UNDERSTANDING INTERVENTION PROGRAMS AND GANG GOVERNANCE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL:

THE CASE OF NORTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA

Title:
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Executive Summary

How do residents of neighborhoods affected by youth gangs deal with these groups in northern Central America? How do practitioners and community prevention program workers handle gangs in the areas where they implement these programs? How do community members navigate the power of the street gang, especially when they need to remain safe, prevent their children from joining criminal organizations, and participate in community development programs? This report aims to answer these questions and analyze the relationship between youth gangs and the community. The Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University (FIU), through support from the Latin America and Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention (LAC-YVP) project managed by American Institutes for Research (AIR), conducted a study based on nineteen 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. This study also reviews the available public opinion survey data linking gang presence and insecurity in those same countries. Based on these discussions, this report outlines residents' views on youth gangs. In addition, it describes the strategies community residents and local practitioners adopt to participate in and implement youth violence prevention initiatives and programs. The findings reveal the following:

- According to surveys conducted by Vanderbilt University and the University of Central America, youth gangs substantially impact insecurity in the communities where they are present. In some neighborhoods, street gangs regulate public spaces and impose certain orders, even over representatives of state security forces. Most community residents learn to adjust their behavior to remain safe, depending on the local power of the gang.

- According to the focus groups, 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 other places, turf disputes and gang wars increase uncertainty and insecurity for the population, making any collective action and community programs impossible.

- Focus group participants explained how gang-related violence allows them to exert their community control through three general mechanisms. First, they extort and impose taxes on the population living in their territories. Second, they manage and take over businesses and economic opportunities —licit and illicit—within their communities. And third, they arbitrate social relationships, resolve personal disputes, and dispense penalties on behalf of community members.

- In several cases, gangs were viewed as organic members of the community. They have family ties, personal relationships, and business partnerships that shape how people react to the presence of gangs. However, gangs were seen primarily as a source of insecurity and risk for non-gang youths living in the community.

- 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.

- Many focus group respondents contended that the family plays a critical role and must be analyzed when discussing youth gang prevention. For example, parents working several jobs trying to support their families may leave their children in unsupervised neighborhoods laden with street gangs.

- Focus group members mentioned that low educational attainment and poverty are among several factors contributing to youth joining gangs. In addition, they maintained that society often discriminates against youth living in marginalized neighborhoods.

- According to the focus group participants, there are a variety of religious groups operating in the region. They discussed the Evangelical church and its work in gang prevention and reinsertion more often in the case of El Salvador.

- Many focus group participants indicated that numerous organizations work with youth in northern Central America. Yet, these programs do not operate seven days a week, and youth must return to their neighborhoods, which are often laden with gangs.

- Institutions and NGOs must recognize that gang zones are dynamic and change as these groups expand and lose territory. This study revealed that NGO workers must understand the local dynamics and the gang dividing lines. Program implementors frequently need to revise their strategies to approach the community to adapt to the changing conditions on the ground.

- Gang members often want to understand what programs are offered in the *barrios*. Some gang members and their children participate directly in intervention programs out of genuine interest in contributing to community development and reducing violence. Yet, other gang leaders send spies to find out more about these community interventions.

- Focus group participants emphasized the need for intervention programs to understand the local context. It is also important that intervention programs employ people who are known in the community and who are not perceived as outsiders.

- Some focus group participants, particularly NGO workers and implementors, stressed the importance of methodologies and best practices grounded in understanding the relationships between different local actors.

- Some focus group members responded that some communities in dire need of aid do not receive the appropriate resources.

- Three critical aspects to consider in implementing community-based intervention programs in northern Central America are location, engagement with gang members, and institutional partnerships. Location refers to the need to identify gang territorial control and their invisible borders. Engagement with gang members entails the need to acknowledge their influence in program dynamics. Finally, institutional partnerships relate to the necessity of weighing issues of public trust in government institutions when engaging communities affected by violence.

Introduction

In some Central American communities affected by violence, gangs determine the actions and govern their active members' lives. They also rule over the lives of the "civilian" non-gang population. They tax economic activities, arbitrate conflicts and social exchanges, and provide access to education and employment opportunities within their turf boundaries. Some scholars have labeled this phenomenon as "criminal governance" (Arias 2017; Snyder and Duran-Martinez 2009; Barnes 2017).

One of the main conclusions of recent research on gang desistance conducted in northern Central America (Cruz, Coombes, et al. 2020, Cruz, Tanyu, et al. 2020, Cruz, Rosen, Vorobyeva, et al. 2017) is that after spending years in the gang, most gang members think about the possibility of leaving the group and stop criminal activities associated with gang life. According to these studies, most youth reach a point where the gang and its activities are no longer appealing. As life responsibilities begin to increase, they seek ways to transform their lives and abandon crime. However, as they separate from the group, they realize that they must navigate an environment that remains controlled by gangs, either by its former clique or by groups that were considered rivals or enemies in the recent past.

 Street gangs' ability to impose limits on people's behavior may represent an impediment to developing intervention programs to prevent gang engagement, mitigate youth violence, and curb criminal careers. The presence of gangs not only reduces the likelihood that their members will abandon their illegal activities but, in some cases, also prevents the establishment of organic and external prevention initiatives. In addition, the supremacy of street gangs in several communities affects the lives of youths and civilians who are not gang members and who refuse to participate in violence and crime. However, intervention programs have been established in several localities and have avoided significant backlash from gangs and criminal groups.

Youth violence prevention programs in Latin America increasingly recognize the reality of criminal governance (Moncada 2016). In several communities affected by high levels of crime, criminal violence is related to the growth of areas under the control of non-state armed actors and criminal groups. Often, these groups replace state institutions in regulating coercion and the distribution of services (Cruz and Vorobyeva, 2021). This reality forces intervention programs to address the uncertainties produced by violent competition between several non-state actors.

Assessments of interventions to prevent youth violence in the region show that community-based interventions with multi-component strategies involving a diversity of key actors— formal and informal— seem to be more effective in reducing youth violence (Atienzo et al. 2017).

A critical gap in the knowledge about youth violence and gang activity is how the communities view the issues raised by youth gangs and how they respond to the challenges imposed by

them. How do community members relate to street gangs, especially when they need to remain safe and participate in violence prevention programs implemented in the community? This project aims to contribute to the discussion about governance and intervention programs in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. In addition, it seeks to contribute to the understanding of the local contexts in which violence prevention programs are implemented. Finally, it aims to understand the conditions under which the population, particularly the youth, circumnavigate the presence and activities of street gangs in some Central American communities, where intervention programming is necessary to reduce violence in their neighborhoods.

This research was conducted by the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University (FIU) in association with local partners in Central America. Its main results are based on nineteen focus groups conducted in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras between June and August 2021. More than 170 people participated in these focus groups, including intervention program implementors, community residents, and non-gang youth who reside in areas affected by violence and gang presence. The groups provided qualitatively rich information about how people view youth gangs and their violence, how they adapt and respond to the challenges imposed by their control in the communities, and how they view and collaborate with the prevention initiatives advanced in their communities by different actors and institutions.

This report is divided into five sections. First, it briefly describes the preparation and implementation of nineteen focus groups across northern Central America. We utilized focus groups as the primary data collection strategy for this study. Second, it reviews existing survey data about the relationship between gang presence and insecurity. In doing this, we provide a background to the focus groups' results. We also confirm prior research that shows the large impact that street gangs have on people's insecurity in the region. The third section describes how and to what extent youth gangs exert control over the population in the communities where they are present. It focuses on the specific mechanisms of how youth gangs exert control over the people and how local practitioners and community residents, including the youth, respond to such power. In the fourth section, this report offers perspectives about local intervention programs. It identifies the strategies that community residents use to participate in violence intervention programs safely. Finally, in the last section, this report summarizes the main conclusions of the study.

Methodology

To answer the research questions about gang governance and intervention programs in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, we conducted a series of focus groups in the three countries. With the support of Asesores Nacionales Especializados para el Desarrollo (ANED) in Honduras, Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPADES) in Guatemala, and a group of specialists led by Luis Enrique Amaya in El Salvador, the FIU research team solicited the help of community leaders, adults who live in gang-affected communities, and program implementors. Between June and August 2021, 19 focus groups were conducted in different cities (Exhibit 1) across northern Central America with 177 participants.

Exhibit 1. Focus Group by Location

Country	City	Date	N	%
Guatemala	Amatitlan	July 1, 2021	9	5.1
Guatemala	San Pedro Ayampuc	July 5, 2021	10	5.6
Guatemala	Mixco	July 7, 2021	11	6.2
Guatemala	Villa Nueva-Cuidad Peronia	July 24, 2021	9	5.1
Guatemala	Cuidad de Guatemala	August 10, 2021	12	6.8
Guatemala	Ciudad de Guatemala	August 10, 2021	9	5.1
El Salvador	San Salvador	June 23, 2021	10	5.6
El Salvador	Soyapango	June 23, 2021	9	5.1
El Salvador	San Salvador	June 24, 2021	10	5.6
El Salvador	Tonacatepeque	June 24, 2021	8	4.5
El Salvador	Tonacatepeque	June 25, 2021	8	4.5
Honduras	Tegucigalpa	June 17, 2021	7	4.0
Honduras	Tegucigalpa	June 17, 2021	8	4.5
Honduras	Tegucigalpa	June 18, 2021	11	6.2
Honduras	Tegucigalpa	June 19, 2021	12	6.8
Honduras	San Pedro Sula	June 23, 2021	9	5.1
Honduras	San Pedro Sula	June 24, 2021	9	5.1
Honduras	San Pedro Sula	June 24, 2021	9	5.1
Honduras	San Pedro Sula	June 25, 2021	7	4.0
		Total	177	100.0

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the security of the participants and data collectors was essential to our study. For the implementation of the focus groups, the research team underwent a full review with FIU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that all provisions of human subject protection were followed during the project. In this section, we summarize the key elements of the methodology utilized.

This study also reviewed the results of public opinion surveys in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The surveys were conducted by LAPOP Lab at Vanderbilt University in Guatemala and Honduras in late 2016 and early 2017, and by Institute for Public Opinion (IUDOP) the University of Central America in El Salvador in 2016. We selected these surveys to do a review of the data about gangs and insecurity because these studies were the most recent available that included questions about gang presence in the community and feelings of insecurity. The reports published by LAPOP Lab (Cohen, Lupu, and Zechmeister 2017) and IUDOP (Cruz, Aguilar, and Vorovyeva 2017) provide the details about the methodologies used in those surveys.

Recruitment of focus group participants

To participate in the focus groups, participants should reside or work in communities facing issues related to street gangs and youth violence. Geographical location and the existence of ongoing violence prevention programs were also taken into consideration. The basic characteristic and common to all the participants in the different focus groups was that they should be residents or work (in the case of program implementers) in the communities of interest.

Focus groups were organized with four different types of populations:
a) Community residents of both sexes older than 26
b) Young females between 18 and 26
c) Young males between 18 and 26
d) Program implementors and institutional representatives of both sexes

Exhibit 2 shows the number of groups per category.

Exhibit 2. Types of Focus Groups

Type of Focus Group	Age of Participants	N
Community resident of both sexes	27 years and older	6
Young Females	18-26 years	4
Young Males	18-26 years	4
Institutional Representatives	18 years and older	5
	Total	19

Participants that live in communities affected by gangs were recruited through diverse organizations, churches, and local institutions. First, recruiters from the partner organizations used a screener questionnaire developed by FIU and designed to identify the persons eligible to participate in each group. Then, using snowball sampling techniques and institutional contacts,

each team approached several potential participants in each country. For instance, in El Salvador, connections with local Evangelical churches played an essential role in recruiting participants. In Guatemala, the long-standing collaboration between IEPADES and local governments and NGOs was instrumental in accessing participants in communities most affected by gangs in Mixco, Villanueva, or Zona 18 in Guatemala City.

