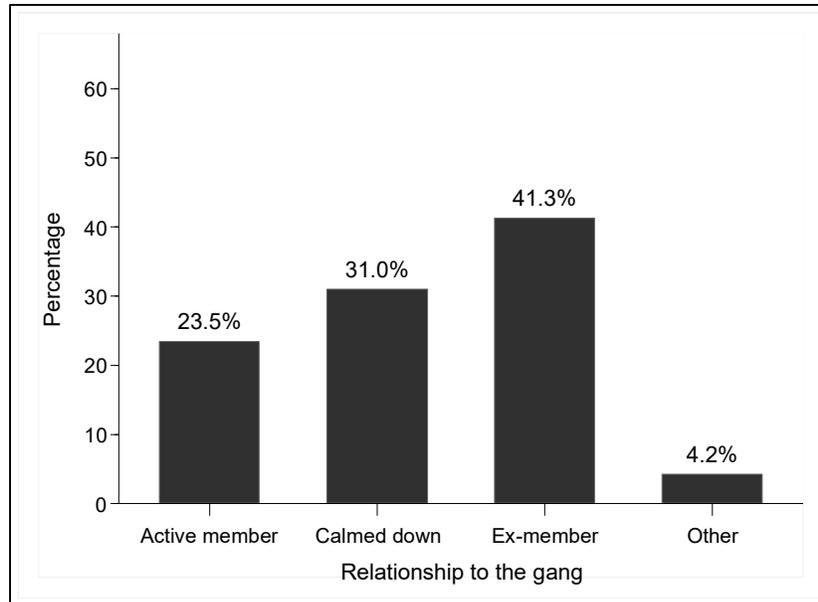
⁹ This topic will be addressed more extensively on Section 3 of the report.

shared many things, we lived the gang life, drank together, and got arrested several times... But he could afford going to college because his mother was in the U.S. sending him money so that he could finish his studies. He went to classes while still in the gang. Now he works as a nurse at the Salvadoran Institute of Social Security. We had had a similar life, but he graduated and managed to reinsert into society. And there are many like him among those whose parents have more resources (*Pandillero 6*).”

Therefore, those who can afford providing for living and placing themselves within the society by means other than criminal activities are likely to take this path. Thus, social programs aimed at preventing youth from joining a gang should focus on retaining adolescents enrolled in school and providing them with professional and educational opportunities (Fisher et al. 2008; Ingersoll and LeBoeuf 1997; Cloward and Ohlin 2013).



Graph 2.7. Monthly family income of a gang member



Graph 2.8. Formal employment among former and active gang members

2.3. Family and friends

To understand the gang phenomena in El Salvador, it is necessary to analyze the social context in which gang members live. Several observers contend that El Salvador has been left with a broken social fabric as a result of the prolonged civil war (Wood 2003b; Ward 2013; Byrne 1996; Zinecker 2007). Following mass migrations and the death of many male family members during the civil war, disintegrated families and communities became the reality for an entire generation of young Salvadorans (Farias 1991; Menjívar 2006; Stanley 2010; Montgomery 1995b, 1995a; De Cesare 1998).

Most gang members come from a disintegrated or incomplete family. During the surveys, gang members were asked who they lived with in their households or who they had lived with prior to their arrest. Notably, only 21% reported to live with their parents or step-parents and 32.9% lived with their wife/husband or partner (see Table 2.1). Thus, 53.9% of the surveyed gang members live in an incomplete household. The absence of a complete nuclear family may constitute a major risk factor in the life of young Salvadorans and could propel them to search for a family-like environment within a gang. As one former MS-13 gang member declared in an interview:

“The evolution [of the gangs], in my view, is the [result] of family dysfunction or disintegration. In my case, it was because my father abandoned me when I was born and my mom had to work and leave me with my grandmother, leaving me in the hands of somebody who did not give me the affection that my mother could have provided” (Pandillero 12).

This dynamic is also demonstrated by the fact that almost half of the interviewees (47%) had left their home before turning 15 years old, primarily due to domestic violence (20.5%), the

desire to be “in the street” with their friends (19.8%), and parental abandonment or separation (14.5%). During an interview, one gang member argued that youth often want to escape the problems that exist in their homes:

“There are just disputes at home, it’s very common. One wants freedom, to get rid of their dominance. What is the first thing that comes to one’s mind? To get into the gang, to be with them [fellow gang members]. When one is in the gang, he considers the gang his family (*Pandillero 5*).”

Another former 18 Street gang member commented on his reasons to join the gang: “When I joined, I was feeling alone, sad and I had hate in my heart because my father mistreated my mother and us a lot. So, I felt that the gang could serve as a refuge for me. ... They became like a family to me, like a brotherhood. One of our slogans was ‘I live for my mother and die for my neighborhood’ (*Pandillero 6*).”

The gang, therefore, becomes a substitute for the family. Notably, joining a gang occupies the fifth reason, following the need for a job, among the reasons for leaving home at a young age. Overall, the reasons that youth leave their homes at an early age are mainly family-related, which in turn is a product of social marginalization, poor living conditions, and high levels of inequality present in Salvadoran society. Such findings are consistent with the academic literature on gang membership in El Salvador (Ward 2013; De Cesare 1998; Savenije and van der Borgh 2006; Savenije 2009a).

In the survey, the gang members were asked about the relative importance of different family aspects based on the following questions:

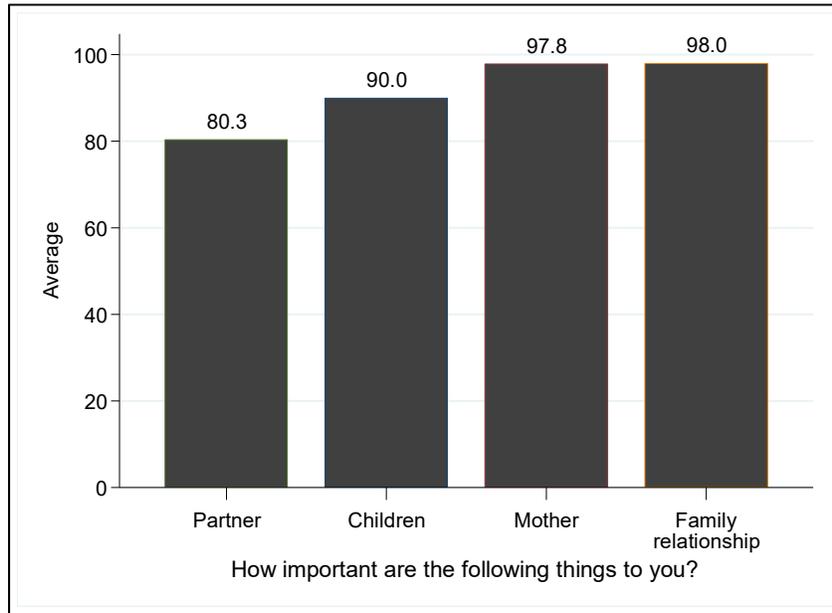
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not important
P72. How important are your own children?	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
P74. How important is it to follow your mother’s advice?	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
P76. How important is your relationship with your partner?	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
P81. How important is it to have a good relationship with your family?	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)

The answers were transformed on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 represents “not important” and 100 represents “very important.” The average scores for each family aspect are shown in Graph 2.9. The data show that a good relationship with the family and respect for one’s mother ranked highest on the scale, 98 and 97.8, respectively.¹⁰ Although still important, the relationship with the partner ranked the lowest (80.3); nearly half of the interviewed gang members are neither married nor in a stable relationship. However, those who have a partner tend to maintain a stable relationship. As can be seen in Graph 2.10, the largest proportion of the interviewed gang members (37.5%) had been with their partner for more than three years.

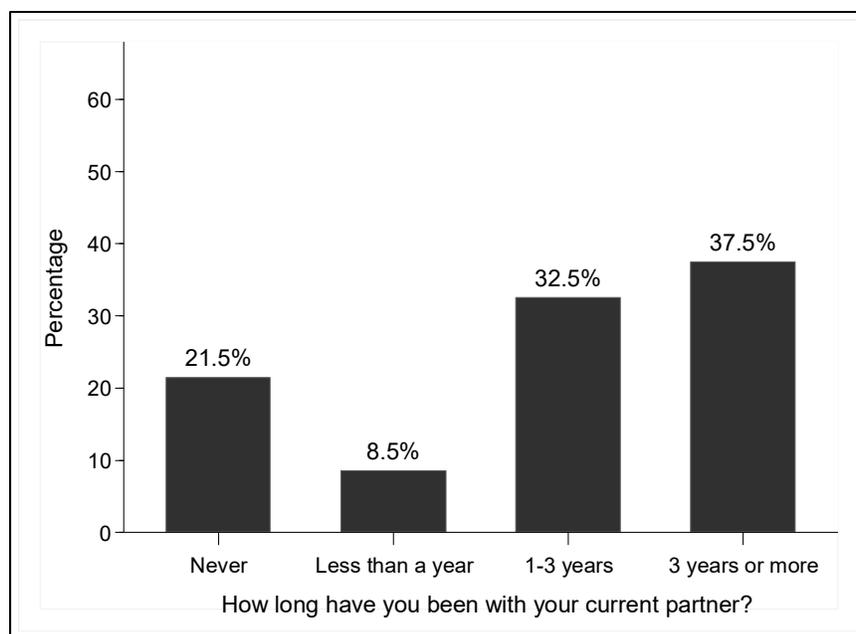
¹⁰ These results are addressed in more detail in Section 3 of the report.

Table 2.1. Household composition of gang members in El Salvador, 2016

With whom the surveyed gang members live with currently or had lived prior to their arrest:	Gang (in percentages)				
	All	MS-13	18 Revol	18 Sureños	Others
Wife / husband; girlfriend / boyfriend; partner	32.9	31.6	27.8	31.6	41.5
Parents / step-parents	21.0	20.7	21.0	26.2	14.6
Only with the mother	19.7	20.6	24.1	16.7	18.5
Grandparents and / or aunts / uncles	8.2	8.4	8.3	6.9	9.3
Other relatives	6.7	6.3	5.3	8.0	6.8
Nobody, lives alone	5.1	5.1	6.8	3.6	5.8
Only with the father	3.3	3.9	3.8	3.3	1.5
Children / grandchildren	1.7	2.4	0.7	1.4	0.5
Other gang members	0.8	0.5	1.5	0.7	1.0
Other	0.7	0.3	0.7	1.4	0.5



Graph 2.9. The importance of family aspects among gang members

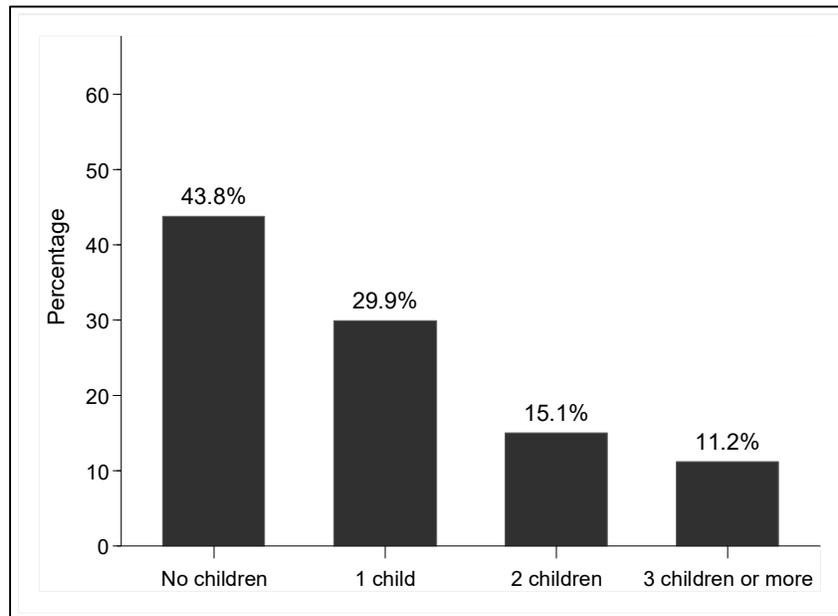


Graph 2.10. Partner relationship among gang members

Another common theme in terms of gang membership is early parenthood. A premature transition to adult life among teenagers may lead these individuals to leave school at a young age, which in turn reduces one's chances of finding a stable job (Thornberry 2003, De Hoyos Navarro, Popova et al. 2016). The majority of gang members surveyed (56.2%) have children (see Graph 2.11), with higher prevalence of parenthood among females. The percentage of females with children accounts for 87.7% of the surveyed female gang members, while the percentage of parenthood accounts for 52.9% among male gang members. Notably, 40.2% of the individuals who have children became parents before finishing school, or prior to turning 18 years old. Moreover, 31.7% had their first child between 18 and 20 years old, while only 10.7% became parents at 25 or older. There is also a small but statistically significant correlation between the age of having one's first child and the age of joining the gang. In other words, the younger individuals in the survey had a child, the earlier they joined a gang. Parenthood brings additional responsibilities and the need for resources in order to maintain the family becomes a pressing issue. In the case of minors, the need for resources often do not allow young parents to finish school. For those young parents who do manage to finish school, the lack of professional opportunities can push them to join the gang in order to maintain their families.

During the in-depth interviews as well as the surveys, many gang members explained the importance of their children. Children can be a motivating factor that can help individuals decide to calm down their gang activities or leave the gang as the life of a gang member is often quite difficult and dangerous. Gang members who begin to think about the possibility that they will not live long enough to see their children grow older can be incentivized to leave the gang. This is consistent with other research studies about gangs and gang desistance (Ward 2013; Varriale 2008; Pyrooz and Decker 2011).

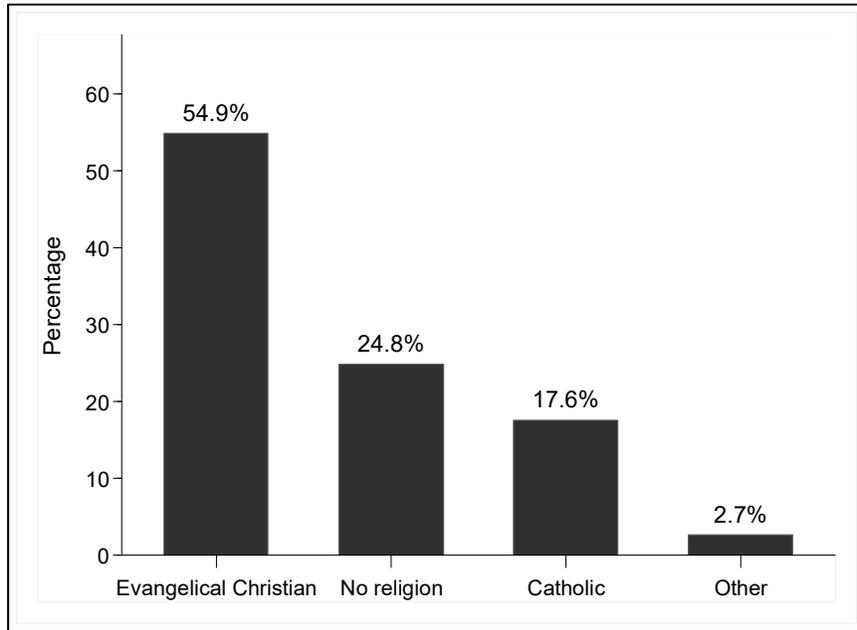
Overall, family-related problems present a significant risk factor that increases the likelihood of a youth joining a gang. The gang is especially influential among teenagers from disadvantaged family environments and is exacerbated by the apparent absence of governmental support for family-oriented programs. Thus, the data reveal the importance of the strong family bonds in the youth's lives and suggest a need for the implementation of community-based, family-oriented prevention programs, which is consisted with other studies (Farrington et al. 2003; Curry et al. 2003; Sherman 1997).



