

A Study of Gang Disengagement in Honduras Key Takeaways

Can a gang member in Honduras leave the gang, abandon criminal activities, and rehabilitate?

The answer is yes. An exploratory study conducted in 2019 with more than 1,021 gang members and former gang members indicates that most gang members in Honduras end up disengaging from street gangs. However, it also shows that leaving the group is a process in which the interaction of several conditions determines how soon or how complicated the separation from the gang will be. There are four significant predictors of active gang members' intentions to disengage. They all relate to the nature of social interactions that active gang members have:

- a) the organization to which the person belongs, whether MS-13 or Barrio 18;
- b) the number of years that the person has been involved in the gang;
- c) the individual's religious affiliation; and
- d) the person's immediate social circle.

The study commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), through the Latin America and Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention Task Order (LAC-YVP), was conducted in partnership with the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC), the American Institutes of Research (AIR), and Democracy International (DI) in 2019 and 2020. The study revolved around a nationwide survey with 1,021 respondents with a record of gang membership. It also included in-depth interviews with 38 former gang members and other community stakeholders in urban locations in Honduras.

Gangs in Honduras. MS-13 and Barrio 18 are the dominant street gangs in Honduras, with MS-13 as the largest one.

- The gangs in Honduras have a regionally fragmented structure, comprised of sectors and cliques, which enables them to operate with relative autonomy while adhering to membership norms and rules.
- Both MS-13 and Barrio-18 control territories using extortion, drug trafficking, and violence. For gang members, such activities are critical components in the process of climbing the gang structure ranks.

Gang member profile. Honduran gang members are mostly male. Male members joined the gang around the age of 15 and, on average, remained in the gang for seven years.

- Females join at an average age of 13 and usually leave their group before turning 18.
- Gang members have an average of 9.6 years of schooling, and 90 percent of our respondents never finished high school.
- Half of the respondents reported a household income of less than 250 USD¹, and 84 percent did not have a regular job, whether in the formal or informal sector, even before they were incarcerated.
- One in every four gang members lived with their parents or stepparents, while 31 percent lived with other relatives or alone.

Joining the Gang. In Honduras, youth join gangs to fulfill their emotional needs rather than because of criminal intent.

¹ According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2019), the average monthly income in an urban household was approximately 202 USD.

- Most youths joined the gang because they felt attracted to peer groups during their teenage years. Gang members value the solidarity, social respect, and resources the group provides, which otherwise would be absent if they were not part of the organization.
- Gang members grow up in environments where family support and monitoring are limited, and educational and employment opportunities in their communities are scarce. The gang appeal to youth by supplying such needs.

Gang Disengagement. Intentions to leave the gang are more frequent in the early stages of membership. Those intentions decline for a while and then increase again with age. Successful disengagement is closely associated with interactions that provide social and instrumental support to reintegration.

- Members of the two major gangs (MS-13 and Barrio 18) express less intention of disengagement than members of the smaller gangs or combos.
- There is a U-shaped curve relationship between the number of years in the gang and intentions to leave. During the first years of gang membership, intentions to leave are stronger; then they subside for a while and start growing again after six years of being in the gang. This pattern suggests that the early months and years of gang life are probably full of doubts about membership. These doubts are later quenched by gratifying experiences as a gang member and then reemerge as the individual matures.
- Religion also plays a critical role in the process of leaving the gang. Belonging to an Evangelical church in Honduras contributes to one's intention to disengage from the gang and provides safe passage out of the group.
- Non-gang groups and social networks of non-gang members are key to supporting gang members' intentions to leave the gang. Active members who spent the most time with non-gang individuals (their family and non-gang friends) were more likely to disengage from the gang.

Challenges and Supports to Reintegration into Society. The process of disengagement and reintegration is extremely challenging and requires many supports at the individual, community, and societal levels to succeed.

- The most common challenges to reintegration include lack of employment and educational opportunities in the community, threats to safety, police abuse, social discrimination, poverty, and lack of family support.
- Most gang members do not trust government institutions to support former gang members. They believe that non-governmental organizations, especially faith-based groups, are the most appropriate institutions to lead rehabilitation and reintegration services.

Policy Implications. Policies and programs that focus on providing relational, educational, community, and economic supports to youth and their families can build on individual and community resiliency.

Policies and programs should primarily target:

- Early prevention focused on peer relationships to deter young people from perceiving gangs as attractive.
- Mechanisms of identification of those in the early stages of gang membership so they can receive the social and emotional supports to disengage.
- The development of support networks for those who are in the process of leaving the gang.
- The creation of rehabilitation, mental health, skill services to help former gang members rebuild their lives.
- The expansion of national and local campaigns focused on raising awareness of discriminatory practices toward youth who disengaged from the gang.