General description of the focus groups

Each focus group was conducted by a moderator and an FIU researcher who served as co-moderator. Moderators had the responsibility of conducting the group discussion according to a script previously developed by the FIU team. Moderators steered the group discussion to obtain the required information with enough quality and depth. The co-moderator had the responsibility of making sure every participant kept anonymity throughout the duration of the focus group.

Each focus group began with an introduction by the moderator. Participants were then asked to adopt and be identified by a number to protect their anonymity. The moderator also discussed the ethical aspects of the study and made sure that FIU's commitment to privacy and confidentiality was explained and understood. Written consent forms were then distributed to each participant, which required each participant to sign. Upon securing the return of the signed consent forms the focus group began, and members of the consulting group audio recorded each session.

After reiterating all the measures taken to protect confidentiality, most participants showed great interest and initiative during the discussions once a sense of trust was built amongst the participants. Such trust was mostly built around the understanding that an international university with no affiliation to the local government or security forces was conducting the study. Participants who lived in communities were eager to share their stories and how their lives have been shaped by living with gangs. Experts and social workers who participated described both effective and non-effective techniques employed when working in these communities.

The moderator in each focus group followed a discussion guide that had been prepared by the FIU research team prior to all sessions. The guide provided a script for conducting the session and reflected the questions and topics that should be addressed as part of the discussion (see Appendix 2 for a copy of the discussion guide). The guide was comprised of three sections. First, it listed the basic information that should be collected about the group: name of the moderator, number of participants, place, date, and time of the session. Second, it provided a guide about the steps that the moderator and co-moderators should follow before starting the session discussion. These steps included the presentation of the general aims of the discussion, providing the basic information about the session, responding to any questions or concern about the session, reading the informed consent aloud, obtaining the informed consent of all

participants, and laying out the ground rules of the session. The third section details the topics to be discussed in the session in the form of questions directed by the moderator to participants.

The topics addressed revolved around five general themes. First, the characteristics of the participants and their views about issues of security in the community. Second, the relationship between the community residents, street gangs, and youth involved in criminal activities. Third, the actions and responses available in the community to reduce violence and help young people avoid becoming involved in gangs. Fourth, the views about who rules in the community and how they exert their authority. And fifth, the participants opinions about the violence intervention programs implemented in the community and how to improve them.

Each focus group was unique. Different subjects and stories shared by participants guided the discussion. The moderator was trained to further explore the topics outlined in the script. Additionally, the moderator tried to generate respectful debates amongst participants to explore similarities and differences amongst members of different communities.

The FIU research team monitored data collection and kept a logbook, which included length of the focus group, location, respondent type, and gender of respondents. The research team consulted the audio recordings as necessary to verify content. Recordings of the focus groups were transcribed in Spanish by the local partners and then translated into English by the FIU team.

To mitigate the transmission of Covid-19 and successfully carry out each focus group, we secured covered outdoor locations (basketball courts or patios in community centers) to maintain a proper distance amongst participants and ensure ventilation. Before the start of each focus group, the research team provided physical distancing guides, such as tape on the floor and signs on walls, to ensure that individuals remain at least 6 feet apart as they enter and exit the premise. Upon arrival, participants were given a facial mask and asked to keep the mask fully covering their mouth and nose throughout the duration of the focus group. Additionally, 13 seats (1 moderator and 12 participants) were placed before participants arrived with a 6 feet radius amongst each other. Participants were asked to remain seated throughout the event and were dismissed one by one after the finalization of the discussion.

Issues implementing focus groups in northern Central American communities

One common issue in recruiting participants was the difficulty of enrolling young people to discuss their views in groups. Several youths manifested that they are not used to participating in a group where they express their opinions about issues afflicting them. Several potential participants stated that such a practice sometimes makes them feel exposed. In addition, young people in the targeted Central American communities are usually economically active, many in

the informal sector earning minimum incomes. Frequently, their wages are not enough to respond to the needs of their household. This implies that amongst the list of priorities lies family, home, and work; anything outside of that is secondary. Although they have more time flexibility to participate in the groups, they did not want to spend time in an activity that will not generate direct cash revenue. Older people living in neighborhoods with a heavy gang presence seemed to be more comfortable expressing their views about the issues of insecurity facing their communities.

The most common issue encountered by the research team was the participants' fear of leaving their homes because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, because of the nature of the study, some people have reservations about youth violence when initially contacted. In one case, after being recruited to participate in the discussion, one participant decided to leave after the moderator went through the information contained in the informed consent form. The subject then explained to the research team that he had left because his family had been forcibly displaced. Extortion by gangs had forced them into hiding in another neighborhood in the city.

Another issue encountered was the location and timing of each focus group. Participants feared that partaking in an activity like this could present some risk given the dynamics in the neighborhood or community in which they live. In some cases, potential participants contended the areas where the focus groups would be held were insecure. As a result, some participants declined to enroll due to their feelings of insecurity, especially after learning that the research team would record their participation.

Analytical Strategy

The analyses of the narratives and material produced by the focus groups aimed to identify general characteristics of the dynamics and mechanisms of governance in the communities where intervention programs are implemented. It sought to describe and categorize the relationships that community residents establish with street gangs. It also sought to identify the different ways in which the community responds to the challenges of insecurity posed by the activities of street gangs and youth involved in crime and what strategies they develop to participate in violence reduction programs. The FIU research team created a codebook with more than 40 entries to classify most of the topics described above. Once the information was classified according to those codes, the team developed types or categories for each area of inquiry. For instance, regarding governance, the analyses developed types of gang rule and mechanisms of rule. For intervention programs, the analytical exercise classified them according to the profile of the organizations implementing the programs.

Limitations

This study aims to understand how people in communities affected by gang violence related to these criminal actors. It also seeks to understand how community residents participate in intervention programs when the gang exerts an oversized power over the community. Since the study is based on focus groups, a qualitative approach, it cannot make claims of representativeness of all the northern Central American communities, nor can it identify the most frequent trends in each country with statistical confidence. Instead, it describes the dynamics of governance, social relationships, and views toward prevention programs that seem more salient in communities affected by gangs where intervention programs are implemented. The study provides a voice to community residents who must address the dominance of street gangs in their neighborhoods while participating in violence intervention programs.

Youth Gangs and Insecurity in Northern Central America

Street gangs are a fixture in several urban communities across northern Central America. Born in some American cities in the 1970s (Ward 2013, Cruz 2013, USAID 2006), several groups transplanted and expanded in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras by the early 1990s (Savenije 2009, Cruz 2013). In the early 2000s, they had become a critical security concern for some governments in the region (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers 2009, Wolf 2012). An extensive assessment from USAID in 2006 estimated that the number of gang members in Central America might have reached 305,000 (USAID 2006, 6). Subsequent estimations and assessments placed the number significantly lower, at approximately 70,000 members (UNODC 2007, International Crisis Group 2017). However, they all indicated the increasing role of these groups in the criminal landscape of the region.

The way gangs relate with the community and, particularly, how community members react and interact with them has been a black box in our understanding of the phenomenon in the region. In studies about northern Central America, there is little information about how communities relate with gang members and work to prevent youth violence through intervention programs. The conventional wisdom has been that gangs and youth involved in criminal organizations contribute to insecurity and impede community development efforts.

Studies using Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer data have repeatedly shown that the presence of gangs in the community increases people's perceptions of insecurity (Cruz 2009, Malone 2012, Rosen 2021b). Furthermore, other studies have revealed that people living in neighborhoods controlled by gangs tend to engage less in different forms of political and social participation (Córdova 2019). To corroborate and illustrate the impact that street gangs have on feelings of insecurity, we utilized survey data from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras in 2016 and 2017.[1] We used the surveys studies conducted by Vanderbilt University in Honduras and Guatemala (Cohen, Lupu, and Zechmeister 2017), and a survey on police legitimacy carried out in El Salvador by the University of Central America (UCA) in late 2016 (Cruz, Aguilar, and Vorobyeva 2017). All these surveys included questions about perceptions of insecurity and the extent to which the neighborhood where the respondent lives is affected by gangs. The question about perceptions of insecurity read: "Speaking of the neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?" The question about the impact of street gangs was worded as follows: "To what extent do you think your neighborhood is affected by gangs? Would you say a lot, somewhat, a little or none?" We use the latter question as a proxy of the reported

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[1] Recent editions of the AmericasBarometer survey did not include the question about gang presence. Thus, we used the data of the last survey where questions about gangs are included.

presence of gangs in the community. These survey items allow us to establish an empirical relationship between the apparent presence of gangs in the community and the levels of insecurity manifested by the respondents in northern Central American countries.

We ran a linear multivariate regression with each country's data to determine whether the presence of gangs had any relationship with fear of crime. We conducted these regressions controlling for the most important demographic variables: sex, age, level of education, place of residence, and economic status. We present the results of the regressions in detail in Appendix 1. Still, exhibits 3, 4, and 5 reveal the adjusted predictions of perceptions of insecurity by reported gang presence in separate graphs per country. Based on the regression results for each country, these exhibits show the predicted score in the scale of insecurity according to the reported gang presence.

In Guatemala, for example, people who reported the highest gang presence in the community are likely to score on average nearly 70 points (from 0 to 100) on the scale of perceptions of insecurity. However, people who reported "some" or "little" gang presence in their communities are likely to score approximately 53 points on the scale of insecurity, while survey respondents who reported no gang presence likely score around 36 on the same scale, holding all other variables constant.
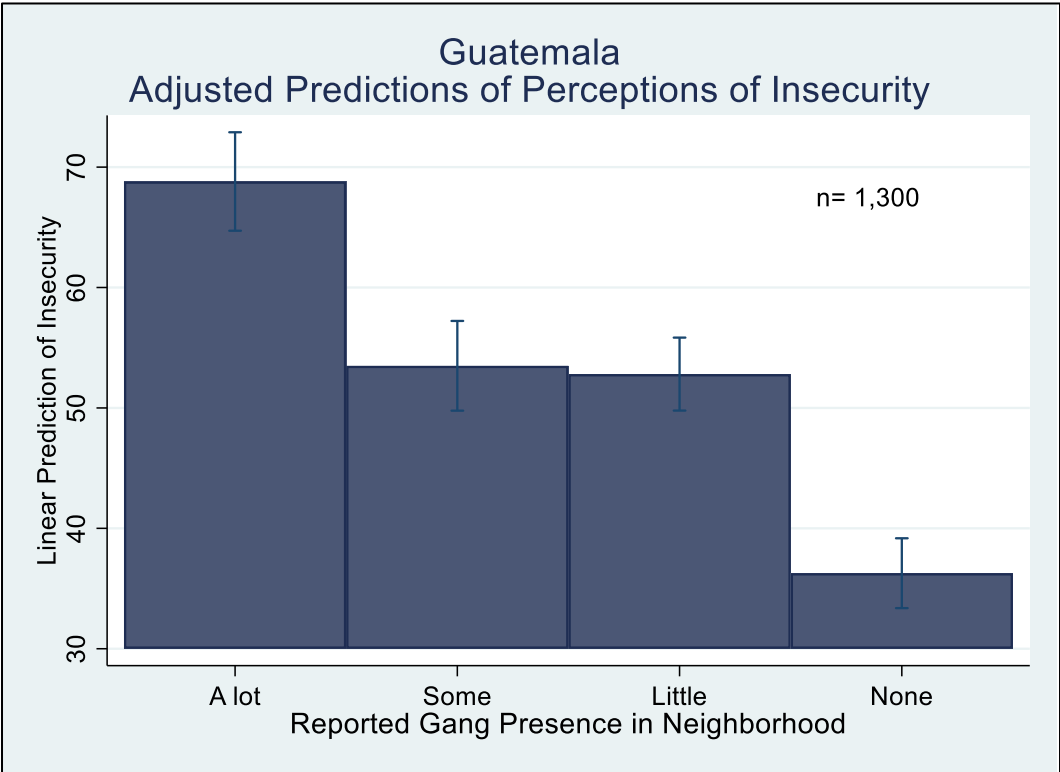

Exhibit 3. Adjusted predictions of perceptions of insecurity by reported gang presence in Guatemala (95% CI)
Data source: AmericasBarometer 2016/17.