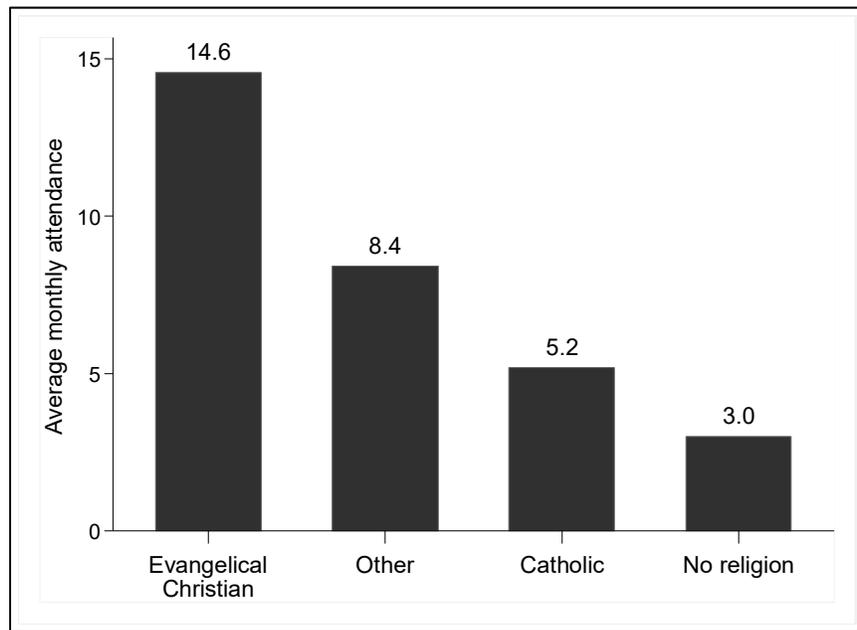
Graph 2.11. Number of children that gang members have

2.4. The importance of religion

What is the relationship between religion and gang membership? As numerous studies on gangs show, one of the main functions of a gang is to generate an alternative identity for its members (Garot 2010, 2007; Decker and Van Winkle 1996a). During some interviews, gang members stated that gangs are a form of social organization that provide marginalized youth with a collective identity and a sense of belonging. For instance, one former gang member interviewed as a subject-matter expert, *Pandillero* 15, said that youth often lack an identity and the gang can help provide individuals with an identity. Churches also can serve as organizations that give individuals a sense of belonging. Religious organizations, especially Evangelical churches, have been filling the void in the disintegrated communities and have provided gang members with alternative venues for dealing with personal crises (Peterson et al. 2001; Brennehan 2011, 2013; Cruz 2016; Gomez and Vasquez 2001; Salas-Wright et al. 2013a; Flores 2013). When asked about the importance of religion in their life during the survey, the overwhelming majority of the respondents (95.3%) answered that their relationship with God was very important to them.



Graph 2.12. Religious affiliation of gang members



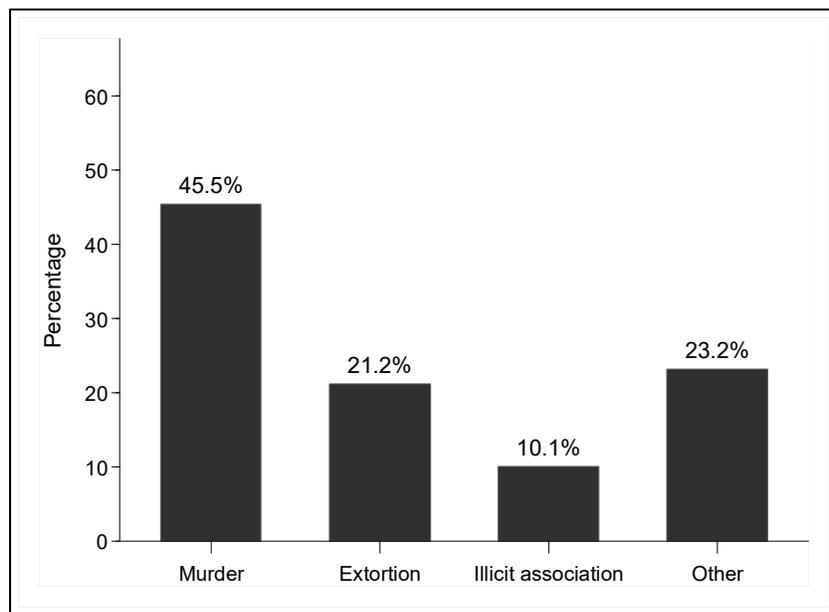
Graph 2.13. Church attendance by religious affiliation among gang members

Churches, especially Catholic and Evangelical Christian organizations, have played an important role in the life of disadvantaged communities laden with gangs. Some churches participated in the 2012 truce between the gangs (Dudley 2013). Thus, churches have

represented an intermediary institution between gang members and the government in El Salvador. As such, religion can be used as an important venue for reaching out to active gang members. When asked about their religious affiliation, most of the gang members, 75.2%, consider themselves religious. Evangelicals comprised the largest group, 54.9% of all surveyed individuals (see Graph 2.12). They also had higher levels of religiosity than members of other religious denominations, attending a religious service 15 times per month on average (see Graph 2.13). Self-identified Catholics, both practicing and non-practicing, constituted 17.6% of the individuals surveyed; other religious groups, such as Protestants and Mormons, were much less common among gang members (Graph 2.12). Affiliation with Pentecostal churches varies depending on the condition of gang membership as they are less common among active gang members (40.6%) than among ex-gang members (64.1%).

2.5. History of criminal activity and violence

Violence and fighting are central elements in the process of gang formation and gang activities (Hume 2007; Cruz 2007, 2010; Cruz et al. 2004). They are part of the system of threats that shape the dynamics of gang life and membership (Decker and Van Winkle 1996b). The most common crimes among gang members surveyed in prisons were homicide and extortion. Out of 93% of the surveyed gang members formally accused of a crime, 45.5% have been accused of murder, 21.2% of extortion, and 10.1% of illicit associations (Graph 2.14). The data also reveal that gangs differ in their level of violence and the type of crimes in which they focus the most.



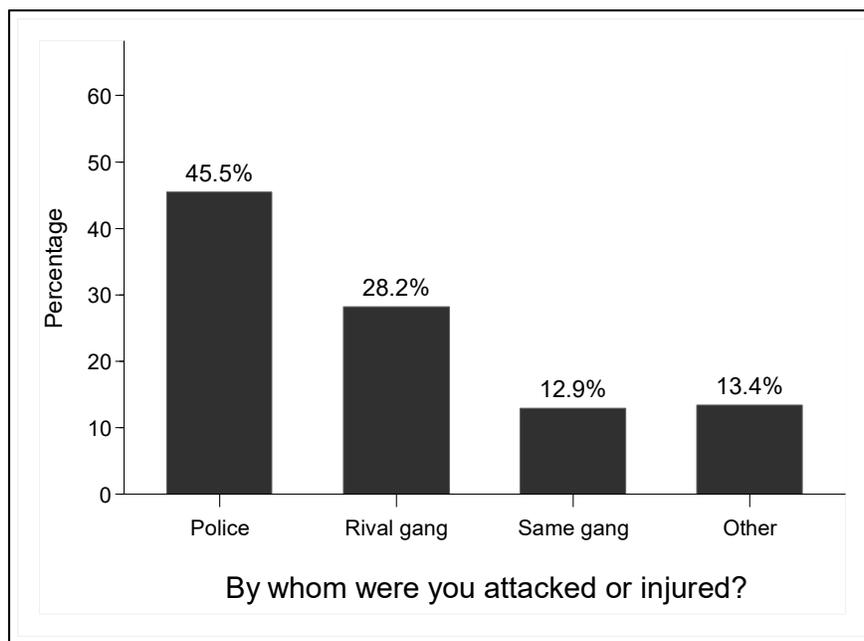
Graph 2.14. Crimes of which the gang members are accused

Table 2.2 shows the comparison between crime accusations across different gangs. Unsurprisingly, according to the results, MS-13, considered the largest and most powerful gang, accounts for the majority of homicide accusations. Nearly half of the MS-13 members interviewed in the survey (48.7%) declared that they were accused of murder. Although the 18th

Street *Revolucionarios* and the 18th Street *Sureños* are warring factions of the same gang, their reported criminal behavior regarding murders follows a similar pattern. *Sureños*, however, tend to report more accusations of extortion than *Revolucionarios*. Notably, the smaller gangs are responsible for a significant portion of extortion charges. 27.8% of the members of peripheral gangs (*Maquina*, Mao-Mao & *Mirada Locos*) said that they are accused of extortion. At the same time, illicit association is a more common accusation for the 18th Street gangs than for the others. While the portion of other criminal charges, such as armed robbery or drug trafficking, is relatively small when taken separately, together these crimes account for a significant amount of accusations charged against MS-13, the 18th Street *Sureños*, and the smaller gangs.¹¹

Table 2.2. Crime indictments of gang members according to gang organizations (in percentages)

Gang membership	Accused crime of gang members			
	Murder	Extortion	Illicit association	Other
All	42.5	19.8	9.4	28.3
MS-13	48.7	19.2	6.7	25.4
18 <i>Revolucionarios</i>	36.8	10.5	18.8	33.8
18 <i>Sureños</i>	37.1	19.6	13.4	29.8
Other gangs	35.6	27.8	5.8	30.7



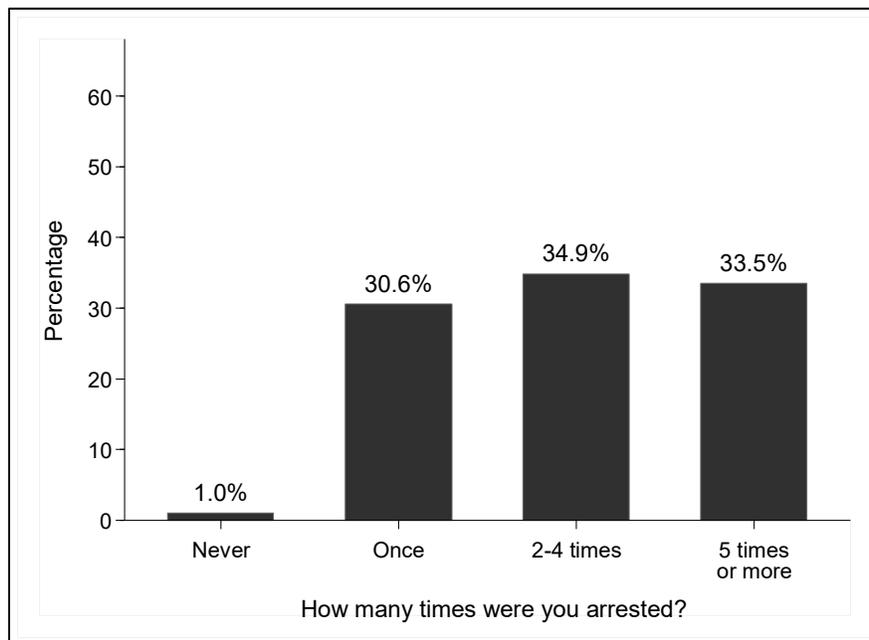
Graph 2.15. Perpetrators of the attacks or aggression against gang members

Despite the widespread perception of gang members as perpetrators of violence, it is not uncommon for them to be victimized themselves: 17.5% of the interviewees, approximately

¹¹ Other criminal charges include: assault, street brawl, armed robbery, drug trafficking, weapon possession, rape, and kidnapping.

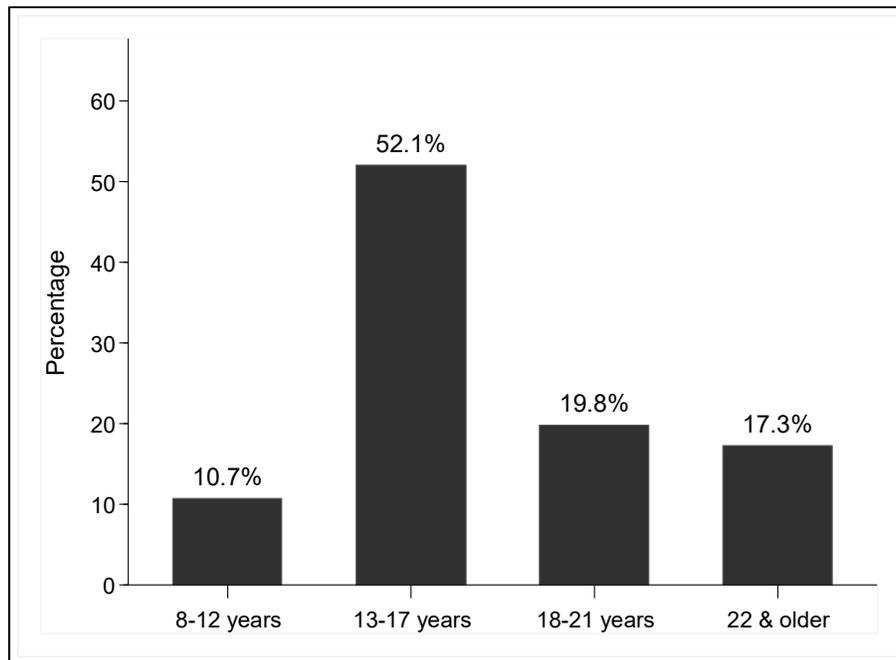
equally distributed across gangs and age groups, said that they had suffered from an attack or aggression in the past year. The data show that the perception of gang members is that they are mostly attacked by the police (45.5%), rather than by members of a rival (28.2%) or one's own gang (12.9%) (see Graph 2.15). Moreover, gang members who occupy a leadership position claimed to have suffered attacks about 1.5 times more frequently than soldiers or collaborators. Leaders also experience violence against their loved ones more often than members of lower ranks within the gang hierarchy. This may be related to the number of years a gang member is active, as leaders tend to stay longer in a gang and to be exposed to higher levels of violence. Overall, 42.1% of the respondents said that someone close to them, a friend or a family member, had been murdered in the past year. Most of the reported victims (42.5%) belonged to the family of a gang member, 33.3% of respondents had lost a fellow gang member, and 24.1% had lost a friend who was not in the gang. These numbers show that gang members live in a highly unsecure and violent environment, with violence often affecting their families.

As part of tougher anti-crime policies, gang members have been incarcerated at an alarming pace. As Graph 2.16 shows, half of gang members have been arrested multiple times, which implies that the penitentiary system does not deter them from committing new crimes. On average, a gang member is arrested six times. This becomes even more worrisome when taking into account conditions of the prisons and detention centers in El Salvador. Even for at risk youth who do not belong to a gang, there is a risk of joining a gang in prison. Young people become familiarized with gang structures once they enter the prison system as much of the gang leadership is behind bars. Given the overcrowded prison conditions in El Salvador, gang members experience “schools of crime” while incarcerated (Metaal and Youngers 2011; Arrarás et al. 2015; Skarbek 2011).



Graph 2.16. Number of arrests of gang members

The average age of the first arrest among survey respondents is 17 years old. However, the majority of gang members (62.8%) first experienced the Salvadoran penitentiary system while they were still minors (see Graph 2.17). The analysis of the data also found that there is a strong association between juvenile detention and gender. Among the surveyed men, the proportion of those who had been detained as minors was 52%, which is three times more than among the female gang members (17.5%). In other words, the prevalence of juvenile detention is higher among male gang members than among female gang members.



Graph 2.17. Age of first arrest of gang members

3. The gang and gang life

This section explores the characteristics of the gang organizations and the reasons why some Salvadoran youth decide to join youth gangs. It also examines the reasons why gang life is of particular importance to these groups and the youth that gravitate toward them. The section ends with a reflection about the current gang dynamics in El Salvador, based on the results of the survey with gang members and ex-gang members.

