



A STUDY OF GANG DISENGAGEMENT IN GUATEMALA

December 2020

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AIR	American Institutes for Research
DI	Democracy International
FIU	Florida International University
IEPADES	Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible
LAC-YVP	Latin America and Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention
LACC-FIU	Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University
QCA	qualitative comparative analysis
SME	subject matter expert
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Can a gang member in Guatemala leave the gang, abandon criminal activities, and rehabilitate? What factors facilitate the process of disengagement from gangs in Guatemala? To answer these questions, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University, and Democracy International conducted a study of Guatemalan gang members and former gang members across the country. The study is based on a series of in-depth interviews with 57 former gang members and 48 subject matter experts (SMEs), including government officials, community stakeholders, and service providers who work with people associated with gangs. According to the findings, active gang members do disengage from the gang and its activities, but this disengagement seems to be more difficult in Guatemala than in El Salvador or Honduras. The difficulties with leaving the gang are attributable to a more rigid system of norms within the gangs and the absence of a gang-approved mechanism to leave. Although religious experiences play a role in driving people away from the gangs, as in El Salvador and Honduras, religious conversion seems to be less accepted by gang leaders as a reason to leave. They view disengagement as a potential threat to the economic interests of the gang clique.

This study, funded through the United States Agency for International Development Latin America and Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention project, builds on previous academic scholarship on gangs in Central America. We conducted the study by using semistructured interviews with former gang members and SMEs who have worked with or studied gangs in Guatemala. Originally, we designed the study based on a survey with individuals with a history of gang membership; however, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced us to modify the original design. In turn, we focused on increasing the number of in-depth telephone interviews and employed alternative analytical techniques to understand why individuals join and disengage from gangs. AIR contracted a local organization, Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible, with experience on social science research—especially on the topics of security and violence—to conduct the interviews, and we trained a local team of interviewers, who collected the information under our direct supervision. We collected data between October 2019 and June 2020.

PRIMARY RESULTS

The results of the study indicate that gangs in Guatemala remain a predominantly urban male phenomenon. Although female members are accepted, their participation in gangs reproduces and exacerbates the patterns of a patriarchal society. Females are limited to minor roles within the gang structure, and most of them cannot advance in the gang hierarchies. Most gang members concentrate in Guatemala City and suburban municipalities, and some operate in Escuintla and Quetzaltenango. According to our findings, the average age at which individuals join a gang is 13.2 years. Approximately 57 percent of former gang members interviewed belonged to Barrio 18 (18th Street Gang), whereas 34 percent expressed past membership to MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha). The rest of the interviewees indicated membership in smaller gang groups.

GANG ACTIVITIES

Violence and criminal activities are essential elements of gang life. According to our analysis, extortions, murder, and drug trafficking are the most common crimes in which gang members are involved.

Criminal activities, combined with seniority as an active gang member, are critical components for ascending in the gang structure ranks.

GANG STRUCTURE

The MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs exhibit similar organizational profiles. *Cliques*, or neighborhood-based cells, constitute the operational units of the gang, and their structures revolve around those groups. According to our analysis, both gangs are regulated by an informal but well-known system of norms particular to each gang and shared by the diverse subgroups with the same gang identity. Cliques are composed of approximately 50 members, most of them male members, but they vary by size. Female gang members usually occupy lower ranks in the gang structure, and, in many cases, leaders do not recognize them as part of the gang, although they perform essential activities for the group. Imprisoned senior members who constitute the *rueda del barrio* (the neighborhood's circle), which is the top decision-making board of each gang, control the activities of the cliques.

There are different levels of involvement within each clique, which reflects the gang hierarchy. The clique leadership consists of a selected group of individuals appointed by the top leader in prison. In the language of the gang, these individuals are known as *ranfleros* ("bosses"), *llaveros* ("key masters"), *primera palabras* ("first words"), *segunda palabras* ("second words"), and *tercera palabras* ("third words"). The former gang members we interviewed described the middle level of the gang structure as the core and "muscle" of the gang. The individuals at this level carry out most of the criminal and revenue-generating activities, such as extortions, drug dealing, and murders. In both MS-13 and Barrio 18, these individuals are known as *homies*, *soldados* ("soldiers"), and *sicarios* ("hitmen"). The lowest level of gang membership consists of collaborators or informants, who are not yet considered formal members of the gang; they must carry out a series of missions to earn their membership.