In other words, and according to the findings, the more street gangs are viewed in the community, the higher the respondent manifests insecurity. In all three countries, the results show a linear relationship between gang presence in the community and perceptions of insecurity.

In El Salvador, based on the regression results, people who reported a lot of gang presence in their communities are likely to score above 60, on average, on the scale of insecurity. However, this average is significantly lower among those who reported "some" gang presence (48), "little" gang presence (44), and no gang presence (37), keeping all other conditions constant. Again, the less gang presence, the fewer fears of crime among the Salvadoran population.
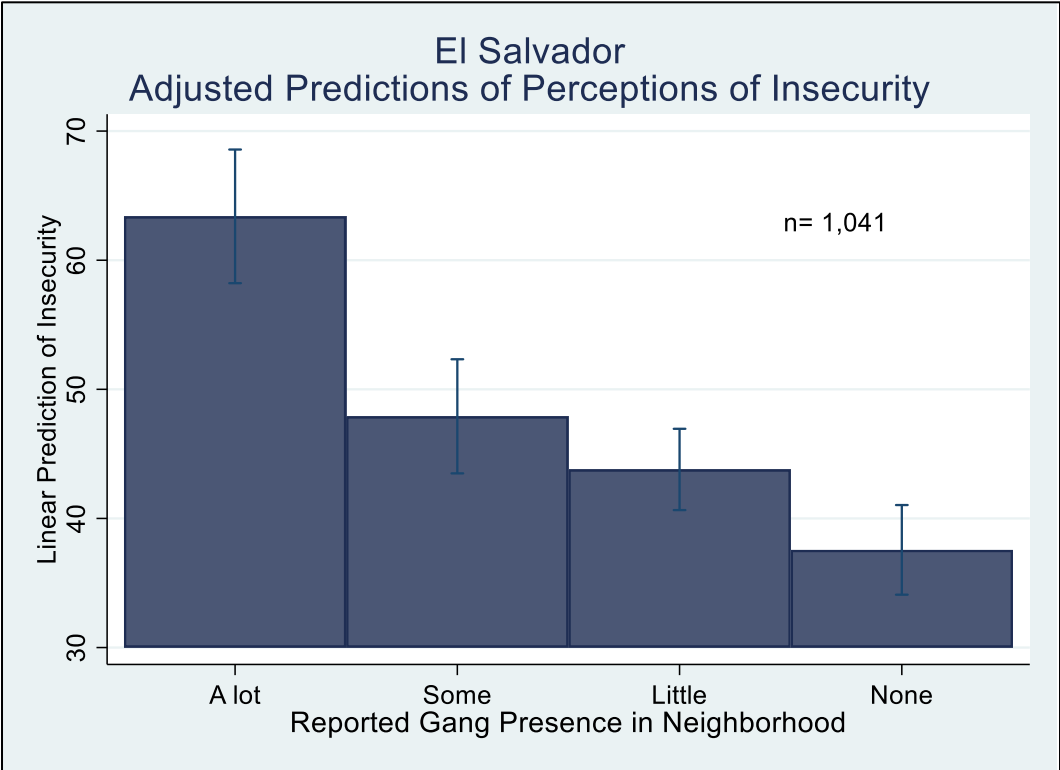
Exhibit 4. Adjusted predictions of perceptions of insecurity by reported gang presence in El Salvador (95% CI)
Data source: IUDOP, 2017.

Finally, in Honduras, the regression data reveals a nearly perfect linear relationship between gang presence and perceptions of insecurity. The predicted scores of insecurity are from an average of 67 in the case of people who view a lot of street gangs in their barrios to an average of 34 in the case of people who do not report gang presence in their community. In summary, for the three countries, insecurity is significantly related to the presence of gangs in the community.
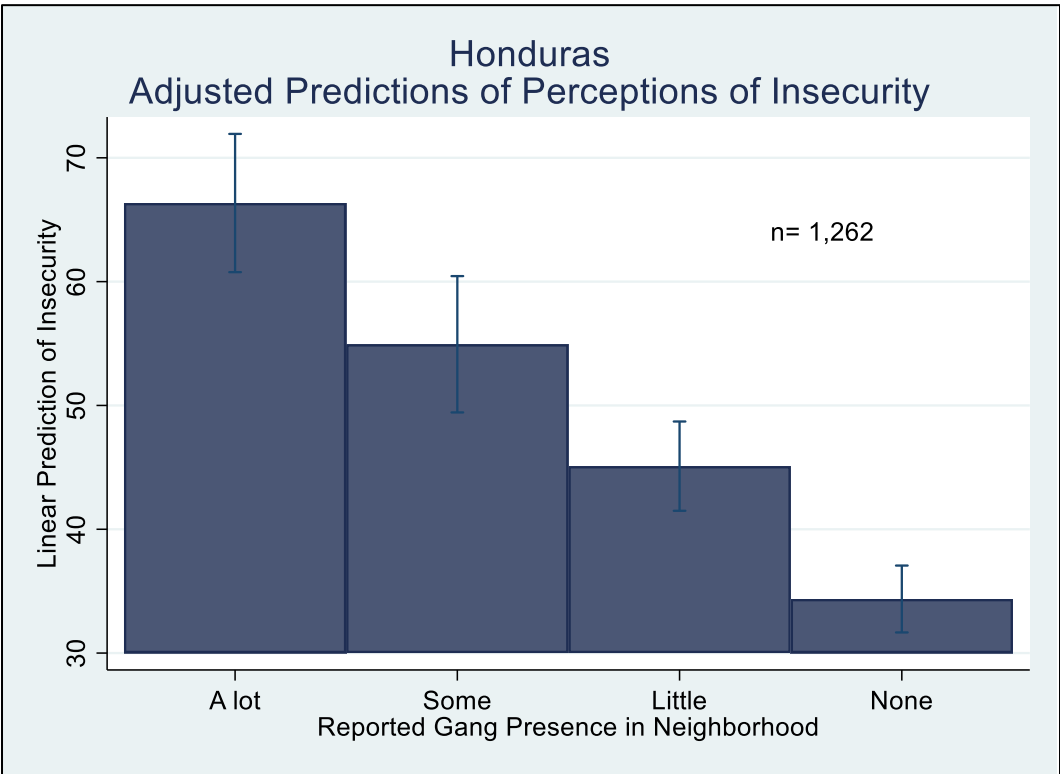
Exhibit 5. Adjusted predictions of perceptions of insecurity by reported gang presence in Honduras (95% CI)
Data source: AmericasBarometer 2016/17.

These data reveal the significant impact that street gangs have on the communities where they operate. Moreover, in several neighborhoods, they constitute one of the primary social actors. They have the capability to impose certain social orders and rule over the collective behavior of gang members and community residents alike. This is what several scholars have called "criminal governance" (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo 2020, Arias 2006, Lessing 2020): the imposition of rules and prescriptions of behavior over community members (Lessing 2020). In this section of the report, we unpack the relationship between community members and youth gangs in environments with a significant gang presence. The considerable impact that gangs have over community insecurity should not obscure the fact that people, and the community at large, still carry on with their lives and activities under such security conditions. How do community members navigate the power of the street gang, especially when they need to remain safe, prevent their children from joining criminal organizations, and participate in community development programs?

In the following sections, we address these questions based on the testimonies provided by the focus group participants in communities with a substantial gang presence. First, we discuss the scenarios of criminal rule; in other words, we try to answer the questions of who rules in the community, who imposes the key social conventions acknowledged and followed by most

community members, and how we can classify such systems of rule. Second, we attempt to create a typology of the mechanisms under which gangs exert their control. And finally, we describe the relationships that community residents establish with youth gangs. We, however, do not attempt to list every possible regulation or collective policy imposed by gang members in communities under their control. In fact, this is the first attempt to systematize the information collected through several group discussions and hundreds of statements. Instead, we identify the most critical prescriptions that allow the community to function and keep most of their members safe despite the gang presence and how programs are implemented under such circumstances.

Youth Gangs and the Community

This section presents the focus group results that delve into the relationships between the youth gangs and the community. Based on the participants' testimonies, we build a series of typologies about community governance in northern Central America. First, in responding to who rules in the community, we identified three types of rule concerning street gangs. Second, we identify three mechanisms of gang dominance. Finally, we explore how the community establishes relationships with youth involved in gangs.

Who rules the community?

The question about who rules the community may seem irrelevant. Conventional wisdom and a long tradition in political sociology contend that formal authorities do (Weber 2009). However, to understand how community-based intervention programs manage to be implemented in areas with high levels of insecurity, we need to acknowledge how community residents view the issue of order and governance.

Based on the results of the focus groups, we identified three types of rule (or regimes) in communities with a gang presence. First, communities in which a particular gang enjoys uncontested power. In these cases, gangs seem to be recognized by all community members as the most significant actor in the social dynamics of the *barrio* or community. Second, communities where gangs share governance with other actors. These other actors are the police, community organizations, or civil institutions recognized by most community members. Third, communities where different gangs dispute territorial control. These are communities that are in bordering zones between opposing groups or in neighborhoods that have faced the collapse of a dominant gang or gang leader.

Youth gangs play a critical role in the existing social order in several communities in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Whether dominant or not, these groups are important social actors in several *barrios* where anti-violence intervention programs need to be established. Classifying the forms of rule associated with gangs is essential to understand better how community residents relate to the street gangs. The nature of the gang presence shapes the conditions in which people relate to the groups. It also shapes the opportunities that allow intervention programs to be established and developed in the community. In the following pages, we discuss the types of rule outlined above.

Uncontested rule

In some communities of northern Central America, street gangs exert uncontested control over the social dynamics of the neighborhood. Intervention programs, businesses, social activities, and regular life seem to be determined by the gang's presence and their prescriptions. A resident of a community with a heavy gang presence in San Salvador described how anyone who wants to start an intervention program in the community needs to secure gang authorization first:

> The authorization to enter... In all communities, I believe. That the first entity to ask for permission, authorization is with them [the gang members]. Not with anyone else because if there is Adesco (a form of community association), you must… look for the association, to say the least, the Adesco. But then Adesco is obliged to tell the boys what there will be, so that they can give them permission or endorsement to implement that program or project in the activity (Participant 6, Focus group No. 1, El Salvador).