3.1. The characteristics of gang membership

This section provides an overview of the results of the survey questions about the structure of the gang. It, however, does not attempt to describe how the main gang organizations are structured as such an endeavor would have required a different methodological approach. Instead, this section seeks to explain the main features of the group organization from the perspective of the individual experiences of its members.

Table 3.1 presents the results of the relationship of the respondent with the gang according to gang membership. Nearly 40% of the sampled population are still active members of the gang, while 42% said that they no longer belong to the gang. The rest of the respondents either stated that they are in the process of calming down, meaning that they consider themselves still in the gang but do not participate in its activities (15%), or said that they were aspiring members (“wannabes”).¹² Among the surveyed respondents, the relationship with the gang varies depending on gang membership and, especially, age. Members of the peripheral gangs tended to recognize more frequently that they were active members of the gang than those in the two largest gangs, Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street *Sureños*.

According to the data, age is the variable that mainly determines the relationship of the person with the gang. The majority of younger individuals, those younger than 17 years old, are active members of the gang. This relationship decreases to 21.3% among the older individuals. In contrast, the percentages of respondents who are in the process of “calming down” and who said they have left the gang increases significantly with age.

¹² For analytical purposes in other parts of the report, active gang members and wannabes are treated as a single category of active gang members, whereas “calming down” and non-members are treated as ex-gang members.

Table 3.1. Relation to the gang according to variables (in percentages)

Variables	Relation to the gang			
	Active member	Calming down	Not a member anymore	Wannabe
<i>All</i>	39.0	15.0	42.2	3.8
<i>Gang membership</i>				
MS-13	26.8	12.7	56.3	4.3
18 Revolucionarios	41.3	24.1	31.6	3.0
18 Sureños	28.4	23.3	43.3	5.1
Other gangs	86.3	4.9	7.8	1.0
<i>Age</i>				
13 to 17	75.0	6.5	17.4	1.1
18 to 25	36.1	13.4	46.6	4.0
26 to 35	31.4	17.9	45.5	5.2
36 and older	21.3	25.5	50.3	1.9

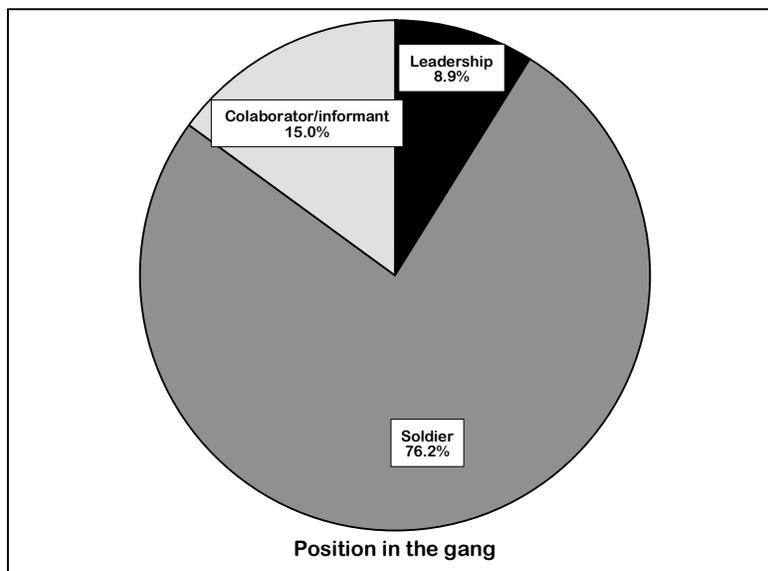
Moreover, the survey reveals substantial information about the position the respondents have—or had—within the structure of the gang. A reclassification of those responses allowed for the establishment of three general categories within the gangs’ organization: leadership roles, regular members, and collaborators. The distribution of the sample according to their position in the structure of the gang is presented in Graph 3.2.

Table 3.2. Classification of positions in the gang organization

Position in the gang	Roles
Leadership positions	Ranflero
	Program leader
	Corredor
	Palabrero
	Segunda palabra
	Segundo corredor
	Clique leader
	Encargado
Regular members	Homeboy
	Brincado
	Artillero
	Ejecutor
	Activo
	Gatillero
	Sicario
	Soldado
Collaborators/informants	Chequeo
	Observacion
	Poste
	Paro
	Informante
	Girlfriend/wife of gang member
	Movedor de armas/drogas
	Civilian

Although the structure of the gangs is in constant flux, and it changes from organization to organization, some in-depth interviews provided a detailed description of some roles in the structure and how the members climbed the organizational ladder:

“The gang is a process. We have what is called “*hacer paro*,” to do observation, be “*chequeo*” and be “homeboy,” which is a high rank, [earned] in stages. *Paro* means to inform the gang that the police is close, and it also involves buying things for them. In observation, the homies are watching you, how one behaves, if truly one has the pride and character to be a gang member. Then after one to two months, to be *chequeo*, you have to kill a gang member from the opposite gang. Each stage involves different murders. [...] From *chequeo* to homeboy is around one year, and different murders, they are around 10-7 [homicides].” (Pandillero 3).

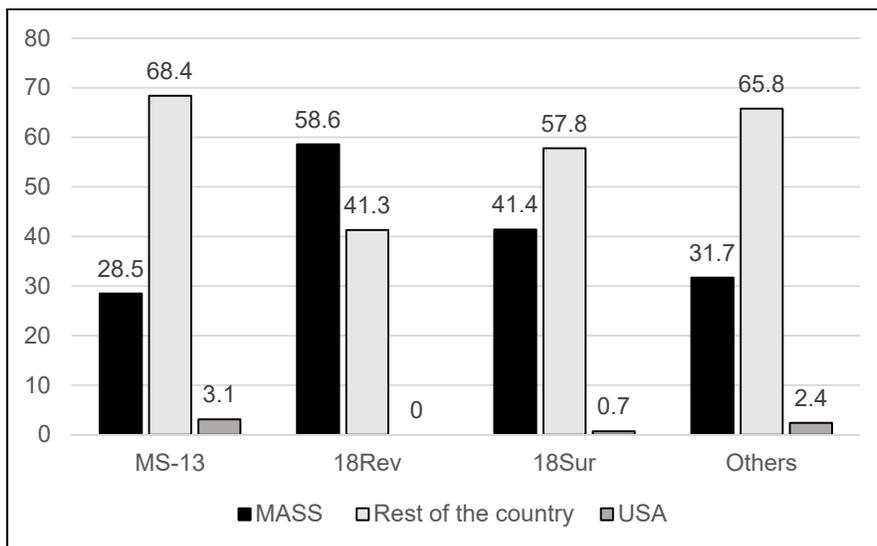


Graph 3.1. Position of the respondent in the gang

As expected, the majority of gang members (76.2%) had a regular position within the gang organization. Nearly 9% of respondents said that they held a leadership position, while 15% introduced themselves as gang collaborators. Among female gang members, 42% stated that they were collaborators or informants, underlining the reduced role that women tend to play within the gang structure in comparison with their male peers (Santacruz-Giralt and Ranum 2010). Other differences exist among age groups. As expected, positions of leadership are more frequent among the oldest group of respondents (13.5%) than the rest of the respondents, while collaborators are most common among the youngest individuals (21.8%).

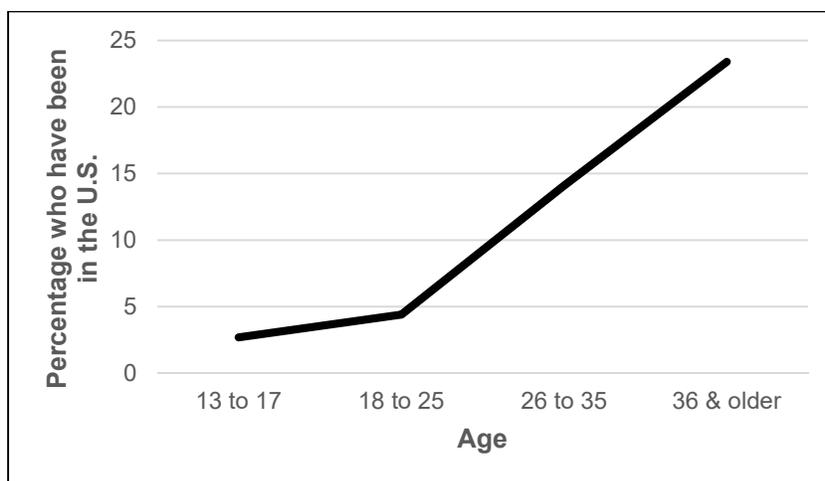
Where did the respondents join the gang? According to the survey results, the vast majority entered the gang structures in El Salvador: 97% of them said that they joined the gang in a Salvadoran city or town. Only one in every three people stated that they had enrolled in the metropolitan area of San Salvador, the rest joined in different parts of the country, which include all parts of the Salvadoran territory. There are some interesting differences based on gang

membership. For example, most of the members of the 18th Street *Sureños* and, especially, Mara Salvatrucha “jumped into” the gang in cities and regions outside the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (MASS); in contrast, members of the 18th Street *Revolucionarios*, the relatively recent split from the 18th Street Gang, mostly enlisted in the San Salvador area (see Graph 3.2). The data also show that very few respondents joined the gang in the United States—or in any other country.



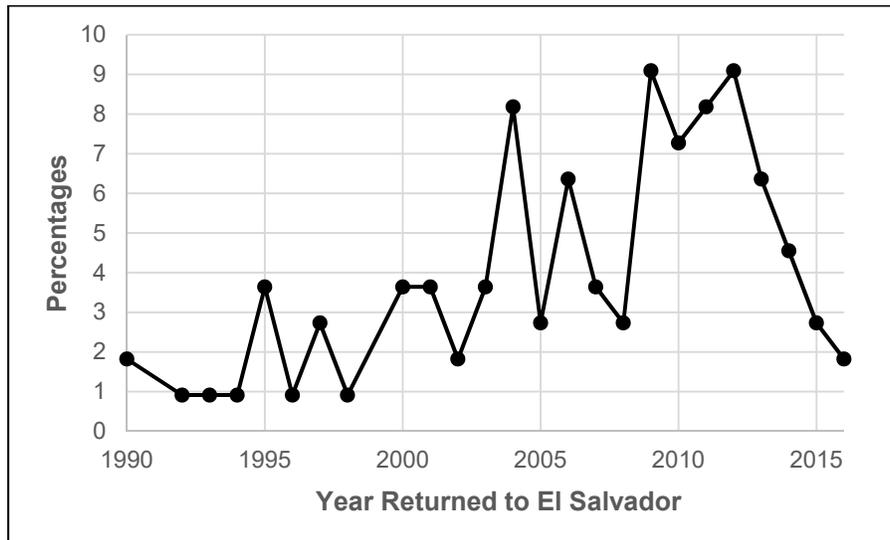
Graph 3.2. City where people joined the gang (in percentages)

When directly asked whether they have ever been in the U.S., nine out of ten respondents (90.8%) said no. However, this percentage changes according to their age as the older interviewees reported being in the U.S. in significantly larger proportions than the younger ones (see Graph 3.3). Although most gang members have never been in the United States, the data indicate that the older generations have had more contact with the American experience than the younger ones. These results may explain the early mark on Salvadoran gangs that is usually attributed to migration. However, the impact of migration is usually overstated today.



Graph 3.3. Proportion of respondents who have been in the U.S. by age

For those individuals who reported being in the U.S. in the past, the gang survey also provides information about the circumstances of their return. 36.4% of those who have been in the U.S. revealed that they had been deported back to El Salvador, while the rest (63.6%) said that they returned voluntarily. In addition, most of the gang members and former gang members who were in the United States returned between the years 2004 and 2012 (see Graph 3.4).



Graph 3.4. Year in which people who were in the U.S. returned to El Salvador (in percentages)

The survey data provide little evidence of frequent contact between the respondents and gang members living in the United States. Only 6.6% of the interviewees said that they have connections with peers in the U.S. This percentage is a bit higher among those who are active members of a gang organization (9.4%) and even higher for those individuals who declared to belong—or have belonged—to the peripheral gang organizations (Mirada Locos, Máquina, and Mao-Mao) (16.1%).

Youth gangs in El Salvador are structured in different ways according to each organization. Different subject matter-experts and retired gang members interviewed for this study confirmed that Mara Salvatrucha has a more advanced and regulated structure than the other gangs. MS-13’s structure includes different levels of management, which typically start with the clique as its lowest operational level, that is, at the neighborhood level. Some cliques that have managed to expand beyond their original neighborhood form 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 chapters: one that is formed by leaders serving time in the national prisons, and the other which is comprised of principals operating on the street.

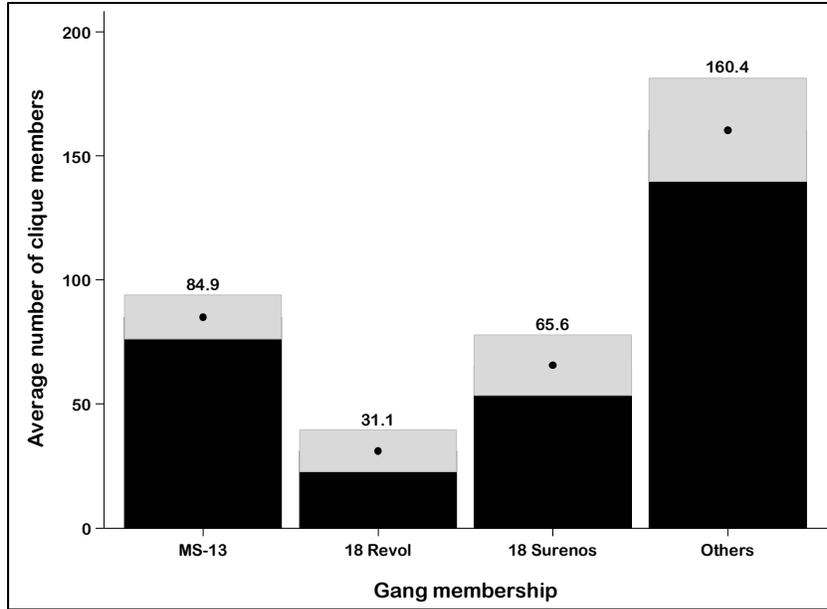
In contrast, the 18th Street groups are less well-structured in terms of their organization. In many cases, it was difficult to establish a unique organizational pattern based on the statements of the experts interviewed. However, and according to some informants, the 18th Street groups divide their organization in “*canchas*”, which operate roughly between the neighborhood level and the city level, and “*tribus*,” which extend to the regional scale. With this information, the survey attempted to collect information about the basic organizational unit that is recognized throughout the whole spectrum of the Salvadoran gang world, namely, the clique or *cancha*.

According to the survey data, the average clique has 87 people, including male and female youth. This is a very high number due to the wide range of memberships among cliques. In several cases, respondents reported cliques of more than 500 members. A general distribution in groups is provided in Table 3.3. According to the table, 13.4% of the people interviewed said that their clique had 10 members or less, whereas 27.2% mentioned that their clique consisted of 10 to 30 people. The rest of the respondents indicated even higher numbers of people in the cliques.