According to our analysis, the universal rivalry between MS-13 and Barrio 18 shapes most of the gang dynamics in Guatemala, both within the gang and in its relationships with the community and the territory. Most gang members trace that rivalry to the fallout of the *El Rompimiento del Sur* ("Rupture of the South") in 2005, an event that ended a nonaggression pact between gangs in the Guatemalan prisons.

GANG ENGAGEMENT

In Guatemala, individuals join gangs at a very young age. Our interviews showed that youth are driven into the gang by a combination of emotional deprivation at home and attraction to peer groups in the gang. The recruitment process is unceremonious, driven by the willingness of the gang wannabe to belong to a group of peers and occurs across extended periods of time. Gang members live in extremely poor environments in which state services, especially social services, are absent. Most gang members come from families in which abuse is rampant, and their parents or guardians either neglect their children or are unable to supervise them. Gangs offer what no other community institution provides to youth in these communities: a sense of belonging, protection, friendship, and respect.

GANG DISENGAGEMENT

On average, individuals interviewed for this study remained in the gang for approximately eight years. Although these data cannot be compared directly with the results of Honduras and El Salvador, where gang membership lasts for six years on average, this study provided consistent evidence that individuals

face more difficulties when they try to exit the gang in Guatemala. Disengagement seems to carry a very high risk of death in Guatemala, where gang membership is a lifetime agreement. Gang structures and the dynamics of violence limit the tolerance of gang leaders toward “deserters.” To avoid adverse consequences, an individual who decides to leave the gang must hide, move to another area inside or outside the country, seek protection whenever this is available from the criminal justice system in exchange for information, or wait for the clique to disappear.

Several conditions prompt the decision to disengage from the gang and start a complicated process full of setbacks. The most common factors behind disengagement are personal maturation, traumatic experiences, religious conversion, and family and personal relationships. Individuals who build relationships with those outside the gang also are able to access resources to move away from the gang environment and have a higher likelihood of disengagement success.

REINTEGRATION

The primary challenges to reintegration are social and economic. Former gang members face constant discrimination and stigmatization, which not only prevents them from finding job opportunities and training programs but also affects their abilities to respond psychologically to the demands of life outside the gang. Gang members indicated that an absence of understanding of and affection toward youth—both before joining a gang and after disengaging—is a fundamental issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study results indicate that programs should prioritize prevention through family- and community-based interventions that target young children as well as their parents before they reach the age of recruitment into gangs and during the first stages of membership at the primary level. Given that many interview respondents cited family issues as one of the root causes driving youth to join gangs, the primary goal should be to make it less likely that youth will join gangs at all, while simultaneously reinforcing family communication and strengthening parenting skills. Given our finding that gangs target younger children, where gang disengagement is concerned, we recommend prioritizing rehabilitation and reintegration programs targeting first-time offenders—that is, young gang members who are serving time in detention facilities or are under judicial supervision in the community.

To effectively prevent, mitigate, and combat crime and violence, multiple efforts are required, as well as commitment from government, civil society, and the international donor community. No single intervention implemented in one sector (e.g., families) will reduce violence and crime in Guatemalan communities. Government and civil society must work together to provide focused support services in those areas. Exhibit E1 summarizes these key findings and recommendations.