The gang's dominance is usually established in comparison with the limited or lack of capacity of the police or state forces to counteract the gang's power. In those cases, the police are viewed as bought off by the gang or in fear of the gang's power. A participant of focus groups comprised of adults living in communities with gang presence in Tegucigalpa illustrated this power:

> Gangs rule because…because I laugh to see two policemen in the patrols, in a neighborhood where there are up to 15, 20, 30 people involved in gangs, two policemen for 30. That's nothing! Sometimes it is the same police who have respect for the gangs. I have seen them, shaking hands. I tell you: how is one supposed to trust the police in our country? People in the police should have integrity… because now for 5,000 or 10,000 lempiras any policeman is sold, bought off. In my neighborhood… in my neighborhood the gangs generally rule there, there is a police post, but it is a post that is for decoration (Participant 3, Focus Group No. 4, Honduras).

In Guatemala, a person who works in a violence prevention program for a suburban municipality provided the following response when asked who rules the community. It illustrates the complexity of the relationships established by gangs in places they control:

> Unfortunately, we know that the gang controls the place, and it could be said that the relationship [between the gang and the community] is ambivalent. But no, the relationship is parasitic in reality, so to speak, because the neighbors do not complain. So, it is known that the gangs have control of the sectors, the area, and the places. And people learn to live with them [the gangs] in certain ways so as not to be affected or not be affected in a violent aggressive way by gang members. I believe the point is not whether the relationship is good or not. It is a relationship. I don't know how to call it, but it is more complex than if they get along or not. The perception is that they [the community and gangs] do get along, but it is a relationship of fear too (Focus Group No. 3, Guatemala).

Territorial control is at the center of the gangs' dominance in the communities. The previous statements underline the importance of controlling the places and areas where the gang settles and develops its activities. Uncontested rule over a territory entails, first, a clear definition of the territory and, second, effective surveillance over such territory. A young man who participated in a focus group in Tegucigalpa described the logic of borders and surveillance:

> In our case, there are established areas. The one next to ours is from community 30 de Noviembre. If you enter there as if they do not know you, then, they arrive and ask you what you are doing there. These entries belong to the gangs, and they look at who enters and who leaves. If they do not know you, one of the things that you must do if you want to enter those neighborhoods is call someone you know and enter with that person and they don't do anything to you (Participant 2, Focus Group No. 3, Honduras).

A young woman in El Salvador described with some detail the form in which gangs maintain systems of surveillance over the territory, deploying several members throughout the community:

> For me, to be able to enter the community, I have to enter through Polygon 8. At the exit of Polygon 7, there is one [gang member]. At the entrance of my block, there is another; and in the corner, there is another. There is another one at the end of my block. I always see someone from ... I always see them asking for an ID or they force men to take off their shirt [looking for tattoos]. Things like that (Participant 6, Focus group No. 3, El Salvador).

Shared Governance

In some communities affected by street gangs, these groups do not seem to exert absolute dominance over the neighborhood. In several places, local gangs appear to share authority with other groups, including state forces, community organizations, and civil society institutions, such as churches. Our research did not explore how common this type of arrangement is. However, in some testimonies and narratives, the emerging picture is one of complexity, with no single actor holding authority but several ones sharing spaces of power. For example, a participant in the focus group with program implementers in Tegucigalpa described it in the following way:

> Very well, the issue is that it is a matter of systems. There are several systems that interact in the same territory, because [there is] the official state security system, who interacts in the territory, but there is also a local system of social security and community safety. It is this system that includes how community [gang] leaders behave with people, that is another system that is on the same terrain, so I would say that this must be interpreted by all the systems that interact in each territory. Because it is not a hierarchical question, it is a circumstantial question because, look…we can walk in the communities safe in a moment, but if the circumstances of that system change suddenly… (Participant 6, Focus Group 1, Tegucigalpa).

In other words, gang dominance is circumstantial, and it depends on the behavior of other actors, especially state actors, who command enough power to contest gang domination. A Salvadoran participant made this point considering the government's efforts to recover territory as part of the Plan de Control Territorial:

> I feel that there is no one who decides they or the others. Because when this Territorial (Control) Plan was established, or something like that, I remember that there was always a police patrol in the corner, right where gangs had been before. But then, that was forgotten because the police are always transitory, but only in passing. Let's say that they are there just from time to time. But I don't feel that gang's rule either, I don't feel that either… (Unidentified participant, Focus Group 3, El Salvador).

Contested Governance

In some communities or zones within the communities, the dynamics of gang governance are determined by contestation. As a result, rival gangs compete for the control of the community, which tends to increase the levels of conflict, violence, and insecurity. A person who participated in the focus group with adults in San Salvador described the importance of determining the rules resulting from the conflicts between gangs to navigate the relationship with the predominant gang safely:

> I think that those rules were given because there was a time when the opposite community came to try to get into this community. So, I think that's why those things happened. There were attacks. So, it was very ugly because they had, let's say, like they control over all the entrances and exits of the same neighborhood. But it was for that very reason, because before they entered and did crazy things themselves. Well like that… that one gang is bloodier than the other (Participant 9, Focus Group 1, El Salvador).

Dynamics of contestation and ambiguous gang dominance are more common in border areas between communities. For example, a community leader in San Pedro Sula described the difficulties of navigating the rules in place given the constant shifts of gang control:

> The problem is that there is no law. That is, the day before yesterday they killed two people in Barrio 10 de septiembre, and that community has historically been the territory of Barrio 18. But historically, because in the last two or three years that has become a border. You have no idea! So, at the end of the day, there might be some security today but might be something else tomorrow. So, it is a changing dynamic… (Participant 4, Focus Group 7, Honduras).

Another participant referred to the difficulties that the community association had establishing the community center, which housed the violence prevention programs, due to the contested nature of the territory:

> Because they [the community] didn't have a place and the place they had is their own center. This center was right on the border, it was right in the middle of a crossing point

and different gangs fought on that crossing point, where we wanted to be able to install the community center (Participant 2, Focus Group 7, Honduras).

The Mechanisms of Gang Dominance

Gang dominance is manifested in several areas of community life, and it is not only about preventing rivals and the police from encroaching upon the gang's territory. According to the focus groups, preventing the intrusion of rival gangs and the police into the turf consumes a great deal of the gangs' resources and time. However, once the group has consolidated its dominance over the neighborhood, it devotes significant time to managing social relationships and imposing some sort of social order. There are three areas in which gangs exert their rule over the community. First, gangs impose levies or taxes on the community through extortion. Second, gangs regulate economic activities beyond extortions and security taxes. This regulation involves legal and illegal activities. For example, a typical illicit activity is selling drugs or managing the local trafficking of illegal commodities. Gangs also help local community members to secure job opportunities in the formal market. And third, gangs may operate as arbiters, enforcers, and judges in common conflicts within the community. These conflicts range from disputes among neighbors to domestic violence.

Extorting and Imposing Taxes on the Community

In several communities across northern Central America, gangs utilize their territorial control to extort the population and extract monetary resources from the areas where they operate. Although not all gangs extort or impose taxes on the people under their influence in the same fashion, cash extraction constitutes one of the primary sources of revenue for the gang in several communities. In some neighborhoods, gangs impose levies on every member of the community, as the following exchange between participants in one of the focus groups in Guatemala illustrates:

> Interviewer: I want to talk about the economic impact of the gang presence. Do you know about extortions in your communities?
> Participant 6. Yes, all the stores, *tortillerías*, even street vendors now.
> Participant. 8. Also, street vendors, people who are selling, taxi drivers, bus attendants, drivers, and so on.
> Participant 9. There [in my community], everyone pays extortion. There is no one that does not pay, most of the houses. Even the houses pay extortion there.
> Participant. 8. Even the grannies pay!
> Participant 3. Ah yes, there in the neighborhood where I live, even the street peddlers, who walk through the crossroads at the traffic lights must pay, so that they are not going to kill them because it is very dangerous (Focus Group 6, Guatemala).

In other places, the imposition of extortions and taxes is conceived as a transaction for a service. For example, a Salvadoran participant described the complaint he presented to the gang leader

because the gang had failed to protect his car from somebody scratching it while parked in the neighborhood:

> Where I lived, they asked you for money for taking care of the car, but they didn't take care of it! Speaking of the situation, I told [the gang leader]: "Here ... You ... Someone scratched my car and fled, okay?" Then, you go and tell them: "Hey, look, I'm paying you, okay? What's up, they scratched me?" [The guy responds,] "Ok. That's okay. Keep it [the money], don't give me anything. I'm going to figure out who scratched it up and then we'll fix it…" Well… I feel that it [complaining] helps you in a certain way, because it is a business that they have forced on you, well… (Focus Group 1, El Salvador).

In the previous statement, the participant acknowledges that the gang imposed the service of protection on him. Still, he also seems to expect the gang leader to respond to his security demand, which he does.

Managing Economic Activities in the Community

In several places, gangs use their dominance to advance and consolidate their businesses. Other than extortions, drug trafficking remains one of the main illegal commercial activities. In some places, their control over the community allows the gang to take over private spaces and displace families. A young woman discussed the case of a family in her community in Tegucigalpa:

> A family in the neighborhood received a letter from the gang telling them to leave the house. Mostly because they are looking for an area where they see that drugs move a lot, where they can boost the business or build crazy houses [gang headquarters]. They establish crazy houses within the neighborhood or outside, and so the reason they forced this family out was that. They send notes because they liked the area, or they liked how the house is or that they can store drugs there (Focus Group No. 2, Honduras).

Gangs also use their leverage to expand on other local businesses. When asked whether gangs have other businesses in the community, a participant in El Salvador responded:

> Some have businesses, let's say like little shops or things like that, little things, like bars. Recently, I believe they have put a bar there. Before, when someone else ran that business, they kept us all up. I am far from that business, right... Well, they even kept me awake, right? They wouldn't let me sleep: drunk people screaming, talking on the weekends there, fighting…And now, since the gang took over that business, well…, I have seen more order. I think they have until 10 at night, they turn off their music and everything is quiet (Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

The previous statement describes the gang organization's incursion into legal activities and showcased the gang's capacity to establish order around the business. Such ability is in full display when discussing the intervention of gang members in resolving interpersonal conflicts in the community.

Resolving Community Conflicts

Participants in the focus groups who live in neighborhoods controlled by gangs constantly referred to the role of gangs in mediating and resolving interpersonal conflicts in the community. Furthermore, some people referenced the gangs' ability to dispense punishments against residents who have committed crimes or broken any community rule. For example, a participant in the focus group of program implementers in El Salvador summarized this notion in the following manner:

> Many people turn to gangs to solve their problems. It's that simple. And we live it in the community, in the neighborhood where we were implementing… (Participant 2, Focus Group No. 4, El Salvador).

A participant in another focus group in El Salvador illustrated one of the conflicts in which gangs were asked to intervene:

> The boys [gangs] had to intervene ... Because, speaking of my friend, who as I mentioned, no agreement was reached with the problem with the neighbor. So, what they did was call them ... the called those who rule there, the boys, and they had to intervene, to resolve the conflict. It was not a serious conflict, but my friend, the one I mentioned to you, he was very distressed… (Participant 4, Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

Gangs are also called to dispense punishments to other community members when they have wronged somebody in the community. Regarding a case involving a bike accident, one participant in El Salvador told a story of gangs being called to punish the individual responsible for the accident:

> But the lady next door comes up and says to my brother: "No way! How are you going to let that son of a bitch go? I'm going to call the boys [gang members] to beat him up." Then the lady came and stirred up the hornet's nest. My brother humbly said "No, there's no problem." But this lady complicated things and called so-and-so and so-and-so, and at the end they hit the guy just for an accident (Participant 1, Focus Group No. 5, El Salvador).

However, one of the areas in which participants frequently described the intervention of gangs was in domestic abuse cases. Despite their history of abuse against women, gangs are called to intervene and stop domestic violence situations, protecting women or children from abusive males. A participant of the focus group with program implementers said:

> I know of a case where the husband was hitting the wife hard and they called the police, and the police never came. So, what they did is they called the gangs to stop them from fighting. That's what they get into (Participant 4, Focus Group 4, El Salvador).