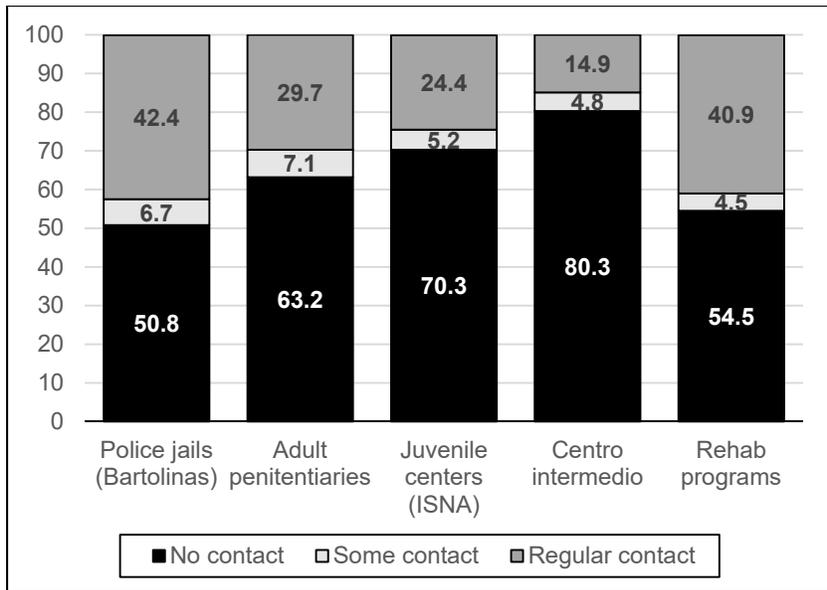
Table 3.3
Number of gang members per clique

Range	Frequency	Percentage
10 members or less	141	13.4
10 to 30 members	287	27.2
30 to 60 members	223	21.2
60 to 100 members	112	10.6
More than 100 members	291	27.6

The data suggest that there is a difference in the number of members per clique according to the gang organization. Respondents enlisted in the peripheral gangs (Mirada Locos, Mao-Mao, and Máquina) claimed that their cliques are usually large, with an average number of 160 people per clique. Yet the 18th Street *Sureños* averaged only 65.6 members per clique. This average, however, is significantly higher than the average of 18th Street *Revolucionarios* cells (31.1), but lower than the average for MS-13 (84.9). Such diverse averages may reflect substantial differences in the structures of gang organizations, with the 18th Street *Revolucionarios* having the smallest units, while MS-13 has the most members per clique among the major gang organizations.



Graph 3.5. Average membership per clique according to gang organization



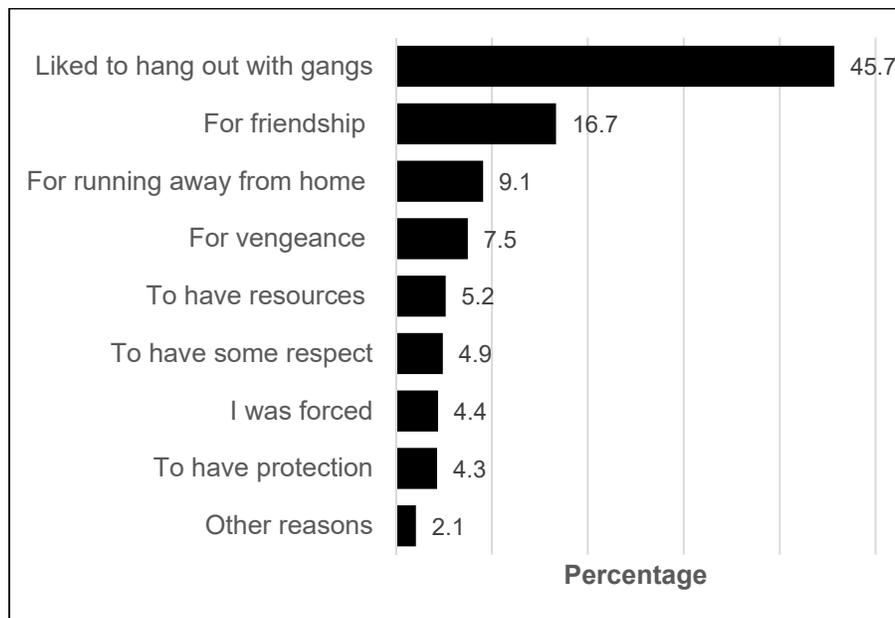
Graph 3.6. Frequency of contact with clique according to type of center

The survey results also indicate that most incarcerated interviewees do not have frequent contact with their fellow gang members. Nearly 29% of the overall sample have regular contact with their peers in the clique. Although most of the population in the survey was interviewed inside the Salvadoran prisons and juvenile detention centers, an important percentage of the gang members who remain in jail stay in touch with their cliques and organization. In fact, gang members manage to remain in contact with their peers in the police jails (*bartolinas*): 42.4% of the respondents stated that they are in regular contact with their colleagues. On the contrary, the inmates incarcerated in the Centro Intermedio de Ilobasco, a detention center that houses youth

who turned 18 years old while in the juvenile center system, show the lowest percentage of frequent contact with their colleagues in the clique. In this case, more than 80% say that they do not have any contact at all.

3.2. The reasons to join the gang

The main reasons for joining the gang still revolve around the excitement of gang membership. Nearly 46% of the population interviewed said that they joined the group because they liked to hang out with other youth and gang members, while 16.7% contended that the group provided them with close friends and “brothers.” One in every ten gang members or former gang members said that they enlisted in a gang as a mechanism for running away from home. Some gang members and former gang members stated that they joined the gang for instrumental reasons, meaning that they enrolled in the gang with the purpose of achieving some specific objectives. For example, 7.5% said that they wanted to avenge a close friend’s death, while 5.2% mentioned that they sought out the gang as a way to obtain resources (e.g. money, drugs, women, etc.) In addition, 4.3% of respondents joined the gang in order to be protected from their enemies. Finally, a small group of interviewees said that they were forced into the organization. These results are remarkably similar to the results obtained in the first survey with gang members in El Salvador conducted 20 years ago (Cruz and Portillo Peña 1998). Moreover, 46% said that they joined the gangs for “hanging out with gangs,” 10.3% stated that they jumped into the gangs for “friendship,” and 12.3% contended that family problems pushed them into the gang (p. 64).

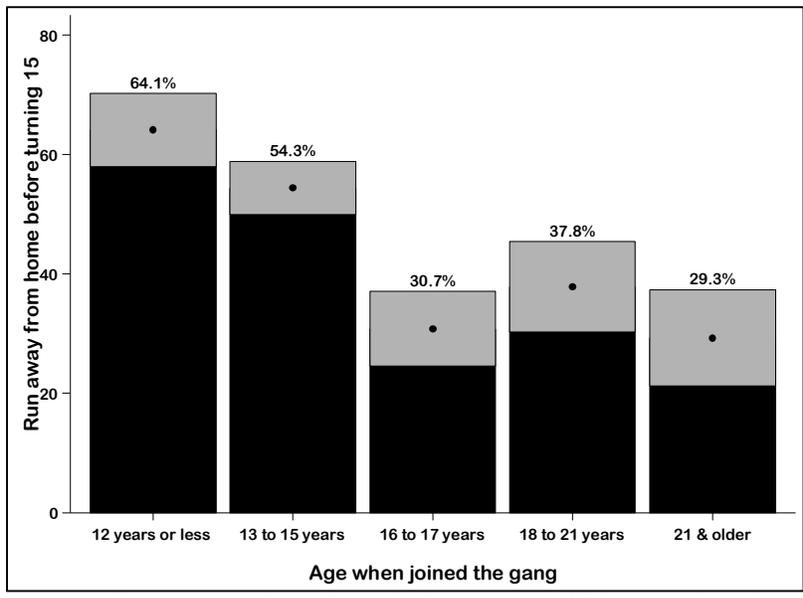


Graph 3.7. Reasons to join the gang (in percentages)

According to the results of the survey, the reasons for joining the gangs remain very similar across different group memberships. MS-13 and 18th Street gang members, both *Sureños* and *Revolucionarios*, highlight the same reasons as to why they decided to join their respective gangs. However, when looking at the differences by gender, female interviewees tend to mention

reasons of leisure less often (“Like to hang out with friends,” 24.6%) than males. More females joined the gang due to family problems (“Run away from home, 21%) than male members. Moreover, 12.3% of females stated that they were forced to join the gang.

Furthermore, the reported reasons to join an organization differ based on the age in which the person joined the gang. For instance, “jumping into the gang” to hang out on the streets appears to be more prevalent among young individuals. Reasons related to family problems and forced recruitment become prevalent as people become older. In fact, when asked whether they ran away from home before turning 15 years old, nearly half of the people interviewed (47.2%) said yes; the rest of the population surveyed (52.8%) stated that they had not run away from their family’s home. There appears to be a close relationship between when young people fled from their homes and the moment in which they joined the gang. As shown in Graph 3.2, 64.1% of gang members and former gang members who joined the gang at age 12 or less had run away from home. This percentage decreases to 54.3% among those who joined the gang between 13 and 15 years old and is even less (40%) among those people who joined the gang at an older age. Therefore, it seems that an important driver causing people to join a gang, especially at a young age, is having fled from home.



Graph 3.8. Percentage who ran away from home before turning 15 by age when they joined the gang

The survey provides evidence that family plays a major role for a significant segment of the youth surveyed that left their homes and joined a gang. The survey asked respondents who said that they had run away from home before turning 15 the reasons why they left home at such an early age. Twenty percent of them indicated that they had been abused at home, 14.9% cited family neglect, and others mentioned various family-related problems (e.g. parent was an alcoholic, parents’ divorce, or the father was a gang member). In sum, more than half of active gang and former gang members (51%) who reported having left their home mentioned some family problems (see Table 3.4). However, an important percentage (29%) said that they ran

away from home specifically to be in the gang. Other people indicated that they moved out from home looking for a job (9.6%) or to be with their partner (4.4%).

Although family problems seem to be an equally important factor in male and female respondents (50.8% of males fled home due to family problems compared to 52.7% of females), the main differences between men and women is that 31.2% of males indicated that they had left home to be in the gang compared to only 9.1% of females. However, nearly 25% of women said that they left home to be with a partner, while only 2.1% of males had the same response (see Table 3.4). In sum, these results suggest that problems and conflicts in the family household continue to help push people to join gangs.

Table 3.4. Reasons to leave home before 15 years old according to gender (in percentages)

Condition	Reasons to run away from home				
	Family problems	To be in the gang	Looking for a job	To be with partner	Other reasons
All	51.0	29.0	9.6	4.4	6.0
Males	50.8	31.2	10.0	2.2	5.9
Females	52.7	9.1	5.4	25.4	7.3

Hence, to understand why people join the gang, it is still important to look at the interaction in the relations between the youth, the family, and the *barrio* peers. Asked about the commitment of young gang members to the gang organizations, a former gang member summarized these relationships in the following way:

“[...] We go back to the family problems, to family disintegration, because if there is something that traps you so much in the gang is the fact that one, as a kid, wants some hugs, some pats, some conversations with your parents. In many cases, we don't have them, as children we don't have them. Therefore, one starts getting involved in the gang, starts meeting kids in the gang, in the *mará*. They provide everything that parents cannot provide, [...], and that traps you so much that one ends up falling in that situation [the gang]” (*Pandillero 17*).

Thus, the relationship with peers are some of the features of gang life that remain attractive to the youth who decide to join gangs in El Salvador. Previous research inside and outside Central America has pointed to the relevance of aspects such as friendship, feelings of respect, and self-assurance (Klein and Maxson 2006; Spergel 1990; Savenije 2009b; Cruz and Portillo Peña 1998). The results of this study seem to confirm previous findings, but they offer some significant variations about the way gang members and former gang members assess the benefits of gang membership. In general, and despite the fact that 27% of the people interviewed said that there were no benefits, nearly 28% revealed that the main benefit to being in the gang was to have friends and friendships. However, more than 15% of respondents indicated that the most important advantage of being in the gang was to have access to money and resources, which included drugs, weapons, and women; a similar percentage cited having power while others talked about having respect in the gang (9.2%) as well as freedom (4.3%). In other words, gangs are critical because they are vehicles for friendships, yet for many they also serve as means for obtaining money and resources. Although feelings of respect were cited by nearly one in every 10 respondents, they seem to play a lesser role in the minds of contemporary gang

members in comparison with studies conducted with Salvadoran gangs 10 to 20 years ago (Cruz and Portillo Peña 1998; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman 2001).

Interestingly, the perception about the benefits obtained from being part of a gang organization vary to some degree depending on the age of the respondent, his or her gang membership status, and position within the gang structure. On the other hand, no significant results were found based on the affiliation of a certain gang (MS-13, 18th Street, or others). In terms of age, however, the idea that gangs are places for friendships is more prevalent among minors (13 to 17-year-olds) than among 26 to 35 year-olds. In addition, younger respondents tend to value respect more as a benefit of gang membership than older respondents (see Table 3.5). By the same token, people who are 26 and older tend to see no benefits in the gang. This might be an effect of the association of age and status in the gang. Former gang members are, on average, older than active gang members, and hence more disapproving of the life in the gang. In fact, there are also differences according to the respondent's status in the gang: non-active members are more inclined to believe that there are no benefits associated with being in the gang and that access to money and resources are perks in the gang than when compared to active members. In contrast, the latter lean more to mention friendship and power as benefits of gang membership.

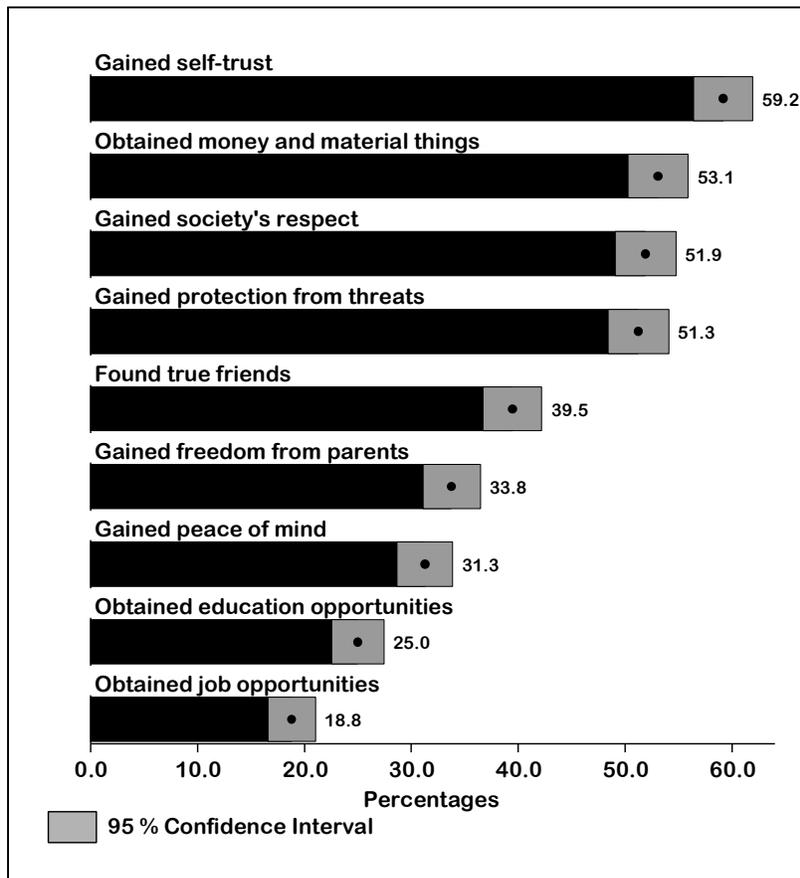
Table 3.5. Benefits of being a gang member according to variables

Conditions	Benefits of being a gang member						
	None	Friendships	Money & resources	Power	Respect	Freedom	Other reasons
<i>All</i>	27.2	27.7	15.7	14.6	9.2	3.7	1.8
<i>Age</i>							
13 to 17 years-old	19.6	36.4	11.9	17.4	10.9	2.7	1.1
18 to 25 years-old	26.1	26.9	17.7	14.5	9.7	3.8	1.1
26 to 35 years-old	31.7	26.6	15.6	14.4	8.9	3.5	2.3
36 and older	29.1	29.8	13.5	12.1	5.7	5.7	4.3
<i>Condition in the gang</i>							
Non-active member	30.7	24.7	19.6	11.2	8.8	3.4	1.6
Active member	21.4	32.6	9.7	20.0	9.9	4.3	2.1
<i>Position in the gang</i>							
Leadership	25.5	10.4	33.9	8.5	15.1	3.8	2.8
Common member	25.4	30.8	13.8	15.9	9.0	3.5	1.5
Collaborator/informant	36.9	22.3	14.5	11.7	6.7	5.0	2.8

The condition that most clearly seems to determine the opinions about the benefits of gang membership is the position of the respondent in relation to the gang (current or former member). Those who defined themselves as collaborators of the gang, rather than full members, mentioned more frequently that they see no benefits of being in the gang. In contrast, respondents who said that they occupy some leadership position in the gang organization were more likely to say that access to power and resources were the main advantages of gang

membership (nearly 34%); they also cited respect more frequently than any other group of respondents. Moreover, the results show that only one in every ten leaders (10.4%) referred to friendship as a benefit of being in the gang. However, the group of gang members and former gang members who placed more value on the benefits of friendship in the gang were the common associates (soldiers, “*gatilleros*,” regular members, etc.). Nearly one in every three regular gang members said that the benefits of gang membership were the friends and solidarity that they have found in the organization. They also mentioned power as a benefit in greater proportion than other groups of respondents. In sum, the data reveal that the personal position in the gang structure determines the views about the advantages of being in the gang.