Exhibit E1. Key Findings and Recommendations

KEY FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Youth are recruited to gangs at an early age, most often before they turn 15.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention efforts should focus on children, not only adolescents, because gangs recruit underage youth. Given the key role of parents in the lives of children, prevention should include parent engagement in early childhood prevention programming.
<p>2. The most important reason offered by former gang members for joining gangs is family dysfunction. Youth are recruited in the streets, even if they do not live in the street. Many come from broken families who exhibit high levels of violence or do not protect or adequately supervise children, leading youth to be out of school and in the streets.</p> <p>3. Gender-based violence and sexual abuse is a prevalent problem in families that push females to join the gangs and part of their experiences in the gang.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention programs should identify and target children and youth at risk who are exposed to violence and neglect in their homes. Youth who do not have safe homes are more likely to seek friendships in the streets, where they are exposed to gangs.
<p>4. Most youth who join gangs seek protection, camaraderie, and respect; they are not joining gangs for criminal reasons or with criminal intent.</p> <p>5. Similarly, most youth do not join gangs primarily to seek material resources. Although gangs offer a source of income for gang members, seeking resources was not the most important reason offered by former gang members for joining gangs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention programs should include activities that provide positive social circles, camaraderie, and a sense of mission or purpose. Programs also should aim to provide role models that youth do not find in their communities.
<p>6. Youth who join gangs in Guatemala remain in the gang an average of eight years.</p> <p>7. Disengaging from gangs is more difficult as gang members rise within the hierarchy and gain more access to information about the gang's operations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gang members who are detained in prisons or in juvenile facilities can be helped in the gang disengagement process if they are offered adequate support. Given that they have not yet had an opportunity to escalate in the gang hierarchy, it may be easier for them to disengage without fearing retaliation from gang leadership.
<p>8. It is possible to disengage from gangs but not without some support. Without an external source of support, whether from the family, the church, or a social organization, it is extremely difficult for a person to disengage from a gang.</p> <p>9. Gang members incarcerated in prisons or juvenile detention facilities do not receive adequate rehabilitation services—an important, missed opportunity to help those gang members who have only a few years of experience in the gangs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gang members who leave prison or have never been imprisoned but want to disengage from gangs require external sources of support to translate intentions to disengage into actionable behavior. Gang members in the process of disengaging should be able to distance from the gang and former peers and need safe spaces, away or protected from hot gang zones. The less contact they have with other gang members, the more likely they will be able to avoid criminal activities and recidivism. Incarceration without rehabilitation is ineffective in reducing violence.
<p>10. Gang members who disengage are stigmatized by and subjected to discrimination by community members, even when they want to be productive members of society.</p> <p>11. Former gang members mentioned discrimination as the most important challenge they face, whereas community stakeholders mentioned obtaining employment.</p> <p>12. Having a tattoo is associated with gang membership and makes opportunities for reinsertion difficult.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gang members who disengage from gangs need to be not only rehabilitated but also reintegrated into society. In addition to enhancing the individual skills of former gang members and assisting them in recovering psychologically and spiritually, individuals need support to return to society, make a living, and prevent their children from joining gangs. It is crucial to change the narrative about youth violence throughout Guatemala and raise awareness of issues of stigma and discrimination in poor communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nearly a decade ago, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that Guatemala had approximately 22,000 street gang members (UNODC, 2012). More recently, a report from the Congressional Research Service cited the same number (Seelke, 2016). Street gangs remain a complex issue in Guatemalan society. Composed mostly of urban youth, street gangs are some of the most notorious criminal organizations in Guatemala and the so-called Northern Triangle (that is, the three Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador). These groups are not the only ones, but they contribute significantly to local dynamics of crime and violence, especially in metropolitan areas. Yet we know very little about youth's motives for joining Guatemalan street gangs. We know even less about the reasons why some gang members decide to leave the gang and start a new life away from violence.

This study explored the reasons for gang engagement and disengagement in Guatemala. It is part of a comprehensive effort to study street gangs in Central America, and the conditions that lead some gang members to disengage from the groups and stop criminal activities. In Guatemala, as well as in El Salvador and Honduras, the prevailing notion is that once a person joins a street gang, he or she will be there for life. But is this so? Can a gang member leave the gang, abandon criminal activities, and rehabilitate? What can public institutions do to rehabilitate these persons and reduce the prevalence of violence? Can the community accept those who disengaged from the gangs and support their reintegration?

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) requested that the American Institutes for Research (AIR) scope out a new study on gang disengagement as part of the Latin America and Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention (LAC-YVP) program. The three goals of the LAC-YVP program are to (a) summarize the latest evidence on preventing youth violence, (b) generate new evidence through grant awards to local organizations for innovative ideas and then rigorously evaluate them, and (c) disseminate the evidence to key stakeholders through an array of distribution modalities. Under this LAC-YVP task order, Florida International University (FIU), AIR, and Democracy International (DI) assembled a team of researchers to develop a study to understand gang disengagement in Honduras and Guatemala.