A participant in the focus group with young women in Tegucigalpa provided a similar testimony:

In my case, there was a neighbor who hit his wife and he had two children. It turns out that he always played loud music every time he hit her. Then, he lowered the volume, and the girl went out with the bruises and the children with traumas. It reached a point that people felt very bad about it, and they accused him. A gang member got into it, and I did not listen to what he said but, since then, the situation between the couple calmed down, because he already is calmer, so they do not attract attention (Participant 8, Focus Group 2, Honduras).

Participants explained that, in several cases, the intervention of gang members in domestic matters and interpersonal conflicts within the community is motivated by the gangs' desire to keep the police and state institutions away from the neighborhood.

[When a couple is fighting] and screaming, the boys [gangs] are going to listen to everything. They will come and will ask you "what's the problem?" The thing is not to call the police … That's the point they tell you, that when you have a problem or personal issues, those personal issues, don't call the police. "Better call us, because we can fix the problem, we will help you" Because if you call the police, you add more problems to the problem (Participant 3, Focus Group 5, El Salvador).

A similar point was made in the focus group with young women in Tegucigalpa:

I think it's the same reason gangs have for getting involved, that they try to get along with the community. Because as she said [other participant], they don't like to interact with the police. So, in that sense, they solve people's problems to put a stop to the police, so they don't cause problems for them too (Participant 7, Focus Group 2, Honduras).

The Relationships between Gangs and the Community

A critical element in the relationship between youth gangs and the community is that gang members are frequently also residents in that community. They have personal relationships marked by family ties, friendships, and partnerships that, in several cases, precede gang membership. To be sure, not all gang members have those ties, as many youths have not grown up in the same communities they inhabit as gang members. They are viewed as strangers to the neighborhoods. However, such relationships shape the way people react to gangs and how the latter respond to the overall concerns of the community. The following statements describe how community members view these relationships and how they play a role in the trust people credit to the gang-involved youth.

Family ties mark the strongest bonds between the youth and the community. One coordinator of a local violence prevention program in Guatemala summarized the strong bonds between the gang and the community through family ties:

I think the relationship [between the gang and the community] is close because it definitely comes from the communities where they are linked. Sometimes there is not a

single person directly, but it is my boyfriend, my girlfriend, or it is my nephew, my own son… (Focus Group No. 3, Guatemala).

Participants acknowledged that such ties help normalize the gang dominance in the community. As one young male who works in prevention programs in Guatemala City stated:

Well, as the colleagues said, we have normalized so much living among gang members. Sometimes even the families themselves are involved, not only cousins and brothers, uncles, parents. We have normalized so much living together, having that environment of being among gangs, I am not in a gang, and I see my cousin who is a gang member as normal because he is practically my family, it is what we have done to normalize living in that environment (Participant 3, Focus Group No. 4, Guatemala).

Other participants referred to the fact that having close ties to gang members provides certain benefits to the community. For example, a Salvadoran community activist explained why the gangs in his community respect the neighbors:

It does have a lot to do with the fact that the young people who are involved in gangs are from the community because of what he [another participant] said. They respect, they know, they have been partners in many things of the people, right? And that influences that at least the relationships with the people who live within the community are good (Participant 4, Focus Group No. 4, El Salvador).

Some participants discussed the conditions that lead young people in their community to become involved with gangs. For example, they mentioned economic conditions, the role of the family, and the role of peers in the understanding of gang membership. The following two statements from participants in Honduras and El Salvador illustrate these points:

Before there was not so much insecurity, because as the colleague said, one grows up with these young people, and as one grows older, they get into these kinds of things. Perhaps because of [the need] to have economic stability or have things easier. But you can see that territories are fought between gangs, and it creates insecurity because families themselves are fighting for territories (Participant 1, Focus Group No. 2, Honduras).

For this reason, as I told you previously, that one knows many of them because one saw them grow up. You saw when they were little and, unfortunately, there were situations in the family that…well… led to their getting involved in gangs, right? (Participant 6, Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

Some participants echoed the complexity of having personal ties with gang members. They referred not only to the allegiances generated by emotional bonds but also to the practicalities of living in deprived and unsafe environments. As one Guatemalan practitioner put it:

I believe that in the end it is a relationship of survival. I know of cases where the neighbors themselves, many times… it is out of fear. But they are also aware that if they do report the gang member, they know whose children they are…. Many times [they do

not report] out of compassion for the gang members, neighbors, who suddenly know that this individual is the one who often supports the parents or grandparents then. Many times, that is why they do not report this situation because in the end it exists as that bond where they feel sorry to report it (Unidentified participant, Focus Group No. 3, Guatemala).

Of course, many relationships between community members and youths involved in gangs are conflictive, violent, and extractive. In one of the sections above, we have described the practice of extortions and taxes that most gangs impose on their communities. Furthermore, the ways in which youth gangs instill insecurity and threaten non-gang residents are diverse and constant. Youth gangs can become a particularly severe menace to other young people not associated with these groups. The nature of these threats is different, and it typically revolves around the gender of the non-gang person, even when the victim is an acquaintance of the gang and a member of the community. The gang frequently targets male youths as they are viewed as potential recruits or potential rivals. In contrast, female youths are targeted for sexual purposes, and they are commonly exposed to harassment and sexual abuse.

A female participant, who emphasized her view as a mother, describes the way gangs approached other young people in her community:

The difference between having a boy or a girl…wow… A boy, I feel there is more danger because I can't even send him to the convenience store at specific times. It is nearly dark in the evening, and it is like you have to close the bubble and nothing else… not even breathe. With the girl, if I go with her, nothing happens. But with the male, even though I'm close, I'm with him… they [gangs] take him away, they pull him away, they take him away. They don't respect, they don't respect. In other words, the gang members just get close to us…and snatch him from me and take him away, even if they know that the kid belongs to you, they take it away! I mean ... They don't respect us! With boys, I feel, as a mother, that it is more difficult. It is more difficult, then. Because you can't go downtown with him, you can't go to the supermarket with him, I can't take him to the clinic, yes, the gangs kidnap him (Participant 6, Focus Group No. 1, El Salvador).

In the same focus group, other participants referred to a different kind of threat faced by young females not associated with gangs. One participant recounted the story of a family who had to leave the community because the local gang had demanded that a teenage daughter be handed over to the gang. The person added:

My daughter then tells me: "I'm afraid of so and so," and we know that he is a gang member. So she says, "Sometimes, when I'm coming home, he looks at me bad, he looks at me weird, I feel harassed." So, now, we have to go wait for her at the bus stop, and sometimes drop her off at work, send her in Uber, or I don't know (Participant 4, Focus Group No. 1, El Salvador).

In summary, youth associated with the gang have complex relationships with community residents. Those interactions are frequently marked by family ties, friendships, and past

partnerships. Such ties may add a layer of protection to some residents from gang violence and extortion. However, in most cases, gangs target other young people in the community, regardless of their personal ties. Thus, becoming a teenager becomes a liability and a personal risk for many community members living in gang-dominated environments.

Intervention programs

This section explores the general views about intervention programs. We also identify the different forms in which community residents participate in those programs under gang surveillance and how they manage to advance violence prevention despite the dominance of the gang.

Preventing Youths from Joining Gangs

Scholarly research reveals that there are numerous factors that lead an individual to join a gang (Vigil 2010, Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz 2014, Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013). This section highlights the comments of the focus group participants regarding what people can do to prevent youth from becoming involved in gang life. After analyzing all the focus groups, we created a typology to categorize the responses of the participants. The typology consists of four elements: the role of families, underlying structural issues (e.g., poverty), lack of opportunities, and stigmatization.

Many focus group respondents maintained that the family is a major factor that must be considered if the Central American countries want to prevent youth from becoming involved in the gang life. Focus group respondents discussed how youth who "hang out" in the streets can be lured into the gang life because of bad influences. Some focus group participants maintained that parents should be held responsible, even contending that some parents have forgotten about their children. A member of the second focus group in El Salvador argued:

> Most of the time they [youth] are with their parents. Instead of helping their children, many of these parents let their kids run around the streets and that's how they pick up the vices of the streets. It is 8:00, 9:00 at night, and the kids are running around in the dark. I think that this will never help us to have healthy children, youth who are healthy because this depends a lot on the parents. Right? In our communities this is a high risk, right? There are many parents like this who are not interested ... Right? They are not interested in their children (Participant 5, Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

A focus group member from Amatitlán, Guatemala in the group of participants who are leaders or are involved in community programs echoed this notion, stating:

> Well, as the saying goes, "teaching comes from home." I believe that we parents have a great commitment when we have young children. We cannot leave them stranded. Knowing that we have many obligations, but one of the most important is educating our children and being aware of what is going on. As one of the participants mentioned, young people who are left alone are easy prey for any gang, for anyone who can introduce them to do anything bad (Participant 6, Focus Group No. 1).

Other focus group participants stressed that there are multiple factors that contribute to the absence of parents. According to one participant from El Sitio community in the group of men and women 27 and older from Honduras, parents in northern Central America are working hard to provide for their families. As a result, children are often left with other family members, such as grandparents. This focus group participant argued that parents are required to educate their children from right and wrong and bear the burden for the well-being and safety of their kids.

> And if the family is the fundamental base, it is not only the family's fault because they are not integral. They [the youth] look for it. There are many factors, but the family has a lot to do with it. The support we give to our children is important as mentioned by the other participant [in the focus group]. We spend time working so much that we neglect our children, and the education of our children is carried out by others like grandmas, who are not there to educate children. She already went through this. Education is the role of parents, and grandparents are there just to spoil them. As parents we should not give the control of our kids to others but rather, we need to involve ourselves as parents (Participant 8, Focus Group No. 4, Honduras).

Focus group participants also stressed the lack of positive male role models in the lives of youth. For example, one individual from La Unión in the group of men and women 27 and older in San Pedro Sula argued that many young people do not have father figures in their lives because the gangs have killed them. She stated:

> Look, I speak about this because the children, as I can tell you and as I say in the statistics, if you are going to do a survey in Rivera, it should be there because I believe that 90% of the children do not have a father because men have killed them in the neighborhood. There was not 1, there were 9 who died in the massacre in the countryside. Yet there were like 18 in a soccer game and now there are a number of children who do not have a father.

This statement highlights the consequences of gang-related violence on the family nucleus. There are multiplier effects when the gang kills someone, as this individual could have been a father and a husband. The high levels of violence can increase the hardships for families and influence the level of trauma that youth face in the northern Central American countries.

Other participants, however, focused less on the family and discussed the structural nature of the youth gang phenomenon. They also maintained that the government has forgotten about people living in marginalized communities. Some participants questioned not only the capacity of the government to solve problems but also their political will. A member of the second focus group in El Salvador, for instance, stressed the structural element of the youth gang phenomenon and questioned the role of the government, contending:

> Because we are forgotten about by the government. I will say it again: Here are the parents and the community who can do it [solve these problems]. This is what can be

> done so these structural problems do not increase. You see? (Participant 9, Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

Another participant in Tegucigalpa from El Sitio, Honduras also expressed skepticism regarding the ability of the government to resolve these structural problems.

> I think, as I already mentioned, it has to be a family, the church, and the youth. We know that the governments are not going to do anything. In addition, they do not have confidence in them. A politician comes to speak with the youth during the campaigns. As a result, they will lose confidence in politicians. The youth support each other among the family, the community, and each other. I worked in revival projects, and they really liked dance, culture, and instruments (Participant 8, Focus Group No. 4, Honduras).