The opinions about the benefit of being in a gang come from a single question in which gang members and former gang members selected the response. In addition, the survey included a variety of questions addressing the things that individuals consider to have gained by joining the gang in order to better understand the elements that factor into the person’s decision to associate and remain in a gang in El Salvador. Specifically, the things referred to are: a) autonomy and freedom from parents; b) education and training opportunities; c) real friends; d) money and material resources; e) sense of unity with people like him or her; f) peace of mind; g) respect from the community and society overall; h) protection against threats; i) job opportunities; and j) self-trust. Graph 3.9 presents the results of the items, enabling a side by side comparison of the results.



Graph 3.9. Things gained or obtained by being a member of a gang (in percentages)

According to the results, for 60% of the respondents, the most common gain of being in the gang organization was self-trust, meaning that they developed self-esteem by participating in the group. More than 50% of the interviewees mentioned money and resources (53.1%), respect from their communities and society in general (51.9%), and protection against threats coming from rival gang members, police, etc. (51.3%). Although friendship was mentioned as a benefit of gang membership in one of the previous questions, when contrasted with other gains obtained in the cliques, less than 40% stated that they had made real friends in the gang. In other words, compared with self-trust, respect, resources, and protection, fewer people with a record of gang membership value friendship. Yet an even smaller proportion of respondents indicated freedom from their parents (33.8%) and peace of mind (31.3%) as benefits of gang membership. Finally, and as expected, less than a quarter of gang members mentioned opportunities for education and employment as benefits from hanging out with gangs.

It is important to note that data from the previous studies not only underline the importance of aspects of self-esteem and the feelings of being respected for those people who opt for gang life but also show the relevance of access to money and resources as well as protection from threats coming from rivals and the police. According to surveys conducted in the 1990s and mid-2000s (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman 2001; Cruz and Portillo Peña 1998), the main drivers of gang membership revolved around self-respect, friendships, and identity. At the present time, although those elements seem to continue to play a critical role in the gang membership trajectory, they are accompanied by gang members' concerns about resources and protection from threats.

Table 3.6. Percentage of respondents who experienced gains, according to gang membership

	Gang membership			
	MS-13	18 Revol	18 Sureños	Others
Self-trust	56.9	61.6	49.4	77.1
Money and resources	58.1	44.4	49.1	49.7
Society's respect	53.7	48.9	44.4	59.0
Protection from threats	54.2	44.3	43.6	57.6
True friends	32.6	43.6	36.0	61.0
Freedom from parents	35.5	38.3	28.4	33.2
Peace of mind	27.8	34.6	24.3	48.3
Education opportunities	24.7	26.3	18.5	33.6
Job opportunities	18.9	17.3	13.4	26.8

The importance of access to money and resources to some gangs is more evident when the results are compared across gang membership. The most cited gains according to active and former gang members of MS-13 were precisely money, resources, and protection from threats (see Table 3.6). In contrast, associates of the 18th Street *Revolucionarios* valued more the traditional aspects of self-esteem and society's respect. The followers of other gang organizations (Mirada Locos, Mao-Mao, Máquina, etc.) also preponderantly valued self-trust and friendships as the main benefits of gang involvement.

In sum, the data collected by the survey with more than 1,000 gang members and former gang members corroborates findings from previous studies in El Salvador and elsewhere (Ranum

2011; Andino and Jiménez 2009; Cruz 2007). Young people join gang organizations because they find friendship and respect and improve their self-esteem by participating in gang activities. These are still important elements when making the decision to join a gang. However, the data also suggest that family issues may play an important role in pushing youth into considering enrollment in the gang. Many people who ran away from home at an early age to join the gang had a history of family conflicts that range from abuse to neglect. This is why aspects of self-trust and people's respect are viewed as benefits provided by the gang organization. Any program addressing the issue of gang membership should consider issues of family relationships and the self-esteem of adolescents and young people. However, they also should consider the fact that, according to the current results, an important portion of the youngsters who decide to "jump into" the gang do so looking for money and resources. This represents an important change in comparison with past studies, as it suggests the increasing weight of the criminal economy in the dynamics of current gang life.

3.3. The importance of the gang and gang life

To understand the importance of the gang and gang life, the survey with gang-related respondents included a set of items that asked the interviewee to rank the importance of different aspects of life, including those of gang life. Among others, those items referred to various aspects with regard to the relationship with the gang, the relationship with family members, the relationship with God, the availability of employment and education opportunities. The wording of each item and its results are shown in Table 3.7.

As Table 3.7 shows, the respondents—whether gang members or former gang members—seemed to agree completely on the importance of family. For instance, more than 95% of them said that it was very important to follow their mother's advice; it was exceedingly important to have a good relationship with the family, to have a good job, and to live in a safe community. However, as much of the previous pages have revealed, most youth who have passed through the gang experience come from problematic families, do not have a stable job and do not live in peace—even those who have already somehow calmed down and left the gang organization. Thus, these results reflect the aspirations of most of the people related to the gang phenomenon. They also show that gang affiliates are no different from most of the civilian population, for whom having a good family relationship, job and educational opportunities, and a secure milieu are of paramount importance. Nonetheless, Table 3.7 also reveals a set of items in which opinions were actually quite divided. Interestingly, these judgments refer to the life in the gang and they allow a deeper understanding of how the respondents view their experience through gang life. For instance, looking at item P73, only 39% of the respondents said that it was very important to be in good standing with the gang, whereas 47% said that it was not important at all. Furthermore, only 42% stated that it was very important to defend the gang, while 47% indicated that it was not important.

Table 3.7. Opinions about the important things for gang members (in percentages)

How important are the following things for you?	Very important	Somewhat important	Little important	Not important
P71. How important is it to live in peace, in a safe environment?	95.1	2.3	1.3	1.3
P72. How important are your own children?	89.7	0.5	0.3	9.5
P73. How important is it to be in good standing with your gang?	38.7	7.8	6.4	47.1
P74. How important is it to follow your mother's advice?	97.0	1.0	0.6	1.4
P75. How important is your relationship with God?	95.3	2.3	1.2	1.1
P76. How important is your relationship with your partner?	73.8	7.5	3.7	14.9
P77. How important is having a good job/career?	95.7	3.4	0.1	0.7
P78. How important is it to graduate from college?	94.6	3.6	0.7	1.2
P79. How important is it to defend the barrio (gang)?	42.3	6.2	4.4	47.1
P80. How important is it to avoid problems with authorities?	91.2	4.1	1.4	3.3
P81. How important is it to have a good relationship with your family?	96.6	1.8	0.7	1.0
P82. How important is it to be respected by your peers in the gang?	46.8	7.2	6.2	39.9
P83. How important is it to ascend in the ranks of the gang?	31.4	6.9	9.0	52.7
P84. How important is it that your gang allows you to calm down?	60.6	5.9	5.8	27.6

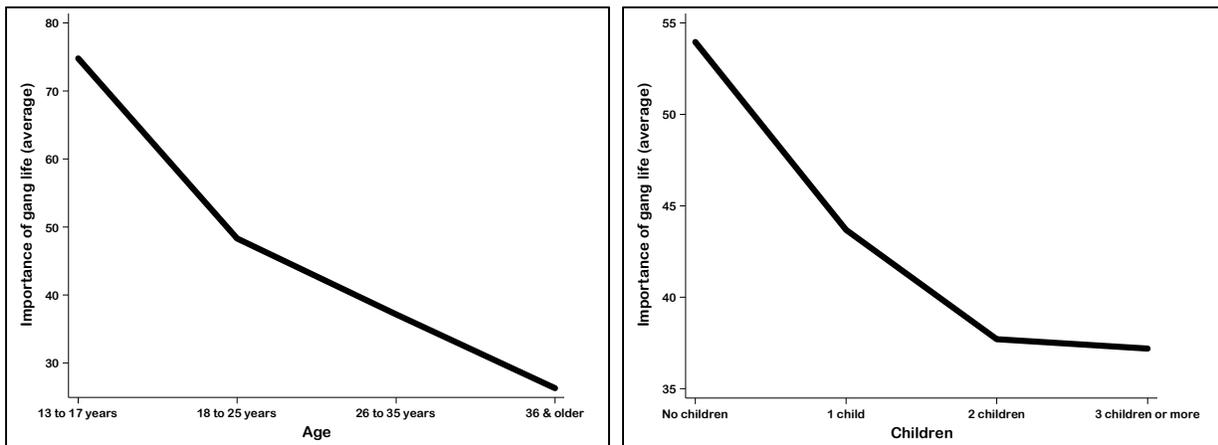
To better analyze the results from these items, a factor analysis was conducted to identify the main attitudinal factors behind the data.¹³ Among all the items, six different factors were identified, but for the purpose of examining the conditions of gang life, only one will be analyzed in this section, namely the one regarding the relationship with the gang. According to the data, four items comprise the attitudinal factor of the relationship with the gang: the importance of being in good standing with the gang (P73), the importance of defending their own *barrio* (P79), the importance of being respected by their peers (P82), and the importance of climbing the ranks within the gang (P83).¹⁴ To compare how gang members and former gang members view the importance of the gang according to different variables, the results of these items were recoded and merged into a single indicator in a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 100; a point average close to 100 indicates that the respondents attribute a high level of importance, while a low point

¹³ Factor analysis is a data reduction statistical technique that aims to identify clusters of related items (called factors) in an attitudinal measurement tool. See Harman (1960).

¹⁴ A Cronbach's alpha for these items returned a coefficient of 0.91, suggesting a very high level of reliability in these items.

average (close to 0) denotes low importance for the respondents.¹⁵ The scale of importance of gang life was analyzed using an Ordinary Least Squares regression (OLS) to ascertain the variables associated with the notion that the gang played the most important role in the life of the respondents.

Four conditions turned out to be associated with the opinions that gang life is very important to the person: being under 18 years old, not having a religious affiliation, not having children, and, surprisingly, being a member of one of the less known gang organizations. As shown in Graph 3.10, respondents under 18 years old have the highest point average in the scale of importance of gang life in comparison with other age groups, especially those who are 36 and older. In other words, younger people tend to value gang life (to be in good standing with the gang, to defend the gang, to be respected by their peers, and to move up in the ranks) significantly more than the rest of people associated with gang organizations. The graph also reveals that as respondents become older their assessment of gang life turns more unfavorable. The second condition that appears to be strongly related to valuing gang life is the absence of children: interviewees who reported not having offspring turned out to be more committed to the dynamics of gang life than the rest of the surveyed population (see Graph 3.11). Furthermore, as the respondents with a record of gang membership have more children, their engagement in gang life declines in a statistically significant way.



Graphs 3.10 & 3.11. Importance of gang life according to age of the respondent and number of children (in averages)

These findings provide an explanation of the factors that may alter the levels of devotion of many Salvadoran gang members to gang life and, therefore, criminal activity. As indicated in the literature on desistance (Decker et al. 2014; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Sweeten et al. 2013),¹⁶ age and the maturation process that occurs with it tend to play a significant role in reducing the engagement and excitement with regard to the dynamics of gangs. This process is underpinned by the formation of a family, which usually occurs as one ages. Although the available data does

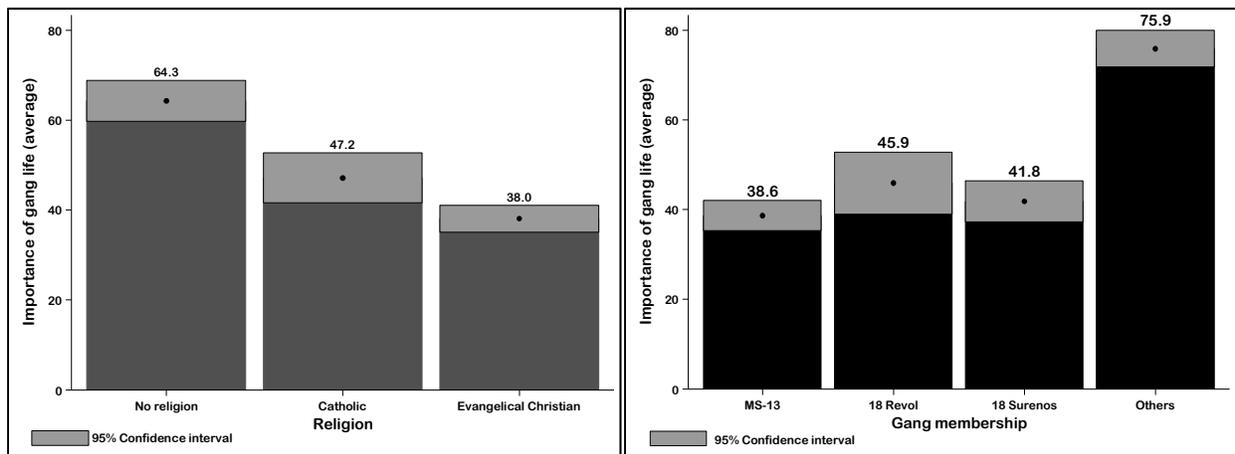
¹⁵ For every item, a response of very important was recoded as 100, somewhat important = 66, little important = 33, and not important at all = 0.

¹⁶ The issue of gang desistance and the reasons why gang members decide to calm down and abandon gang life is addressed in more detail in Section 4 of this report.

not suggest that just having a partner has an effect on the commitment of the interviewed gang members to gang life, it does indicate that the presence of children reduces the willingness of gang members to commit to the dynamics of gangs.

As indicated above, the commitment to gang life not only depends on age and the birth of more children, it also depends on religious affiliation and gang membership itself. Respondents who do not have any religious convictions seem to be significantly more engaged with the gang, as they value gang-related activities more than people who consider themselves Catholic and Evangelical Christians. In fact, and according to the findings, the gang members or former gang members who declared themselves as followers of Evangelical churches are less likely to value gang life in a positive way (see Graph 3.12). This result is obviously a product of the decision of many gang members to leave the gang by committing to religious life, and it shows the relevance of religion in the dynamics of gang life. It also confirms what other studies have found regarding the critical role that Evangelical denominations play in pushing juveniles out of the gang (Brenneman 2011; Salas-Wright et al. 2013b).