This report presents the results of the study on gangs in Guatemala, describing the reasons for and the characteristics of joining a gang and disengagement from a gang in Guatemala. It discusses the potential roles of institutions in the process of gang disengagement and rehabilitation. It builds on a similar research study conducted by FIU, through its Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC), in El Salvador in 2017 and another study conducted by LAC-YVP in Honduras in 2020. The research aims to expand our knowledge of gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central America and guide programming on the challenging phenomenon of youth violence in the region.

I.1. BACKGROUND

Street gangs are pervasive in several urban communities in Guatemala. As in El Salvador and Honduras, street gangs in Guatemala are networks composed of turf-based groups of youth and adults. They share the same group identity, brought from Southern California, and they engage in diverse criminal activities (Cruz, 2010; Fontes, 2016; Levenson, 2013). Guatemalan street gangs mostly consist of youth, but members' ages range from eight to 40 years and older. The predominant street gangs in Guatemala are the 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18) and MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha). Other very small gang groups also exist

but with comparatively limited reach, such as Vatos Locos, White Fence, Chapines 13, Eleven Street, Harpies, and others. Some of these small gangs seem to have been more prominent in the past. Today, most of the gang dynamics in Guatemala are determined by the activities of MS-13 and Barrio 18. There is no certainty about the precise number of gang members in Guatemala. Estimates continue putting the number at approximately 22,000 gang members (Seelke, 2016). However, a report by the Civil Intelligence Directorate indicated that as recently as 2016, there were 15,000 gang members in Guatemala.

Research conducted by InSight Crime in 2018 determined that street gangs are present in 23 of the 25 city zones in Guatemala City.¹ MS-13 related cliques are present in 21 zones of the capital, whereas Barrio 18 cliques are established in eight city zones, including Zona 18, one of the largest zones of Guatemala City. In addition, street gangs are present in other cities in the country, such as Quezaltenango, Escuintla, and others, including Retalhuleu according to recent information. However, the number of cliques operating in those cities is not known with certainty.

Observers inside and outside Guatemala view street gangs as responsible for an important share of the criminal violence occurring in the country (Brands, 2011; López, 2011). However, as with the number of gang members, it is difficult to ascertain the number of murders and crimes committed by gangs with the available data. An analysis of the available data conducted by InSight Crime in 2014 and 2015 determined that 41 percent of the homicides perpetrated in Guatemala City's Zona 18 were gang related (Dudley, 2016). However, this analysis is limited to only one urban area known for its high gang presence and cannot be extrapolated to the whole country. In any case, the report underscores the fact that street gangs in Guatemala remain an urban phenomenon, more so than in neighboring El Salvador.

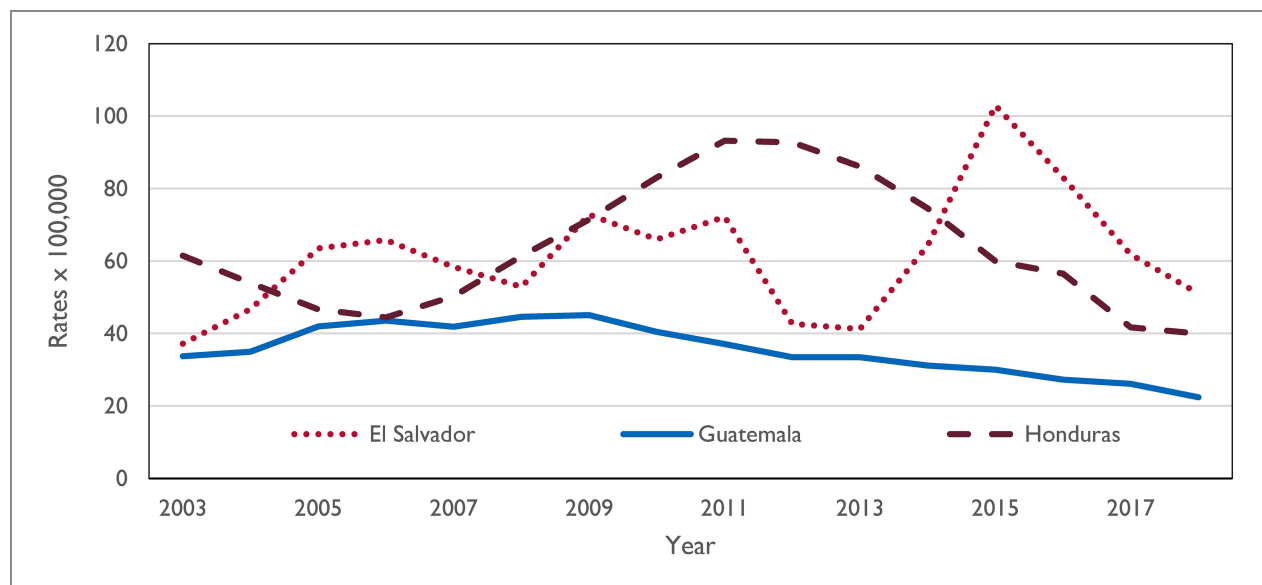
Where extortion activity is concerned, uncertainty about the precise number of participating gangs is even higher. Although there is consensus that all street gangs engage in extortion, an activity that constitutes an important source of revenue for them, the percentage of extortions committed by street gangs versus other groups or individuals is unclear. Guatemalan authorities have repeatedly indicated that most extortions reported to law enforcement are perpetrated by “imitators” or copycats (Chumil, 2019). These people pose as gang members to intimidate the victims and persuade them to pay.

