Understanding Intervention Programs and Gang Governance at the Local Level:
The Case of Northern Central America

Key Takeaways

How do residents of neighborhoods affected by youth gangs deal with these groups in northern Central America? How do participants in community prevention programs face gangs in the areas where they implement these programs? These are crucial questions for understanding the scope and limitations of the youth prevention program and initiatives in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These countries are chronically affected by high levels of youth violence and street gangs.

The Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University (FIU), through support from the USAID-funded Latin America and Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention (LAC-YVP) project managed by American Institutes for Research (AIR), conducted a study to understand violence intervention programs and gang governance in northern Central America.

The study is based on 19 focus groups with residents, local subject matter experts, and prevention program workers in communities affected by youth violence in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. LACC conducted this study between June and August 2021 through several group discussions with 177 people in the region.

Youth gangs substantially impact insecurity in the communities where they are present. For example, in some neighborhoods of northern Central America, street gangs regulate public spaces and impose certain orders, even over representatives of state security forces. As a result, and depending on the local power of the gang, many community residents are forced to adjust their behavior to remain safe. In several places, turf disputes and gang wars increase uncertainty and insecurity for the population, making any collective action and community programs impossible. However, not all communities with street gangs are controlled by them. In some cases, street gangs seem to cooperate with other local social actors to advance their interests as well as community interests.

In several cases, gangs are viewed as organic members of the community. They have family ties, personal relationships, and business partnerships that shape how people react to their presence. However, creating community programs in areas lacking safe spaces where youth can participate in recreational programs presents a challenge for people living in marginalized communities controlled by gangs.

Three critical aspects to consider in implementing community-based intervention programs in northern Central America include location, involvement of gang members, and institutional partnerships.

This study has revealed that locations where program activities are developed and implemented matter. Borders and territorial limits imposed by gangs are usually invisible and scarcely understood by government institutions and external organizations working to reduce violence. Gang territorial control determines who can access and work in certain areas and who cannot. The issue is compounded in bordering spaces or in neighborhoods under gang territorial dispute. Program workers must understand the dynamics imposed by territorial control and acknowledge the limits of their programming. Program implementation in these areas requires additional efforts in dialogue and mediation with different groups to develop safe spaces and reduce the likelihood of violent disruption by gangs and other criminal groups.

The former entails the recognition of the need to interact with these groups in areas under their control. This study shows that gang leaders and members can view local violence reduction programs positively. It also reveals that, more frequently than not, gang members and their relatives are eager to engage in program activities if they effectively provide opportunities for development and safety. Prior research has shown that most youth in gangs in northern Central America eventually want to leave the violent group and desist from crime; they wait for a suitable space and program to do so. Programs that recognize this reality and the influence of the gang seem to be more likely to succeed. However, some program managers are frequently—and naturally— conflicted about the possibility of engaging with gang members and their associates. As a result, they avoid engaging with these groups and alienate a critical actor that has the power to boycott local initiatives. Indeed, the former raises ethical and justice-related questions for the organizations working in the communities. However, it is essential to bring such discussions to the table when thinking about strategies and programs to reduce violence in northern Central America.

Finally, this research project has confirmed the high levels of local distrust in government institutions and the public's perception about their inability to solve many of the underlying structural issues of youth violence. Furthermore, in most communities included in this study, law-enforcement agencies are viewed as outsiders and counterproductive to the wellbeing of the community and its members. Initiatives that aim to have these institutions as part of program activities should consider the issue of trust to avoid community engagement issues. The former should not mean the exclusion of government institutions from local programming. Instead, it requires a concerted and sustained effort to work with the community to select reliable government partners and develop community-based oversight mechanisms.