These comments emphasize the high levels of distrust of the northern Central American governments—a common theme throughout this report—and their inability to provide security to citizens living in these countries.

Furthermore, focus group members talked about the lack of opportunities contributing to youth joining gangs. A participant in the group of young women in El Salvador stressed the lack of job opportunities, which has played a role in youth joining gangs. She underscored that there must be an emphasis on education, contending that some parents in El Salvador do not require their children to study.

> I still think that there is a lack of work, lack of opportunities, because many times young people have no experience, right? I search for jobs with so many years of experience, but how will someone obtain experience if nobody allows them to work, right? I feel that this is one of the important things to consider. Likewise, there are many parents who are not concerned about their children, right? They do not force them ... They do not force them to study or obtain their high school diploma. I also feel that things like projects… Sometimes the young people participate in a tournament, which keeps them entertained. Playing ball or things like that keep them entertained, and it is not necessary for them to wander the streets so much (Participant 5, Focus Group No. 3, El Salvador).

Other focus group participants also discussed the combination of several factors, mainly poverty, lack of opportunities, and drugs and alcohol. These factors have contributed to some disconnected youth becoming gang members. A participant in San Pedro Sula from the Comisión de Acción Social Menonita (CASM), echoed this sentiment, stating:

> Yes, there are neighborhoods that have been left empty, quite a few families, but I feel that, I don't know if it is my perception, but I feel that it has decreased a little. But I repeat that these are zones. They are not sustainable because sometimes the repression of the state slightly lowers the number of incidents, but this is latent there. I am going to tell you something, when I was studying the factors that generate violence about 15 years ago, this is latent. These issues have not been overcome; access to drugs, access to alcohol, and poverty are still there. There are no opportunities for young people. There is no education.

> In other words, it is difficult. That is why I say that we make a titanic effort, and there are some results… (Participant 3, Focus Group No. 7, Honduras).

The above reflections highlight that there are various complex problems that contribute to youth joining gangs. The research on gangs in Central America shows that gangs consist of youth who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are highly uneducated (Cruz, Rosen, Amaya, et al. 2017, Cruz 2006). While poverty and low educational attainment alone are not the only factors contributing to gang membership, the focus group members contended that they play an important role in understanding why youth join gangs.

Finally, the last component of the typology for understanding why youth become involved in gangs is the role of stigmatization. Society often discriminates against youth from marginalized communities. One member of a focus group in El Salvador argued that being young is a crime, while other focus group participants stressed that it is important to remember that gang members are human too.

A shoemaker and father of three living in El Salvador emphasized that young people are discriminated against by society simply for being young:

> The majority are with the youth. The youth are truly blank. Sadly, today being young is a crime. As of today, they have always respected me (Participant 9, Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

In a focus group in Tegucigalpa, a young woman living in Los Pinos in Honduras echoed the concept of discrimination, stating:

> Sometimes we as humans also forget that they are human as well. Instead, we opt to discriminate against them, and they also have feelings. Thus, they sometimes support you for that or see if it is something that is going to benefit the community (Participant 4, Focus Group No. 2, Honduras).

These reflections echo previous academic studies, which have focused on the role of discrimination. Scholars have highlighted the "curse of being young" in El Salvador, as many young people living in marginalized communities contend that they are targeted by law enforcement and stigmatized by society (Rosen and Cruz 2018). Scholars also argue that stigmatization can occur based on one's neighborhood and socioeconomic status, resulting in the criminalization of "being poor and uneducated" (Rosen and Cruz 2018).

Intervention programs in the communities

There are numerous intervention programs in northern Central America. The first type of organizations are churches. As will be discussed in more detail below, there are various religious organizations that work with the communities and help address the issue of gang prevention and rehabilitation. Non-religious affiliated programs like Scouts in Honduras also

work with youth and building active and responsible citizens. There are also a variety of NGOs, often funded by USAID, that focus on "skill building." USAID has partnered with many NGOs in Central America that seek to work with the community and provide skills to help educate citizens and build resilient communities. Finally, there are several organizations that revolve around sports and creative endeavors like dance.

The first component of this typology is religious organizations. There are many religious organizations operating in northern Central America. As indicated in previous research studies on gangs in El Salvador, the safest and most common method for leaving a gang in El Salvador is through a religious experience (Rosen and Cruz 2019, Cruz, Rosen, Amaya, et al. 2017). The gangs provide permission for gang members to leave the organization if someone dedicates their life to God. Many gang members leaving through a religious conversion become members of an Evangelical church, an organization which tends to provide gang members with structure and discipline (Cruz, Rosen, Amaya, et al. 2017).

Focus group members talked about the number of churches operating in the communities. In a group of community leaders in Guatemala, one individual who has lived in the Cerro Corado Colonia for 24 years emphasized that there are churches working there. This individual stated that these communities can be rescued and stressed that the church plays an important role.

> But I think we have a community that can be salvaged. We have a variety of churches, we have Jehovah's Witnesses, we have Mormons, we have Catholics and a lot of Evangelical churches. In fact, we have 17 Evangelical churches in the community. All of these have helped us because as the other participant mentioned, the Evangelical church comes and dedicates itself to its members. These members also seek to recruit more members...Other religions also do this. Thus, they are recruiting people for something wholesome and that is good (Participant 7, Focus Group No. 1, Guatemala).

The role of the church in the focus groups appeared more often in El Salvador. Evangelical churches play a more important role in the gang desistance process than other religious organizations (Cruz, Rosen, Amaya, et al. 2017, Rosen and Cruz 2019). Some focus group members stressed the role of the church in working with youth and helping gang members leave the organizations. In focus group number one, which consisted of male and female adults, a member living in the community for 30 years contended that some gang members seeking to leave the organization find the church:

> Yes, some churches are in charge of accompanying young people. In other words, they have youth groups and invite them. They have announcements so that they come to the events. Sometimes they go looking for them. But many young people who may regret being in the gang at the time look for the church to be able to leave the organization. In the church, they [the gang] no longer bother them… (Participant 4, Focus Group No. 1, El Salvador).

Other focus group participants described the church as a refuge for youth, given that the gang respects the church. A participant who has lived in Las Palmas, El Salvador for nine years, stressed the notion of a safe haven, stating:

> They are dispersed, because in a moment the group was united. But later, some colleagues have partners, while others work; study; the pandemic has also played a role. But I tell them that "*Vacilarte*" [hang out] here because it is in the community. From this point of view, we try to bring something new, a festival, a play…Bring a work of theater that can be performed to the community, right? We try to bring these things to the community, but I am not saying that we are going to save so many young folks. Because if you come and free yourself… Many young people have a place of refuge in the churches because the gangs respect the church, viewing it is a divine entity (Participant 1, Focus Group No. 1, El Salvador)

Religious community members in El Salvador also highlighted how the church preached the word of Christ to gang members. This, however, requires caution given the sensitive nature of working with gangs. One member of the second focus group in El Salvador who described himself has someone who has worked serving God for 30 years, stated:

> The truth is that: speaking humanly, then, there is that fear of what might happen, but when the Holy Spirit gives us the authority, then one preaches with freedom and that also allows them to have confidence, that freedom, to go to one in any need in this realm ... Maybe not so much in the economic realm, but also in the moral and spiritual realm, right? ... Because this is the part where we can support you, right? Ultimately, we have also had activities where the Pastor has invited us, and we have therefore tried to support them despite the fact that they do things that are not in accordance with the Church, because they have their own ways of working, their own ways of being that the same people criticize, friends criticize, right? ... Then they say: "And why are the brothers participating in this? ... But one has the idea that as a Church we have to be open, because we have to evangelize. If we close ourselves off to them, how are they going to hear the gospel? Of course, we are not going to attack them in their living condition, right? ... Because we would be driving them away, right? In that sense we have to be quite cautious, but if we preach the word, it is the word that is going to touch their hearts. The focus is to talk to them about repentance and how they can change their lives, if they so desire, by giving their life to Christ. Nobody is going to be able to change them, only the power of God in their hearts. And they are conscious of this, because, in fact, when they are preaching to them, they are hearing the word of God and are receptive to the word. These individuals as well as those who do not want to be there, those that are forced to be there…Because this is what they have...In that sense they are well disciplined, in that respect... Although they later carry out their activities, their rituals and everything they do. Anyway, one respects it, well... (Participant 6, Focus Group No. 2, El Salvador).

This statement indicates that members of the church speak to gang members and preach the Gospel. The gang tends to respect the church and allows them to preach to the community. Yet these organizations face challenges operating in territories controlled by rival gangs and must proceed with extreme caution.

In addition to the role of the church, focus group participants mentioned various organizations that work with youth. In Honduras, for example, many participants had positive impressions of the organization known as Scouts. This non-profit focuses on four pillars: empowering youth, creating active citizens, providing life skills, and educating youth for peace. In the group of young men from Tegucigalpa, a focus group member from El Hato belonged to Scouts. He stressed that this program is very beneficial and helps teach youth many different things, not just how to cut hair. This individual also emphasized that Scouts assists youth in the process of character building, which plays an important role in helping young people decide whether they want to participate in criminal organizations like gangs.

> I would say that most organizations are good. In the end, I am going to defend the organization that I was involved in; I was a member of Scouts for like 10 years. Actually, I think 15. Ultimately, I think that this is a very good organization because they help develop youth who start seeing things from different areas. It is not only teaching them to cut hair. Yes, they can teach you to cut hair, but they can also teach you mathematics and soccer. This is an organization that helps form many young people, who depending on what they like, start to develop character, and grow as a person. Thus, if you want to create an organization, I am going to defend Scouts in the same way as the church. At the moment, I think that it is a good organization. As I mentioned, it is not only based on one area, but they help form young people and develop their character, which is mainly what it will help the young men to decide whether or not to be part of these gangs (Participant 6, Focus Group No. 3, Honduras).

Yet another member in the focus group of young men from Tegucigalpa stressed that there are some challenges with programs like Scouts, as it only occurs on Saturday. This participant from Los Pinos contended:

> We need to control the family so that in the end the child is growing up and these activities would need to be 24 hours. In my case I was helped by Scouts during my childhood, but Scouts only takes place on Saturday from 2 to 4 in the afternoon so to speak. The problem is what happens after this time period from Sunday to Friday…If we look at the issue of the situation, a gang member comes and says come, I'm going to help you with something. This is a person who is already inside this world…The child says: I want to be like him, I want to be like him. The child has no bad intentions but does not realize until later that he is already involved. What he does is submit [to the gang] because they tell him that they invited him so many times… (Participant 3, Focus Group No. 3, Honduras).

This reflection highlights the limitations of some programs, as these initiatives do not operate seven days a week. Youth living in marginalized neighborhoods are required to leave the safe

haven provided by organizations like Scout and return to their communities, where numerous gangs operate and compete for control (Ruiz 2019, Rivera 2013, Rosen 2021a). Implementors of programs working with youth must consider how to keep youth away from gangs when these individuals return to their communities.

Focus group participants also had positive things to say about USAID and the numerous programs that this organization supports. An individual from La Unión, Honduras in the group of adults 27 and older described the work of USAID, stating:

> In the neighborhood there is a program. USAID held some workshops. There is *piñatería*, gym, various courses that they support a lot. The stylist boys have learned many things. They are there with the girls who were not doing anything with their lives, but now they are there doing nails and making a living (Participant 7, Focus Group No. 5, Honduras).

