

A Study of Gang Disengagement in Guatemala Key Takeaways

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

The answer is yes, but the process seems to be more difficult in Guatemala than in Honduras or El Salvador. An exploratory study conducted in 2019 and 2020 with 57 former gang members and 48 subject matter experts in Guatemala indicates the difficulties with leaving the gang are attributable to tighter control of the gang cliques at the neighborhood level. It is also related to a more rigid system of norms within the gangs and the absence of gang-approved mechanisms to leave. While religious experiences play a role in driving people away from the gangs, as in El Salvador and Honduras, religious conversion seems to be less accepted by gang leaders as a reason to leave. They view disengagement as a potential threat to the economic interests of the gang clique as well as the security of the gang.

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 series of in-depth interviews with 57 people with a record of gang membership. It also included in-depth interviews with 48 subject matter experts and other community stakeholders in Guatemala's urban locations.

Gangs in Guatemala. Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) are the dominant street gangs in Guatemala, with Barrio 18 as the largest one.

- Street gangs in Guatemala are concentrated in the country's main urban areas, especially around Guatemala City, Escuintla, and Quetzaltenango. They are comprised of neighborhood cliques, which enables them to operate with local autonomy while adhering to the organization's 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.
- Barrio 18 and MS-13 have national councils comprised of imprisoned leaders in the main penitentiaries. Activities by the cliques are controlled by imprisoned senior members who constitute the Rueda del Barrio (the neighborhood's circle), the top decision-making board of each gang.
- Each neighborhood clique operates with autonomy from others, which frequently generates conflicts between same-gang cliques to control territories.

Gang Member Profile. Guatemala gang members are mostly male. Male members joined the gang around the age of 13 and, on average, remained in the clique for eight years.

- Most gangs concentrate in impoverished environments in urban neighborhoods, in which state services, especially social services, are absent.
- Females are limited to minor roles within the gang structure, and most of them prevented from advancing in the gang hierarchies.

Gang Engagement. In Guatemala, youths are driven into gangs by a combination of emotional deprivation at home and attraction to peer groups in the streets.

- Most gang members come from families in which abuse is rampant, and their parents or guardians either neglect their children or are unable to supervise them.
- Gangs offer what no other community institution provides to youth in these communities: a sense of belonging, protection, friendship, and respect. They also provide material resources through criminal activities.

Gang Disengagement. Many gang members disengage from the gang and stop criminal activities. However, the study suggests that this process is more difficult in Guatemala than in El Salvador and Honduras. Most gang cliques do not recognize a legitimate process to leave the gang, even when the leadership grants special permission to members with famed criminal careers. Hence, gang disengagement usually occurs when individuals are able to move away from the gang-controlled neighborhood.

- Gang structures and dynamics of violence limit the tolerance of gang leaders toward “deserters.”
- To avoid adverse consequences, an individual who decides to leave the gang must hide away, move to another area inside or outside the country, seek protection whenever available from the criminal justice system in exchange for information, or wait for the clique to disappear.
- However, on average, gang members spend eight years of their life as members of the gang. They join the gang around 13 years old and leave it when they reach 21, following the life-course maturation.
- Several conditions prompt the decision to disengage from the gang and start a complicated process full of setbacks. The most common factors behind disengagement are personal maturation, traumatic experiences, religious conversion, and family and personal relationships.
- Individuals who build social networks outside the gang can access resources to move away from the gang environment and have a higher likelihood of disengagement success.

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.

- Former gang members face constant discrimination and stigmatization from the community and society at large.
- Discrimination and systemic stigmatization prevent former gang members from finding job opportunities and training programs. It also affects their abilities to respond emotionally to the demands of life outside the gang.

Policy Implications. Programs should prioritize prevention through family- and community-based interventions targeting young children and their parents before they reach the age of recruitment and during the first stages of membership at the primary level.

- The primary goal should be to make it less likely that youth will join gangs while simultaneously reinforcing family communication and strengthening parenting skills at home.
- Programs should also prioritize rehabilitation and reintegration programs targeting first-time offenders—that is, young gang members who are serving time in detention facilities or are under judicial supervision in the community.
- Programs should also create safe spaces for former gang members away from the gang and former peers. The less contact they have with other gang members, the more likely they will avoid criminal activities and recidivism.