However, the most startling finding is the one that shows that respondents associated with what can be called the Salvadoran peripheral gangs (Mirada Locos, Máquina, and Mao-Mao) are more prone to gang life than the interviewees who stated their allegiance (past or present) to the main Salvadoran gang organizations (MS-13, 18th Street *Sureños* and 18th Street *Revolucionarios*). As shown in Graph 3.13, people who belonged to the peripheral gangs have an average score of nearly 76 on the scale of importance of gang life, compared to a score below 45 in the case of the major gangs, and only 38.6 for the Salvatrucha gang affiliates.



Graphs 3.12 & 3.13. Importance of gang life according to religious denomination and gang affiliation

These findings suggest that members of the MS-13 and 18th Street organizations would be less committed to gang life than their peers in the smaller—and less notorious—peripheral gangs. Here, it is important to note that this relationship between the respondent’s membership and his/her commitment to the gang remains unchanged when controlling for other conditions. In other words, the differences in the way MS-13 members value gang life as opposed to the minor gangs can be attributed to their gang membership and not to other potential conditions associated

with it (i.e. whether they are active gang members or not). One possible explanation, which merits further exploration, may have to do with the orientation of the gang. The emphasis on gang life reflects a commitment to the values of the typical youth street gang. There, the relationships built around the band on teenagers prevail over the dynamics imposed by large and structured organizations, such as those of the main Salvadoran gangs. It might be the case that the complexity of organizations such as MS-13 and the offshoots of the 18th Street Gang dispel the values of gang life and impose dynamics and values more oriented to criminal economies and profit.

4. Leaving the gang

This section analyzes the possibilities and processes to leave the gang organizations. It mainly follows the results of the gang survey, but informs the analysis with the information obtained with subject-matter experts and retired gang members in greater detail than in previous sections.

4.1 Is it possible to leave a gang (desistance)?

The first post-war studies on gangs in El Salvador highlighted the fact that youth gangs declared their loyalty to the organization for life (Cruz and Portillo Peña 1998; Smutt and Miranda 1998; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman 2001; Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff 2003). This still seems to be the case based on the information collected in the present study. The general argument among gang members is that one is in a gang for life—*en el barrio por vida*. However, all gang experts and former gang members interviewed maintained that it is possible to leave the gang and that even gang members with long periods of commitment to gang activity can leave the gang. The process of leaving the gang depends on two dimensions. First, how that process is conceptualized, whether the gang member is “calming down” or leaving the gang altogether; and second, who makes the decision for somebody to leave the gang.

The conceptualization of the process of abandoning gang life is critical for understanding the process. Depending on their status in relation to the gang, people with records of gang membership have two ways of understanding separation from the gang. First, a gang member can “calm down,” namely, they no longer participate in gang life and the activities of the gang organization, but 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 and obtain permission from the leaders to step away from the clique and the gang structure. It also assumes that he (or she) will always bear the identity of the gang. However, the separation from the organization can also—and frequently is—understood by the actual desisters as a genuine process of abandoning the gang (“*salirse de la pandilla*”). Thus, the defectors no longer consider themselves to be tied to the gang in any way. Former gang members interviewed for this research frequently struggled explaining that they no longer belonged to the gang and they have not merely calmed down. An MS-13 former gang member who spent ten years in the gang summarized this dilemma in the following way:

“In my mind, I am out [of the gang], but in their [gang leaders’] mind, I am ‘calmed down.’” (*Pandillero 3*)

Therefore, the central debate for gang members is whether some people may have merely “calmed down” their gang activity or they have entirely renounced their gang. From the gang leaders’ point of view, the *barrio* could call on individuals who are less active to increase their gang activity and perform certain duties, particularly during such tense times in El Salvador

between the gangs and the government; whereas actual desisters no longer owe anything to the gang.

The other important debate about leaving the gang revolves around the agent of the decision. The findings of this research indicate that, although the decision to leave the gang is, seemingly, an individual decision, it also depends on the gang organization's acquiescence. Here, it is important to point out the difference between the process of desistance in El Salvador and other countries. While the research on desistance from gangs in the U.S. underscores the individual and psychological processes that lead youngsters to abandon the gang (Carson et al. 2013; Pyrooz et al. 2010; Laub and Sampson 2001; O'Neal et al. 2016), in El Salvador that progression has to be constantly negotiated with the overwhelming power of the gang. This negotiation is, in most cases, a subtle 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. Yet in many cases and after some period of declining gang activity, the separation takes place through an open and forthright request to the organization.

Open requests to leave the gang represent a predicament for the gang organization. While it is not impossible to obtain permission to leave, several experts interviewed agreed that gangs are very strict and use violence as a form of control. Thus, the question becomes why would a gang want—or allow—individuals to leave the organization, particularly during a full-fledged war between the government and the gangs.¹⁷ *Pandillero* 13 provided the rationale from the gang organization:

“Somebody who is receiving thousands and thousands [of dollars] monthly wouldn't want to leave. You see somebody driving a Toyota Prado, a Mercedes-Benz, a BM[W], you don't know who he is, logically, right? The pressure goes from the top to the bottom, and the last one is who receives all [the pressure]. And they are the ones who want to leave the gang. Those who are at the bottom are most interested [in leaving], and the ones who have more opportunities. [...] You tell me, what a businessman is going to do without his workers? Simple, he will go bankrupt. What a top gang leader is going to do without his soldiers? Without his *gatilleros*? Without the people who collect the *renta*? Without the *postes*? What is he going to do? He is going to wind up alone.”

This statement also highlights the importance of one's position in the gang in the consideration of gang desistance. Intentions to leave the gang are impacted by the specific conditions of the gang member within the structure. Such conditions came out in the results of the survey. The survey reveals that the majority—68.6%—of the individuals interviewed said that they had intentions to leave the gang. On the other hand, 16.7% said that they would never leave the gang (see Table 4.1). The data do not return significant differences in the intentions to leave the gang according to gang membership. Most *Salvatruchos* and *Dieciochos* seem to concur when it comes to their intentions to leave the gang. However, members of the peripheral gangs showed less agreement in terms of their intentions to leave the gang: 35% said that they would never leave the gang, 33% said they would like to calm down, and 32% indicated that they wanted to abandon the organization.

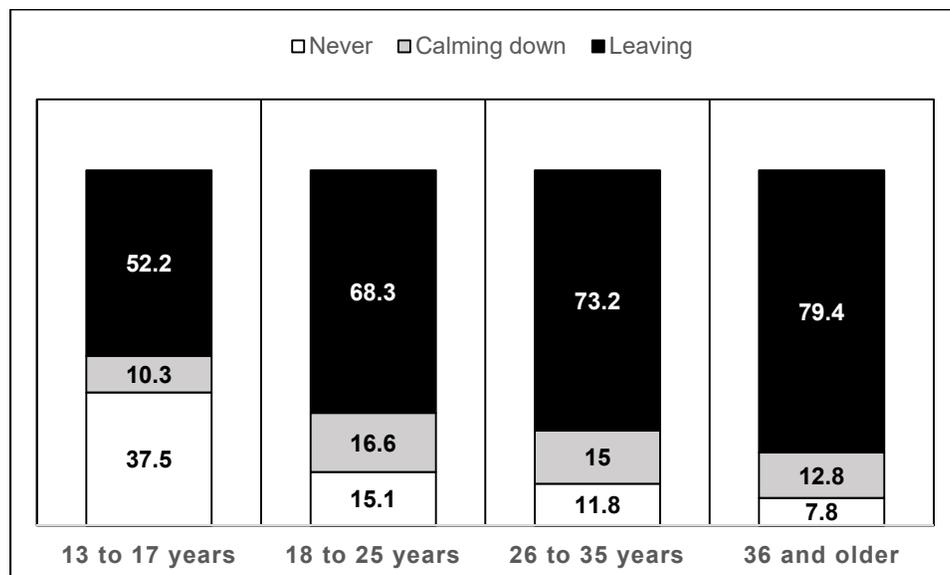
¹⁷ These comments are based on individual interviews with experts. A special thanks to these anonymous interviews for their insightful comments.

However, the condition that turned out to be associated with the intentions to leave the gang is the position in the gang. As can be seen in Table 4.1 and contrary to the argument of *Pandillero 13* presented above, respondents in positions of leadership indicated to be ready to leave the gang more frequently than respondents in other positions within the structure of the gang. On the contrary, the people with seemingly less willingness to leave the gang are those who are regular members.

Table 4.1. Intention to leave the gang according to gang organization (in percentages)

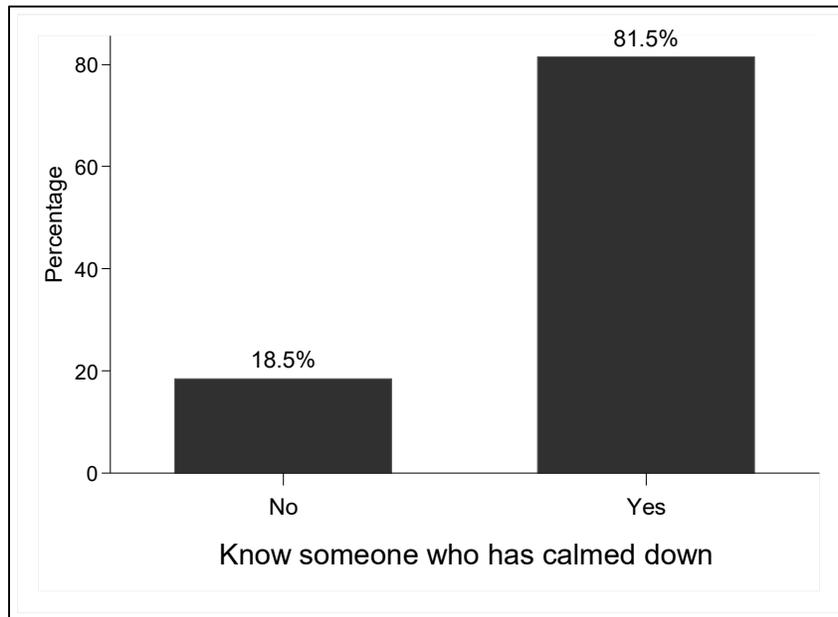
Gang membership	Have you ever thought about calming down or leaving the gang?		
	No, never	Yes, calming down	Yes, leaving
All	16.7	14.7	68.6
MS-13	15.1	7.9	77.0
18 Revolucionarios	10.5	18.0	71.4
18 Sureños	9.1	13.8	77.1
Other gangs	35.6	33.2	31.2
Leadership	3.8	8.5	87.7
Regular member	19.1	15.6	65.3
Collaborator	12.3	14.0	73.7

Following the literature on desistance (Decker et al. 2014; Pyrooz and Decker 2011), the differences in the intentions to leave the gang according to their position in the structure may be an effect of the maturation process associated with age. In fact, age turned out to be the most important variable in predicting the intentions of the respondents to leave the gang. As can be seen in Graph 4.1, the inclination to leave the gang increases significantly as the respondent gets older, while the intentions to remain in the gang fade.



Graph 4.1. Intention to leave the gang according to age (in percentages)

However, when it comes to successful experiences of desistance, almost all interviewees know somebody who has retired from gang activities. In fact, 81.5% of people surveyed said that they know someone who has calmed down their gang activity. On the other hand, 18.5% said that they do not know anyone who has calmed down their gang activity (see Graph 4.2).



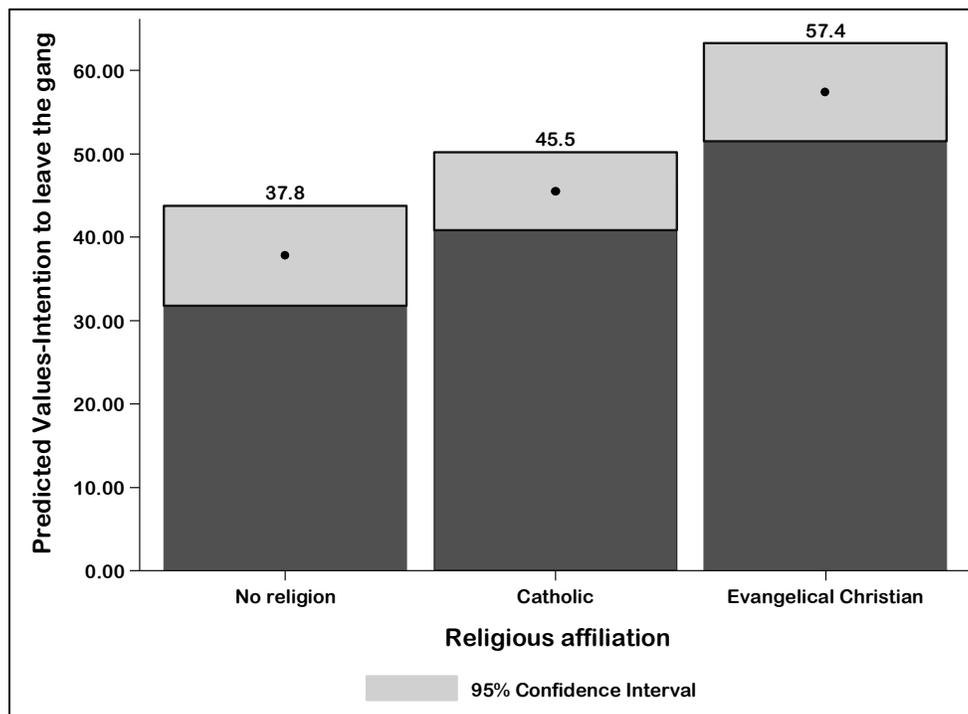
Graph 4.2. Percentage of people who know someone who has calmed down their gang activity

To establish with better precision, the variables that affect the intentions of gang members to leave the gang, the research team created a scale that measures the intention of the respondent to abandon the gang organization and ran a regression with a series of factors believed to impact the decisions of active gang members to leave the gang. Respondents with higher scores in a scale from 0 to 100 reflect greater intentions to leave the gang than people with lower scores. The factors used to test the conditions associated with leaving the gang are: age, school enrollment, level of education, religion, having a formal or informal job, level of income, being in a stable relationship, having children, age when running away from home, years of gang membership, number of arrests, age when arrested for the first time, being injured in an attack, and having a close relative or friend being killed.

The regression (only with active gang members = 466) returned interesting results. As expected, religion affiliation plays an important role in the intentions of people to leave the gang. Specifically, active gang members who declared to be Evangelical Christians showed a higher likelihood to having intentions to abandon the gang. In addition, respondents with more years of gang membership have a higher likelihood to entertaining the idea of leaving the gang. By the same token, active gang members who were older when they were arrested for the first time harbor intentions to leave the gang organization more frequently than those who were arrested at a younger age. Nevertheless, the two more illuminating conditions that, according to the statistical analysis, have an effect on the intentions of active gang members to leave the gang are: having an informal job and belonging to MS-13. Committed gang members who have an informal job have significantly more intentions to abandon the organization than the rest of the

active gang members interviewed in the survey. Similarly, gang members enlisted in the MS-13 organization have *less* intentions to walk away from their current organization than any other group.

In other words, active gang members who have been in the gang for more years, who have been arrested for the first time at an older age, an especially those who have informal jobs, who are not *Salvatruchos*, and who characterize themselves as Evangelicals are more likely to have intentions to leave the gang than the rest of the active members. Consequently, these results indicate the importance of employment—even if informal—, religion, and gang affiliation in the process of desistance. In contrast with the literature on desistance, these results do not provide evidence that the age of active gang members per se constitutes a relevant factor in the intentions to abandon the gang, nor do they seem to support the argument that having a family and children affects the willingness to walk away from the gang. Rather, religion (as can be seen in Graph 4.3) plays a determinant role, along with the organization itself, and having some type of informal job).



Graph 4.3. Predicted probabilities of having intentions to leave the gang according to religious affiliation

These results were widely supported by the qualitative interviews with gang members. For instance, when asked why some individuals decide to leave the gang while others do not, *Pandillero 12* said that some people have a calling from God. Moreover, *Pandillero 15* contended that some gang members think differently while others believe that the only option is prison or death. In his opinion, God plays a major role and helps shed light on people. In addition, this person argued that it is important for individuals to be mature enough to understand that there is no future in the gang life. This process of maturation may not only be associated with age per se, but also with the time spent as a gang member, as the data previously indicated.