Finally, focus group participants discussed various sports and creative programs (e.g., dance). These programs provide youth with an outlet to express themselves, relieve stress, and focus on team building. A member of the National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil—PNC) in the focus group that occurred in the Municipality of Mixco, Guatemala, contended:

> As the PNC, I have a great deal of experience in Zone 12 of Villa Nueva Mezquital Villa Lobos. There I was working prior to the pandemic. There was a "vacation" school, but this school not only operated during vacations, but rather it was a project that lasted practically the entire year. They created modules of computation, modules of music, and modules of dance. Every afternoon youth arrived after primary school to this vocational school. The investment was quite strong… (Focus Group No. 3, Guatemala).

As will be discussed in more detail below, these programs have severe limitations, as gangs control areas, particularly communal spaces like soccer fields.

Participation in Intervention Programs amidst Gangs

The next section of this report focuses on how people participate in community-based programs with the acquiescence of the gang. First, this section will explain how gangs control territory and create challenges for community intervention workers. Considering what we have seen so far, implementing programs in communities dominated by gangs may require *tacit* negotiations with the gangs. Said differently, NGO operators seeking to work in these communities will have to confront the gangs, which requires respecting their territory and understanding the local dynamics to avoid potential confrontations and security challenges. Second, law enforcement organizations in the northern Central American countries are not seen as the solution to creating safe spaces, as citizens neither trust the police nor want to anger the gangs by calling the authorities. Third, the results of the focus groups indicate that there are programs where gangs are participating directly in these initiatives. Some gang members send spies to see what is happening in these programs and have them report back to the gang. Information helps

keep the gang abreast of the activities occurring within gang-controlled territory. In summary, this section argues that NGO organizations cannot avoid the power of the gangs. The level of gang involvement in programs ranges from direct participation to spying and general observation. The gangs want to know what programs are occurring within the community and who is leading such initiatives.

Working with communities located in gang-laden zones requires understanding criminal governance and the dividing lines of the gangs. Scholars have noted that gangs operate as *de facto* governance in zones throughout the northern Central American countries (Rosen and Kassab 2018, Cruz and Vorobyeva 2021, Cruz 2011). As noted in the section of this report on the relationship between the community and the gangs, many focus group participants maintain that the gangs make the rules and punish individuals who disobey their authority. NGOs must know which gang controls what neighborhood. In the focus group of young men in Tegucigalpa, a male from El Hato emphasized that NGOs must understand the fault lines, as several powerful gangs are competing for territory:

> For me, all the programs are good, both the state and the church. I think that in the end all they try to do is help…I think the problem is that they highlight the problems in the communities. In other words, they all have gang problems, while some stand out a little more because there are three different gangs. Thus, the institutions that previously worked in El Hato will have a difficult time functioning. I am emphasizing this point because you need to do a study in each conflict zone and see what would benefit them (Participant 8, Focus Group No. 3, Honduras).

The issue of space and creating areas where youth can play sports or participate in other activities highlights the challenges of developing community initiatives in zones controlled by gangs. Said differently, the simple goal of playing on a soccer field in Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador can become a complicated proposition, as gang members dominate territory around the *canchas* that have been built for youth to enjoy. A member of the focus group in El Salvador associated with Juvenil Fusión echoed the challenges of operating in public spaces like soccer fields:

> However, I would believe that, as project managers, we must carefully analyze which projects to bring to a community. Why? Because sports fields are a double-edged sword because they serve as recreational spaces, but also are a downfall for youth because they arrived as though there was a football game, but there can be gang members playing. Some kids arrived because they were bored at home and wanted to watch the game. Yet they start to become influenced. They may not come from a broken home, but they do come from a family where mom and dad are working. They are home alone and go to the parks to distract themselves and watch soccer games. Many of us say: "I prefer my son to be in soccer," but are you sure that your son is going to play soccer at the field? Thus, one of the factors is the parents' lack of attention towards their children, that we are practically leaving them to grow up because they have education and food at home, but they do not have the dedication of their parents (Participant 10, Focus Group No. 4, El Salvador).

This comment reveals that building sports complexes do not solve the problem of space and territorial control, as these areas have become communal spaces for specific gangs and their clique members to "hang out."

The challenge for NGOs is that these territorial zones are not static but rather change over time. MS-13 and Barrio 18 battle for control and gain and lose territory. For instance, as we saw above in the discussion about contested governance, a neighborhood that is controlled by MS-13 may be dominated by another gang in a month. This requires that NGO workers stay abreast of the local dynamics in the community and understand the gang in charge of the *barrio*. Gangs competing for control can lead to increases in violence, making it more dangerous for community workers running intervention programs.

Many focus group participants also indicated that NGO workers are required to respect the authority and structure of the gangs. A focus group member in El Salvador who has spent 11 years working in community programs stressed the importance of respecting the fault lines and power of the gang, which can help avoid problems with the gang leadership:

> It is a border. Thus, we both enter; we have the two [gangs] at the church at the Center of Esperanza. We have not had any problems. Maybe they come to the raffle at the church. We also have a school that is located in the territory of the 18th Street Sureños and… And, in that sense, we have people from outside the school and we transport them. They [the gang members] told me: "We know what you are doing. As long as they respect us like you respect us, they will not have a problem with us." I have seen that when you respect them and recognize their territory and who they are, they grant you a level of flexibility with them. Thus, there are not any problems, and they have never caused us problems when we arrived in the neighborhood… (Participant 6, Focus Group No. 4, El Salvador).

The police, however, are not able to provide safety for NGO community workers. Focus group participants noted clearly that the gangs do not want the police to enter the *barrios*. Police entering gang territory can increase the security risks for NGO workers and people trying to help implement prevention programs. A member of the Secretary of Education, Committee of Emergency in the focus group in Tegucigalpa stated:

> By no means, because in the communities it happens more and began as a reference to the conversations with young people, particularly in the Comayagüela area. For them, the security forces of the state perceive the maras and gangs at this risk level and recognize, in theory, that they should provide protection. When we consider the context, the environments are like a spiral. For us, the police in theory give us security. Yet for the maras and gangs for them it is the opposite. For them, they bring fear, and this is the point: to recognize, identify, and be aware of what the people living in these communities go through…. (Participant 1, Focus Group No. 1, Honduras).

A member of the Scout team in Honduras echoed this point, contending that outsiders visiting from other countries touring the community feel safer with a police presence. However, this individual stressed that the police create more problems; it is safer to tour these zones without officers.

> Look, sometimes when one receives visits from abroad. In our case, we have mainly received visitors from the United States. They often feel safer being accompanied by the police. Logically, they want to be escorted by a police officer or soldier, and I have had to ask for help. While they feel secure, the reality is not like that (Participant 6, Focus Group No. 1, Honduras).

These observations reflect the importance of understanding the community dynamics as well as the demands of the gang. The gang does not want to draw attention from the police and prefers that community members enter gang zones without law enforcement.

Furthermore, gangs want to understand what programs are being conducted in the communities. There are gangs that participate directly in programs, which provides them with firsthand knowledge of the NGOs and their activities. One member of the second focus group in El Salvador, who described himself as someone working for God, discussed the participation of the gangs in community programs. This individual highlighted that gang members and their kids are involved in these programs. This has led some gang members to support certain community activities:

> In fact, within these projects that the government is implementing in the community, even they [the gangs] participate in them…
> *Participant 6*:… They are involved in teams… Their children are also involved…
> *Participant 6*:… They themselves are integrated.... they are not opposed and at no time are they against all of this. In fact, they support these programs because they also get involved in them (Focus Group No. 4, El Salvador).

Other focus group members mentioned that gangs may become irritated with programs in the community depending on the impact that these projects have on gang membership. Some gang members send spies to infiltrate the nature of the community-based initiatives and report back to the gang. An institutional representative of Scouts in Honduras responded yes when asked directly if the gangs send spies to the events, stating:

> I think it depends on whether the changes that they are making are going to influence the organization by directly decreasing their power. That's right. There are participants, but there have also been experiences like the Warriors, where the same gang members send their kids and cousins. They have told us that I don't want them to be ordered to kill, like what happened to me. In other words, they want them far away from being a *sicario* (hitman) and monsters. They are people. Who wants something bad for their kids? Exactly, they observe what is going on and send people to "see what Carlos is doing" and if the police are around. This happens in all the programs and projects, but they are also part of this because in the end it is the whole world against them, and the

> gangs are formed because there is nothing. The gangs live in hell, and this is a form of resistance (Participant 5, Focus Group No. 7, Honduras).

Having gang members infiltrate the programs and report the information back to the gangs creates challenges for NGOs operating in these communities. Ultimately, the gangs want to know what the community workers are doing in the *barrio* and whether these organizations present a threat to the gangs' operations and criminal governance.

Views About the Programs

The focus group participants had numerous thoughts about the community programs, which one's work, and how to improve them. First, this section discusses the importance of context and working with people who are well-known in the community. Second, it examines the role of evidence-based practices. Focus group participants also stressed that community interventions require replication and communication. Third, it analyzes how some communities lack the presence of NGOs and require increased access to resources. Fourth, this section discusses the importance of safe spaces and the challenges faced by individuals participating in programs or desiring to participate in interventions requiring them to leave their neighborhoods.

While many focus group participants viewed community intervention programs favorably, some members stressed the need to understand the community dynamics. This requires that people are known in the community and have a visible presence. As documented in the section of this report on the relationship between the communities and the gangs, many non-gang members who have lived in communities know the gang members. Some of them have studied with gang members in school or have known them for decades. While they may not approve of their behavior and illicit activities, the respondents are known as members of the community and are not perceived as outsiders. Having someone who is familiar with the neighborhood is fundamental if an NGO wants to be successful. A focus group member in Tegucigalpa from Los Pinos emphasized this point, declaring:

> The problem is if the help comes from a program or something that you want to bring to the community then it must be with someone who is inside the community and someone who is familiar with the area. The solution would be to go and bring the project to the community. That is, to go and take them with another person and bring it to the gang… (Participant 3, Focus Group No. 3, Honduras).

This observation reveals that it is harder for outsiders to operate in *barrios* where gangs dominate and dictate the norms. The suggestion of some of the focus group participants is that outsiders should always partner with local leaders who are well-known in the community. Given that gangs operate at the street-level, they often view outsiders as a threat to their illicit endeavors and control, which could lead to security challenges for perceived *strangers* attempting to work in these neighborhoods.

Moreover, some of the focus group participants also mentioned the need to implement programs based on studies. The use of evidence-based practices can help inform policy makers and NGO implementors regarding what programs are working effectively. This also helps NGOs determine where to invest their resources in terms of community intervention programs.

A member of the Scouts team in Honduras stressed the importance of studies and methodologies when designing programs:

> I believe like you, that there has to be a method. In fact, the Scouts method has been replicated in other organizations because it is a method ... that is, seeing the name Scouts and utilizing the method, which is an effective method and is very attractive for youth programs. I am applying it in the church, for example, with the children of the church. The same method is being used, but we only change the name. I think that the Adventists also changed the name and called it missionaries—something like that. There are like two or three organizations, in Chamelecón. I think there is also an organization that uses the same method, only a little more military-like (Participant 5, Focus Group No. 7, Honduras).

The academic research on program evaluation and impact studies is abundant (Posavac 2015, Abadie and Cattaneo 2018, Coryn, Schröter, and Hanssen 2009), and NGOs can benefit from impact studies conducted by organizations like USAID. Creating programs with sound methodologies that can be evaluated are fundamental to the success of NGOs (Marshall and Suárez 2014). Working with youth, particularly active and former gang members, presents challenges tracking these individuals over time. In other words, there are obstacles performing longitudinal studies with the same populations given the perilous nature of gang life.