Although Guatemala has not had the levels of homicidal violence rates of its neighbors in the last decade (see Exhibit 1), some areas of the country, including Guatemala City, maintain murder rates equivalent to those of El Salvador and Honduras. For instance, the municipality of Guatemala City registered an annual rate of 49.7 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019 (Mendoza, 2020).

Regardless of the precise percentage of criminal violence committed by street gangs, they constitute important actors in the levels of insecurity and violence in Guatemala. The AmericasBarometer, a survey periodically conducted by Vanderbilt University in the region, found that in 2019, perceptions of insecurity in Guatemala increased significantly in the last seven years. In the 2017 survey, the AmericasBarometer found that 36.2 percent of the interviewed population said that gangs affected their communities (Azpuru et al., 2018). The survey also found that the presence of gangs played a role in people's intentions to emigrate to the United States (Azpuru et al., 2018).

¹ Only zones 15 and 17 did not report gang presence in Guatemala City. See InSight Crime (2019).

Exhibit I. Homicides per 100,000 Persons in the Northern Triangle of Central America, 2003–2018



Source. UNODC (2013, 2019).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GUATEMALAN GANGS

The first known academic report that points to the growing phenomenon of street gangs in Guatemala comes from a study conducted in the mid-1980s by Deborah Levenson in Guatemala City (Levenson, 1988). The study highlighted the growing phenomenon of youth gangs in the capital. Their emergence resulted from a combination of the typical social drivers of youth gangs (systemic exclusion and the need to integrate a group of peers) and social protest movements among urban youth in the midst of political conflict in Guatemala (Merino, 2001). According to the study, most gang members came from blue-collar families seeking solidarity and peer support, while perpetrating different petty crimes. Before the 1990s, the universe of street gangs in Guatemala comprised a myriad of territory-bound gangs, with many drawing their names from the neighborhood or zone in which they appeared. However, some street groups already used the names MS-13 and Barrio 18 in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, changes in the pattern of transnational migration, along with the increase of deportations from the United States, facilitated the spread of the Southern California gang culture in Guatemala (Cruz, 2013; Ranum, 2011; Shifter, 2012). Gangs started to change in Guatemala, following role models established by some deportees and newcomers who brought new notions, identities, and norms dictating gang behavior. Limited information exists about the number of newcomers with a history of gang membership that made it to the Guatemalan streets, but their presence and constant flux in the 1990s transformed the landscape of gang dynamics in the urban centers (Ranum, 2011). Neighborhood gangs started to adopt the names of the Californian gangs (MS-13, Barrio 18, Hoyo Maravilla, and White Fence), contributing to their expansion. The growth of membership in the Californian identities created new conflicts and dynamics of violence. Following old rivalries transplanted from the streets of Los Angeles, MS-13 and Barrio 18 clashed in the Guatemalan streets, contributing to violence and insecurity, whereas White Fence and others watched their membership practically disappear. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Guatemalan authorities estimated that MS-13 and Barrio 18 comprised 95 percent of all gang membership in Guatemala, with MS-13 being the largest gang during those years (USAID, 2006).