Some of the former gang members who work at League Collegiate Outfitter, a company which makes collegiate apparel, maintained that leaving a gang requires will power, which, for several gang members is usually provided through the personal religious experience. This has implications regarding policies for gang rehabilitation as placing current gang members into jobs who do not want to be there will not function efficiently, unless other conditions are met. A gang member has to want to leave the gang for the rehabilitation and reinsertion process to occur, and, in several cases, such willingness comes as a product of the time served in the gang. Gang members who are older and who have a long trajectory in the gang often realize that they cannot continue the gang life forever. In addition, many gang members interviewed who have children desired to change. One former gang member at League stated that people are often scared for their lives to leave the gang even though many gang members secretly desire to change their lives and leave.

In any case, intentions to leave the gang do not occur overnight. As shown above, the decision to walk away from *la vida loca*—as it is sometimes called among gang members—come from long-lasting periods of internal deliberation prompted by the hardships of gang life. *Pandillero 17*, a former Mirada Locos gang member who was active in the gang for a decade sheds light on this experience:

“Life in the gang is a miserable life. [...] One starves, cries alone, and still can’t leave [the gang]. One knows that anywhere one goes, one can be killed. One is also persecuted by the authorities, just for being part of the gang.”

4.2 The mechanisms to leave the gang

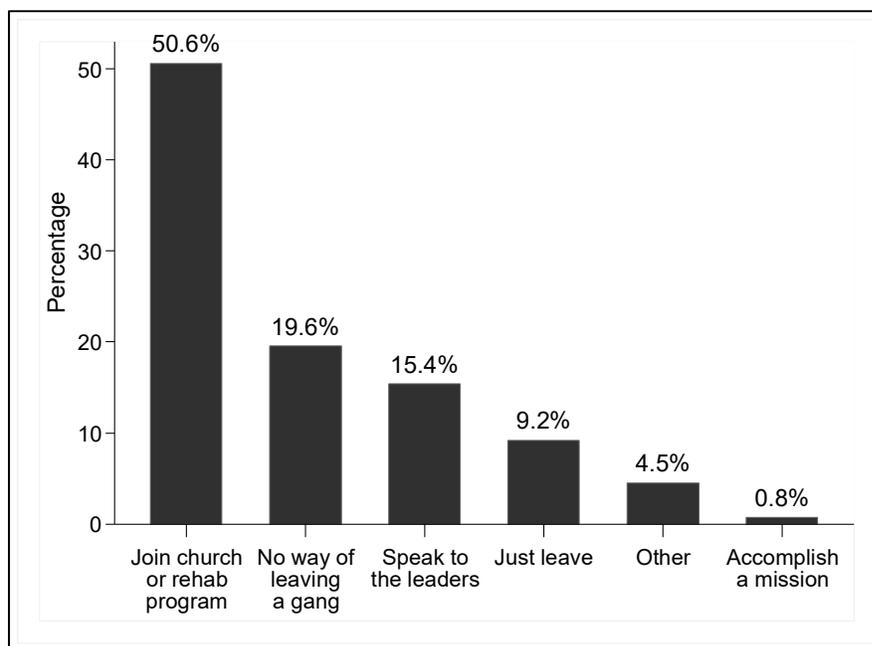
As suggested by the results above, the most common and seemingly accepted mechanism to calm down and leave the gang in El Salvador occurs through a religious experience. The church is a vehicle for many members to leave a gang, which is consistent with the scholarly literature on desistance and gangs in Central America (Brenneman 2011, 2013; Wolseth 2008). In fact, 50.6% of the individuals surveyed argued that the church or rehab programs are the best options for leaving a gang. Several gang members stressed that the only way for someone to leave the gang is to dedicate themselves to God. During the in-depth interviews, religious awakenings were a common theme among former gang members. It appears that religion provides some gang members with comfort as many of these individuals have committed heinous crimes, and they often have a hard time living with their pasts. Thus, many people turn to a higher power and have described the intense process of being “saved.”

Yet it is important to note that some of the individuals surveyed contended that there are several options for leaving a gang. For instance, 15.4% of the people surveyed contended that the best option for leaving a gang is speaking to the leaders. On the other hand, 9.2% of people stated that gang members can just leave. Interestingly, less than 1% of the people stated that the best way to leave the gang is to accomplish a mission (see Graph 4.4).

The process of leaving the gang can be long, tortuous, and uncertain. *Pandillero 24*, who thought about leaving for a year, was able to leave the gang despite immense pressure not to

leave the gang and despite the fact that the gang killed his brother in front of him during the aforementioned meeting, explained the process in detail:

“It is not what you want to do, there are leaders that you have to follow. [...] I passed a complete year where I had told them no and did not attend the meetings...I had distanced myself from everything. They called me and asked me, hey, what’s up, what happened? They did not want to see me...after a year, I received a call and they told me that they were going to have a meeting and we had to speak about this [his membership status] [...] I went to the meeting because they wanted to know if I was going to continue or not. There were seven men and three females. Everyone with their different problems...They came and began one by one getting out all the information that they wanted making them see that everything was going to be fine [...] They spoke with me and asked me if I was going to continue. I told them no. They asked me three times if I was going to continue [...] I told them I didn’t want to.”



Graph 4.4. Options for leaving the gang

Although religious conversion seems to be the most common and accepted way to leave the gang, in reality, desistance takes place under the observation of the gang organization, whether tacit or explicit. Gang members who are in the process of calming down and leaving the gang need to show utter commitment to the new life afforded by the church. Many people interviewed contended that people who are not serious face consequences. An individual who has left the gang for the church and is seen drinking alcohol or participating in other activities would face various penalties, possibly death, from current gang members. Such arguments have been supported by other scholarly research (Brenneman 2011). *Pandillero* 12, a former 18th Street Gang member, who had previously belonged to the *Mirada Locos* gang, explained this concept in the following way:

“They were watching if I truly went to the church. Even the first two weeks after I decided to follow Jesus, I continued doing the *paro* [favors] for them. Then, one of them came to me—and I was surprised at it because if you’re doing something wrong, the first

thing they do is tell the leaders because you're not supposed to do that anymore since you have decided to follow Jesus. So, one boy came to me and told me not to continue, otherwise I'll be badly beaten.”

The level of commitment to the church is also an indicator of whether the conversion is real or not. Given that religious conversion frequently works as a protection to gang members who have been threatened by their former peers, many interviewees spoke about insincere attempts to join an Evangelical church, without real commitment to a pious life. *Pandillero* 21 described it in the following way:

“Many become Christians for fear, few do it for gratitude. You make a mistake in the gang? What do you do? Become a Christian first. Then, sometime later, you get out [of the church]. When it is for gratitude, it does not matter the hardships to come, but you are confident that God is going to save you. And if you are killed for your past, you go peacefully.”

Debates exist among some individuals interviewed about whether the type of church—Evangelical or Catholic—is fundamental. *Pandillero* 16 asserted: “If you are Christian, they [the gang] do not do anything.” However, he then stated that you have to be Evangelical and cannot be Catholic or Mormon, arguing that some people believe that Catholics party. As a result, he contended that “the majority of gang members look for Pentecostal churches.”

The views about the options to leave the gang vary somewhat according to gang membership. In line with the data suggesting that Mara Salvatrucha is tougher to leave, the survey showed that MS-13 members and associates of peripheral gangs tend to believe more that there are no actual mechanisms to leave the gang than 18th Street gang members. Instead, 18th Street gang members are more inclined to believe that the church and the religious path are valid mechanisms to leave the gang than members of other organizations.

Table 4.3. Mechanisms to leave the gang according to gang organization (in percentages)

Gang membership	What do you have to do to leave a gang?			
	Talk to leaders	Join a church or rehab prog.	No way to leave	Other
MS-13	18.6	57.0	21.1	2.3
18 Revolucionarios	12.7	67.3	10.9	9.1
18 Sureños	10.3	66.7	17.9	5.1
Other gangs	22.0	38.4	30.4	9.1

However, some people also pointed to other mechanisms that may even involve the completion of criminal missions, such as kill an enemy. Although they were not reported as frequently as to create a separate category in the survey, some of the survey respondents referred to such practices. In one of the in-depth interviews, *Pandillero* 23 explained:

“Every gang has its own ideology. With regard to MS-13 to say if one can leave, it is very complicated because I have heard of experiences of people who lived in my community and they told me to leave the gang you had to kill someone, but someone from your own family. Or, if not, kill a certain number of people from the rival gang.”

4.3. What can be done to help gang members leave the gang

The survey asked the respondents what can be done to help gang members to calm down and abandon the gang. The vast majority—97.1%—of individuals surveyed said, again, that joining a church would help gang members calm down their gang activity (see Graph 4.5). *Pandillera* 19, a former female gang member who joined at 14 years old, stated:

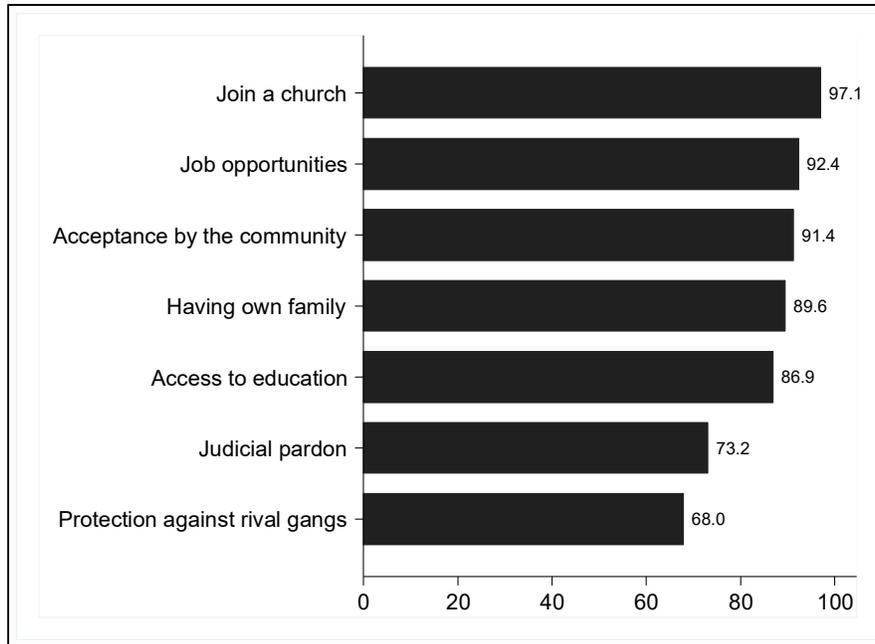
“Nothing more than be Christian [is necessary to calm down one’s gang activity]. Teach them [gang members] the testimony of what God has done in our lives [...] the love of God is powerful and I have seen many changes in many people in my life. My life was very lost.”

While the church can serve as a vehicle for leaving the gang, many individuals interviewed stressed the importance of jobs and educational opportunities. In the survey, 92.4% said that job opportunities would help gang members calm down their gang activity. However, a major challenge for the former gang members interviewed was the idea that they would never be able to find a job as they would be discriminated against. Many complained about the lack of opportunities in the labor market. *Pandillero* 17 stated:

“Nowadays, it is hard to find employment for somebody coming out of the gang because [when interviewing for a job] in many places, companies, factories, there are medical staff who remove the clothes to see if they have tattoos.”

The individuals surveyed also stressed the importance of access to education: 86.9% of people surveyed believed that access to education would help gang members calm down their gang activities. In fact, most gang members have never worked in their life and lack essential job skills to be considered for a job. In addition, 91.4% of the people surveyed believe that being accepted by the community is very important. Companies like League Collegiate provide opportunities for former gang members and are a model to follow. League has a culture that all employees are treated equally and discrimination is not tolerated regardless of one’s background or any other special needs. Former gang members at League spoke about how grateful they were for this opportunity. Several individuals who became supervisors at League have tremendous levels of pride and hope for their futures. They also expressed how grateful they are to have the chance to work and study.

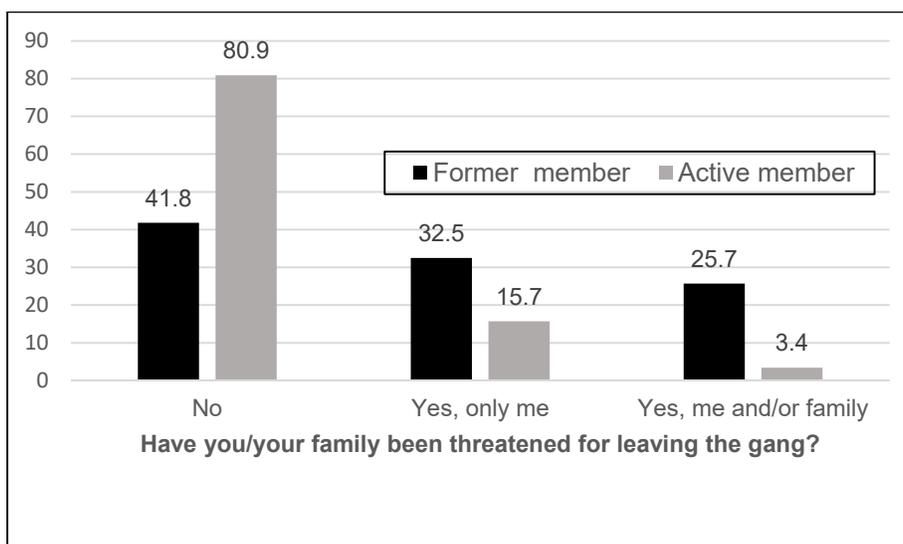
Many former gang members interviewed at League had never worked before in the formal economy. League is a company that prides itself on the notion of family. The leadership at League goes above and beyond to help its employees. The League factory in El Salvador is led by Rodrigo Bolaños, who is the general manager. League provides training for former gang members. Individuals can earn their high school degree and continue on to study for a bachelor’s degree. In addition, all employees are required to study English for 30 minutes per day, and the progress of each individual is monitored. League also provides classes during the weekends for employees who are working toward a degree. The leadership at League wants its employees to continue to improve their lives and does not want these individuals to work in the factory forever. The goal is for League employees to have a steady paycheck and opportunities to improve themselves through education. Working at League requires tremendous sacrifice. Some individuals spoke about having to commute several hours to work via public transportation.



Graph 4.5. What would help a gang member calm down (in percentages)

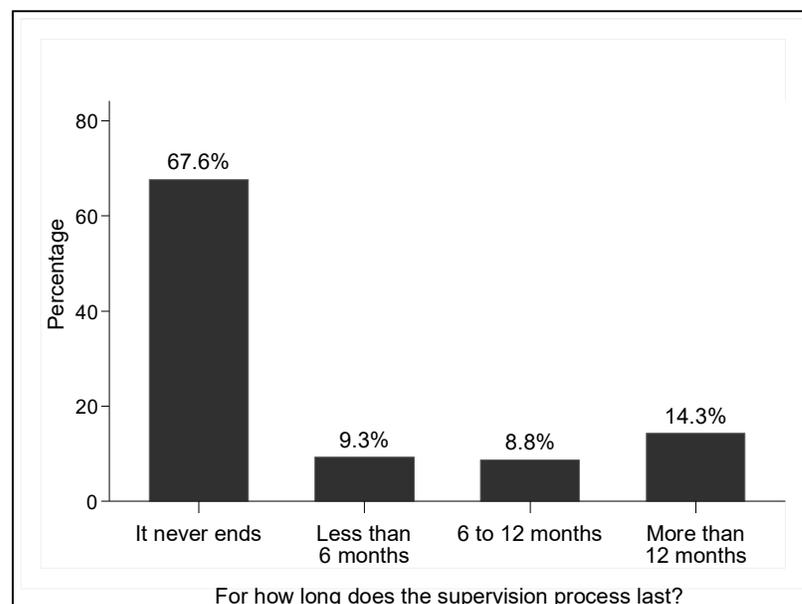
4.4. The challenges of leaving the gang

Individuals attempting to leave a gang and reinsert themselves into society face various challenges. One of them comes from the gangs 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 presented in Graph 4.6, more than 58% of former gang members have received threats against themselves or their families for abandoning the gang. This share is significantly less (19.1%) among those who are still gang members, likely a result of not having gone through the desistance process.