Some focus group participants also contended that some projects lack follow through. According to a member of the Municipal Office for the Protection of Children and Adolescents from the focus group that occurred in the Municipality of Mixco in Guatemala:

> I believe that there have been several projects that the Municipality of Mixco has provided that are very good. Unfortunately, I agree with the focus group participants from the National Civil Police, as there is no continuity; it is like a balloon that is inflated. The photo is taken and there is nothing else and what is going to happen to these young people…. I read that several projects were done by young people directly focused on some areas. I remember zone 4 of Mixco when I started working in the municipal office of child protection, I knew about the existence of these groups of young people. I do not remember the work conducted by UPCV [Unidad Para La Prevención Comunitaria De La Violencia], but there was no continuity. Later the Lions Club also did work in zone 5 of Mixco. They had worked directly with the schools for parents. What is very important is to focus on the needs of that particular area and then conduct a diagnostic to know the risk factors in order to better focus on prevention… (Focus Group No. 3, Guatemala).

Intricately linked with program evaluation and implementation is access to aid. Some focus group members indicated that NGOs also need to ensure that the aid arrives to regions that are in need. There are zones in Central America where the aid is severely lacking. A focus group member from San Pedro Sula associated with the Rivera Hernández organization stressed the importance of access to aid as well as transparency.

> CDI is a foreign church that supports a local church, as there are foreign sponsors who support the sponsoring of children. Yet sometimes that aid does not arrive. There are people who do not handle the funds properly (Participant 1, Focus Group No. 8, Honduras).

As indicated by this reflection, transparency and accountability are fundamental. This reflection is consistent with recommendations from leading academics studying NGOs and project management (Keating and Thrandardottir 2017, McGee and Gaventa 2011).

Finally, one of the biggest challenges for NGOs seeking to provide programs in communities laden with gangs is the notion of safe spaces. Focus group participants discussed the power and control of the gangs at the local levels. This creates a challenge for NGOs trying to work in areas where gangs operate as *de facto* authorities. NGOs want to ensure the safety of the participants as well as the team members providing services. A participant from Save the Children in Honduras echoed this point during the focus group with members representing institutions:

> As mentioned by one of the participants, the recognition of the organization within the communities is important. Something that is very important is the identification of the community centers of safe spaces or zones where we work with the people in the community in these activities. If I wanted to delve a little more into this topic, it is important to recognize the levels of risk of the team operating in the communities. We are currently implementing various prevention programs. There, however, is forced displacement because of the violence. For example, I cannot just enter Rosalinda, and say that I have a project. Thus, the issue has to do with them not seeing us as a risk (Participant 5, Focus Group No. 1, Honduras).

As mentioned above, the perception of many of the focus group participants is that the police are not able to provide these services. The presence of the police can create more problems and increase the security risks, as the gang views the police as a threat.

Intricately related to the notion of safe spaces is that individuals desiring to participate in community programs are afraid to leave their respective neighborhoods. Many focus group participants stressed that traveling to another neighborhood where one is not familiar with the local dynamics and does not know who is in charge creates challenges for many individuals living in northern Central America. A young woman working for Rivera Hernández and living in San Pedro Sula echoed this point, stating:

> Well, that's why they put these activities in the center so that you can get there. If they put them inside the community, then only the people who live there can get there (Participant 1, Focus Group 8, Honduras).

This statement is particularly relevant for NGO workers, as community programs must occur in one's own neighborhood or a neutral, central location. Given the security risks and the fear of the unknown, residents in one *barrio* often prefer to avoid the security threats of traveling to a program in another neighborhood.

Conclusions

Public opinion data have consistently shown that street gangs significantly impact public security across northern Central America. In all three countries in this study, the presence of youth gangs contributes to perceptions of insecurity. However, despite the chronic fears of crime, residents of several communities affected by gangs still must go about their lives. They need to find employment, support a family, and participate in collective efforts to reduce crime and violence, despite threats by gang members and criminal groups.

Gangs generate violence and insecurity and constitute a hurdle for prosperity and development. Residents must also grapple with these groups to achieve their personal and community goals. They interact, resist, and sometimes collaborate with these groups as part of their daily lives. This research project has aimed to document the different ways in which civilian residents navigate the dominance of the gang in their neighborhoods, how they view violence intervention programs, and how they participate and contribute to them. In the following paragraphs, we summarize some of the most important findings of this research project. We end this section with some reflections about its implications for programming in the region.

The participants of the focus groups in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have provided ample testimonies about the role that street gangs play in their communities. In some, these groups exert significant control over public life, to the point that even state authorities and other institutions are not able—or willing—to contest their power. In other places, they are just another social actor who participate in community decisions but defer to other actors in matters of importance for the community. They would cooperate with other actors in the neighborhood in the search for solutions to collective problems. However, more frequently than not, youth gangs are engaged in long and violent disputes over territorial control, especially in neighborhoods located in the middle of rival territory. In these cases, they significantly contribute to the insecurity of the population.

In these contexts, gang presence is manifested through extortions and extractive activities. Furthermore, in some communities, gangs also act as the arbiters of personal conflicts, judges in family disputes, and third-party enforcers of other groups. In addition, they enact rules of individual and collective behavior that range from who can enter the community to what residents are allowed to keep their homes.

Moreover, the relationship between street gangs and the local community is compounded by the personal linkages between gang members and community residents. Often, gang members are not strangers to the community residents. They have family ties, maintain old friendships, and establish partnerships that impact how other actors and prevention programs are

implemented. These relationships may contribute to community isolation as the same community rejects external actors, even institutions, to avoid causing conflicts with the gang. However, despite their apparent assistance to solve community problems, gangs remain a hostile group and a threat to other community members, especially the youth.

The focus group members in this study have very low levels of trust in the governments of northern Central America. None of the focus group participants in the three countries expressed positive sentiments about the governments and their ability to solve many of the underlying structural issues that have led youth to join gangs. The focus group members also had high levels of distrust in the same institutions designed to protect members of society (e.g., the police). This finding is not surprising and is consistent with the quantitative research in Central America (Zechmeister and Lupu 2019, Cruz 2015).

Given the crisis of local governance, citizens in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are looking for alternative resources to help solve gang-related activity resulting from the underlying structural issues inflicting society. NGOs working on prevention, education, and community resilience deliver services that the governments have not been capable of providing. Overall, NGOs in northern Central America were viewed positively by many focus group members.

The participants in the focus groups had insightful comments about working with communities in Central America. As highlighted in the sections above, focus group respondents stressed the importance of context. NGOs must understand the local realities of the different communities where they desire to work. This requires having people from the community working on projects. Moreover, they must know the different actors operating at the local level. In other words, outsiders who enter a neighborhood will have a more challenging time working and achieving success given the complicated realities—political, security, and societal—in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. In summary, it will be harder for NGOs to be successful if they do not consider the local dynamics and fail to have effective partners.

The focus group participants, particularly the individuals working with the communities and for various NGOs, also emphasized the nature of implementing programs in the northern countries of Central America and trying to operate programs in communities that are dominated by gangs. Gangs operate as de facto authorities in many zones throughout northern Central America. This is particularly evident in the case of El Salvador, given the size and expansive reach of the gangs throughout the country (Cruz, Rosen, Amaya, et al. 2017, Ruiz 2019). NGOs working in these communities cannot avoid the gangs and must create tacit agreements with the gangs to implement community programs. It is not possible to operate in these communities without encountering gangs.

Given the power and control of Barrio 18, MS-13, and other street gangs in different regions within El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, NGOs must consider security issues intricately related to territory. Focus group participants discussed the need for safe spaces. NGOs need a

secure location where they can operate and work with members of the community. Creating a safe environment for youth participating in community programs is one of the biggest challenges that NGOs face.

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

This study has revealed that locations where program activities are developed and implemented matter. In communities with heavy gang presence, these youth groups establish well-defined territories and borders. These borders and territorial limits 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 those 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 the vast majority of youth involved in gangs in northern Central America eventually want to leave the gang 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 issues for the organizations working in the communities. These issues cannot be adequately addressed here. 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 weigh those matters 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.

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Appendix 1: Multivariate Linear Regression Results

Exhibit A.1. The relationship between gang presence and feelings of insecurity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (OLS Results)

Variables	El Salvador		Guatemala		Honduras	
	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	t	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	t	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	t
Male	-7.372** (1.96)	-3.77	-3.003 (1.73)	-1.75	-4.358* (1.94)	-2.24
Age	.022 (.06)	0.35	-.043 (.06)	-0.69	-.004 (.07)	-0.06
Education	.142 (.28)	0.51	-.049 (.22)	-0.22	-.537* (.26)	-2.07
Urban	-3.200 (2.36)	-1.36	-.345 (1.82)	-0.19	-.210 (2.07)	-0.10
Economic Strata	-.829 (.89)	-0.93	-.791 (.69)	-1.15	1.565 (.82)	1.92
Feelings of Insecurity						
Little	6.230* (2.39)	2.61	16.535** (2.14)	7.74	10.731** (2.32)	4.62
Some	10.343** (2.91)	3.56	17.225** (2.42)	7.12	20.575** (3.16)	6.50
A lot	25.832** (3.20)	8.07	32.530** (2.57)	12.67	31.980** (3.19)	10.02
Constant	45.496** (6.34)	7.17	42.670** (5.31)	8.03	36.481** (5.72)	6.38
N	1,041		1,300		1,262	
F	11.11		23.34		17.23	
Adjusted R-squared	0.072		0.121		0.093	

*p< 0.05
**p<0.001

Appendix 2: Focus Group Moderator Guide

Information about the group		
Moderator name:		
Group number	Number of participants	
Place:	Date:	Time:

Introduction	
1. Introduce yourself	
2. Present the study's purpose	This study seeks to understand the strategies that communities like this adopt to avoid youths getting involved in gangs. It seeks to understand the measures and actions that the community and its members adopt to prevent the involvement of youths in gangs.
3. Provide basic information about the duration of the dynamic, read the informed consent form aloud, and collect the signed forms. Explain the recording system	
4. Respond to any questions from the participants	
5. Lay the ground rules of the group	- Everyone has a right to his/her opinions and viewpoints. - All participants have a right to speak without being interrupted or disrespected by other group members. - Participants should avoid dominating the conversation and allow time for others to speak. - Moderator will guide the timing and flow of the session topics but will allow the group to determine the importance and focus of the conversation. - Identities of group members will remain confidential. First names will

	be used for reference during the session.

Questions	
Introductory	1. How long have you lived in this community?
	2. Who lives with you at home? (The purpose is to know if they have young people at home)
	3. What do you do for a living?
	4. How do you feel about the security situation in your neighborhood?
Content	1. Are there youth involved with gangs in this community? Are they from the community? Are they from other communities?
	2. How is the relationship of the people of the community with the kids and people involved in gangs? Do people get along with them or not? Why?
	3. What do people in the community do to avoid kids and youths becoming involved in gangs? What do you personally do?
	4. Can you identify any community-based program to prevent gangs and/or violence? How would you evaluate such programs? Is it effective? Why?
	5. What should the community do to prevent youth from becoming involved in gangs? Is that something the community and the government can do?
	6. Who rules in this community? What groups or persons oversee issues of security here?
	7. What are your perceptions about the role of the security forces in your community? How would you evaluate their efforts?
	8. Have you ever considered moving to another neighborhood or leaving the country?
	9. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about youths involved in gangs?
Wrap up and thank you	Thank you so much for your time today. We appreciated hearing your insights on this topic.