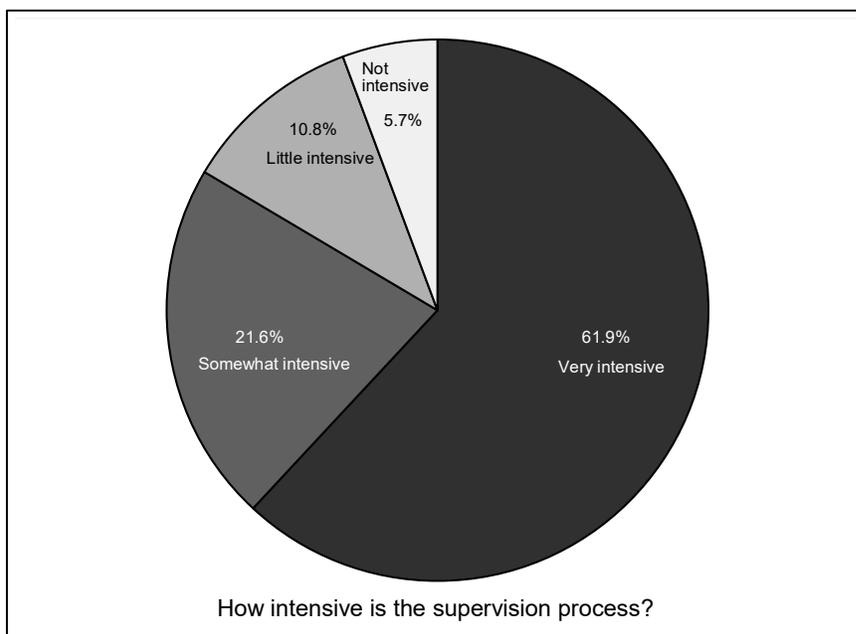
Graph 4.6. Threatened for leaving the gang according to relationship to the gang (in percentages)

In any case, and as suggested in the results presented throughout this section, people who aspire to leave the gang face an intense supervision process: 67.6% of the individuals surveyed contended that the supervision process never ends. Among MS-13 members, the percentage spikes to nearly 72%, while among 18th Street *Sureños* it is only 58%. Furthermore, 61.9% contended that the process is intense compared to only 5.7% who said that it is not intense. Various gang members spoke about the supervision process during interviews. They stated that the gang does not reveal the supervision process, but keeps a constant watch to see what the “calming down” candidates are doing. Gangs can correct behaviors by beating up individuals who transgress the rules of what is expected from somebody who is in process of reinsertion. In many cases, the gang loses its patience and will murder people for such misdeeds. For many gang members, the supervision process outside the gang is for life.



Graph 4.7. Duration of the supervision process

Having the desire to leave a gang is not enough as former gang members face a litany of obstacles. These people are often easy to identify because of their tattoos. The number of tattoos differ depending on the individual, but it is easy to identify gang members with tattoos on their faces, arms, and hands. Gang-related tattoos present a problem for gang members in everyday life. The most mundane tasks, such as riding a bus home, are quite difficult for former gang members. Former gang members also must return home to their neighborhoods and communities and will inevitably encounter gang members from the same gang as well as rival gangs. One individual interviewed working in League has many gang tattoos on his arms and hands, making it nearly impossible for this person to travel on the streets without a sweater and gloves to cover up his tattoos. Former gang members can encounter enemies from opposing gangs on the streets which could lead to an individual being harmed or even killed. Various gang members, such as *Pandillero 17*, argued that former gang members have many enemies. He contended, “The daily challenges for someone are other rival gangs.” According to this individual, the major concern is that rival gangs will identify you on the streets.



Graph 4.8. How intense is the supervision process?

The research team interviewed and surveyed countless people with tattoos, especially individuals in prison who have gang-related tattoos on their faces; some former and active gang members tattooed their entire faces. Many people argued that they are judged by society not only for their tattoos but also for being gang members and ex-prisoners. Many individuals surveyed and interviewed inside and outside prisons, including active and former gang members, stressed that it is very difficult to reinsert oneself into society, as individuals who have served time will be discriminated against as a result of their criminal records. Furthermore, active and former gang members argued that employers discriminate against not only one's physical appearance but also where you live or where you are from as some neighborhoods are marginalized and have high numbers of gangs who operate and live in these areas.

During an interview, *Pandillero 24* explained various challenges as he was rejected by members of his family, including his own mother, as well as society. He argued that it is quite difficult to get a job as people judge you for being affiliated with a gang. Many companies are not willing to hire people who have criminal records and have served time in prison.

Former gang members at League also discussed various legal problems that they had and how the company helped them by hiring a lawyer, which enabled them to address their legal situations. The sense of family increases levels of trust among employees as they feel comfortable talking with company leadership about their problems. However, there are major obstacles for people who have left the gang and are attempting to reinsert themselves into society as former gang members cannot change their histories and the crimes that they have committed while in the gang. During interviews, former gang members at League expressed the constant fear of going to prison. Various people explained how they faced criminal charges and the possibility of being incarcerated even after abandoning the gang life. Such fears represent a source of concern and stress for such individuals. The police and other law enforcement officials

have lists of gang members and people that they are looking to arrest. Thus, an ex-gang member could be arrested for a previous charge or because of alleged gang affiliation. Some employees at League spoke about the challenges that they have faced with regard to the police. They discussed police harassment and profiling.

4.5. The role of government and society for facilitating desistance

Debates exist among gang experts interviewed in El Salvador about the political will to solve the gang phenomena. Some individuals argue that there is political will among the Salvadoran government to resolve the gang issue. Many gang members interviewed criticized the government's strategy for combating the gang problem. For instance, *Pandillero 20* argued that the government has responded to the gang phenomena by "fomenting violence with more violence." *Pandillero 3* put it in the following terms:

"The government does not have the heart [intention to rehabilitate gang members]. It leaves things as they are, it does not control the problem. Rather, what they are doing is fueling the fire. They do not seek to reduce the problem of gangs, they are creating the problem themselves."

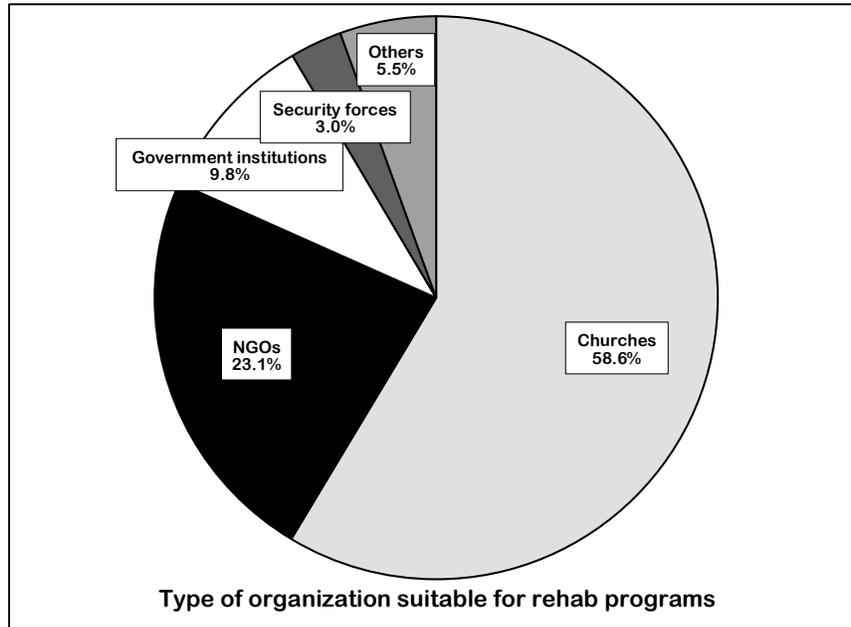
However, other interviewees have contended that there is not much political will, particularly as demonstrated by the hardline strategies of the current government. While debates exist, many experts maintain that even if politicians desire to solve the problem there is a lack of capacity. Said differently, the need exists for rehabilitation programs that function efficiently. Some gang members face obstacles, such as drug addiction, and require rehabilitation programs. One NGO leader in El Salvador argued during an interview that there are no successful programs that currently exist in El Salvador to deal with drug addiction. Another gang expert contended that there is not only the need for resources but also the need to transform various underlying societal and structural problems. This expert asserted that many political leaders often view this as a criminal problem, but the reality is much more complicated.

Many gang members during the in-depth interviews contended that former gang members face a tremendous level of discrimination. Many ex-gang members argued that civil society should help individuals by not judging them. Moreover, it is important that business people, the government, and civil society help individuals improve themselves through employment and education. *Pandillero 13*, who is married and has children, contended that society often closes the doors for gang members as well as ex-gang members:

"The society wants to kill gang members."

Yet when asked what organization would be fitting to lead gang rehabilitation programs, unsurprisingly, most respondents (58.6%) pointed to the churches. This was also corroborated in the in-depth interviews. Virtually, all subject-matter experts underscored the potential of the Salvadoran churches to house programs of rehabilitation. When gang members decide to leave the gang, most key actors in the gang phenomenon view churches and faith-based programs as the most legitimate environments of transformation, rehabilitation, and reinsertion. Developmental NGOs are also viewed by some respondents (23.1%) as an appropriate organization to lead gang-rehabilitation programs. In contrast, few (9.8%) see government

institutions as suitable places for housing programs directed to gang rehabilitation, and even fewer see the security forces, the police and the military (3%) as important players for gang reinsertion.



Graph 4.9. Type of organization most suitable to lead rehabilitation programs

5. Conclusions

This study constitutes one of the few gang research in the hemisphere based on a survey of active and former gang members. Although the inquiry relies on a combination of purposive and convenience sample design, the results provide valuable evidence about the dynamics and characteristics of the Salvadoran youth gangs. Given the challenges researching criminal groups in one of the most violent countries in the region, the research team took extreme measures to guarantee the safety of the research subjects as well as the field team, that, nevertheless, did not affect the quality of the fieldwork.

Youth gangs in El Salvador are not new. The 18th Street Gang, Mara Salvatrucha, and many other street-corner groups already roamed the streets of the major Salvadoran cities long before most people interviewed in this research project were born. However, as pointed out by several studies and observers, the current manifestations of the phenomenon of youth gangs are quantitatively and qualitatively different than 10 or 20 years ago. Contemporary youth gangs are much more numerous, their presence has spread throughout most of the territory, and their activities are significantly more violent, strategic, and complex.

Yet the results of this work primarily portray a social phenomenon that continues to be fueled by the same fundamental conditions that created the problem three decades ago. Problematic families, domestic violence, search for identity, run-down neighborhoods, lack of jobs and educational opportunities, and underfunded services, among others, still push many underprivileged children to the streets and the gangs who inhabit them. In the gang, teenagers find friends, respect, resources, and, in many cases, the family and its perks that they never experienced at home. Thus, the gang becomes a full-blown life experience. Loyalty, criminal behavior, and power over territory become the means through which individuals ascend and consolidate their position in the gang as well as the control of the gang over the community and territory.

However, as gang members mature they better understand the challenges and hardships of gang life, the possibility of death, crippling injuries, and winding up in prison. In some cases, this realization is prompted by key events: the birth of a child, the assassination of a close friend or relative, surviving a violent assault, etc. Gang members, even those that occupy leadership positions, begin questioning their own commitment to the *barrio* project and start exploring desistance mechanisms. The success of leaving the gang depends on the ability to find an equally all-inclusive way of living in a protective and caring environment at the right moment. That is why some faith-based programs and churches, as well as initiatives such as League, become so important—and successful—in the experiences of gang desistance. Hence, successful rehabilitation programs are those that provide a safe and protective space, akin to a bubble, where desisters are able to remain away from the gang while developing their own human and social capital.

The results of this study underscore the fact that while it is possible to leave a gang, it is not easy. Even if a member is allowed to leave a gang, he must constantly struggle to reinsert himself into society. This is almost always a grueling endeavor as many gang members do not have the necessary education or skills required to become productive members of the community. Former gang members are a very challenging population as they face many daunting obstacles that they must overcome. Some of these individuals have issues with drug or alcohol addiction and require treatment. In addition, many of these people require regular psychological counseling to overcome the plethora of issues that have impacted their lives. More resources could be invested in programs to counsel former gang members and initiatives designed to help people overcome addiction and other underlying problems, but they must be provided in a comprehensive fashion and in a protective environment.

In addition, gang members seeking to reinsert themselves into the formal economy face discrimination and alienation as many companies and educational centers will shy away from enlisting people with criminal records. League 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 into a protective environment. League offers not only employment and educational opportunities but also—and more importantly—a caring environment that provides constant support to ex-gang members—and other employees—with any problems that arise. The leadership of League wants its employees to work and study and grow not only personally but also professionally.

Some Pentecostal faith-based programs devoted to gang rehabilitation do something similar. Brandishing religious values, they offer protective environments from the threat of the gang, from the abusive family, and from the enticements of gang life. They, however, seem less prepared to offer job and training opportunities. Hence, programs are needed that provide gang members with the necessary training to learn various trades required to work as productive members of the formal economy.

Entering school or job training programs is not an easy task for many former gang members, many of whom have criminal records and have served time in jail and or prison. More resources could be invested in programs that seek to provide ex-gang members with the skills and resources needed to work and be productive citizens. Such programs require resources and tremendous leadership. Even if they are provided with the opportunity to study or work, former gang members face many daily challenges from encounters with the police to seeing former colleagues or enemies on the streets, which is even more dangerous. El Salvador is a small country, and ex-gang members will constantly encounter individuals from their past. As a result, the government must work to create protective zones where at-risk youth and former gang members can develop their potential.

It also is important to note that prisons in El Salvador do not rehabilitate gang members effectively. Overcrowded jails and prisons function as recruiting grounds for gang members. These environments are ripe for organized criminal activities. Extortion and smuggling of illicit contraband represent problems for prison officials as such activities are commonplace in prisons throughout the country. In addition, the living conditions in many of the prisons are deplorable as a result of high levels of overcrowding.

The backlog in the justice system means that many people are in pre-trial detention for months (Popkin 2010; Call 2003). By law, inmates are only supposed to be in the jails (*bartolinas*) for no more than three days. However, the judicial system does not function efficiently and, therefore, some inmates are required to stay in the jails for months—or even a year. The jails are extremely overcrowded and inmates are not allowed to leave their cells. Since the *bartolinas* are jails operated by the police, inmates must pay for their food. Some *bartolinas* are operating as small prisons as a result of the severe delays in the judicial system. In sum, major reforms are needed in the jails and penitentiary system. In June 2016, the high court in El Salvador ruled that the overcrowding is unconstitutional (Tjaden 2016). One option would be to reroute offenders, particularly minor criminals and drug offenders, into job training, treatment, and rehabilitation programs. However, one expert noted in an interview that many prisoners will eventually be released from prison. This expert questioned what individuals will do when they leave the prison. Individuals who lack the appropriate skills and training will likely return to prisons. Prisoners, especially the youth, require a tremendous amount of help to overcome the various obstacles that they face, particularly those individuals who have served time in prison.

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