Following a similar pattern experienced in El Salvador and Honduras, Guatemalan gangs strengthened after the government increased crackdowns on gang members and locked many youth in prisons and detention centers (Merino, 2001; O'Neill, 2010; Ranum, 2011). Although Guatemalan authorities did not reform the penal codes or establish new laws to deliberately fight gangs, the criminal justice system and the police focused a significant part of their activities in the persecution and crackdown of marginalized youth using the already existing legal framework. The imprisonment of hundreds of youth led to gang restructuring (Cruz, 2010). In prison, gangs connected with different networks, including criminal organizations; defined new leaderships; and diversified the scope of their criminal activities (Demoscopia, 2007; USAID, 2006). Tensions exploded in 2005, when imprisoned leaders of MS-13 mutinied in several prisons and decided to break the pact of no aggression that they had with the Barrio 18 gang leaders in prison. This event was locally known as *El Rompimiento del Sur* ("the Rupture of the South"; Prensa Libre, 2005).

The dynamics of gang activities changed in subsequent years. Information collected for this study suggests that Barrio 18 became the largest street gang in Guatemala, although the nature of their activities does not differ significantly from those perpetrated by MS-13. Although street gangs are a major security concern, the anxiety surrounding them is fueled by moral panic prompted by different sectors of the Guatemalan society (Reséndiz Rivera, 2016). Gangs specialize in extracting rents through extortion, selling "protection" services to small businesses and public transportation companies, and engaging in local drug trafficking. They also collaborate with other criminal organizations as assassins for hire and provide protection to larger groups for some criminal activities. These activities place them at the center of the debate of crime and insecurity in Guatemala.

1.2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON GANG DISENGAGEMENT

For the purposes of this study, a street gang is any street-oriented group composed mostly of young people, with a strong attachment to a group identity that includes unabated involvement in criminal activities (Bruneau, 2014; Cruz, 2010). This definition incorporates the key elements of most conceptualizations of street gangs in the criminal justice literature (Esbensen et al., 2001; Klein & Maxson, 2006).

Following the literature on gangs in the United States, we conceptualized disengagement from gangs as the declining probability of gang membership. Individuals who belong to gangs start participating less in their activities; they separate from the core group; and in many cases, they abandon their gang identity (Carson et al., 2013; Tonks & Stephenson, 2018). The study on why and how gang members leave a gang is a relatively new field in the criminal justice literature (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Most of the research that explores desistance from crime and gang disengagement has been conducted in the United States and Europe (Tonks & Stephenson, 2018). Studies generally coalesce around the idea that juvenile offenders, including gang members, go through life-course stages in their relationship to gangs, which we can summarize as follows: First, a young person joins a gang when maturational changes during puberty and adolescence push the individual to search for identity with other peers (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Pyrooz, 2014). Second, the individual participates in gang activities for a while, including illegal and criminal activities (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Third, a gang member disengages from the organization when, again, the individual experiences maturational changes that interact with external events. These events and exchanges prompt new identities and social relationships that steer the individual away from the gang (Carson et al., 2013).

Thus, age is an important factor when studying involvement in gangs and gang disengagement (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

According to the life-course perspective on gangs, gang membership is usually transitory, and most youth remain in a gang for a brief period of time (Pyrooz et al., 2010). However, scholars working in developing countries report that youth tend to spend more time in gangs (Hagedorn, 2008). They also maintain that, in many countries, street gangs institutionalize and morph into other forms of criminal groups (Dowdney, 2005; Hazen, 2010). In Central America, it is well known in popular culture that once a person enters a gang, it is for life (Bruneau et al., 2011). These studies illustrate that gang members often have trouble exiting the gang and reintegrating into the broader community given the power that gangs have over the communities they control.

Members of this research team recently conducted studies of gang disengagement in El Salvador (Cruz et al., 2017) and Honduras (Cruz et al., 2020). El Salvador and Honduras, particularly Honduras, share several public security challenges with Guatemala, including the high prevalence of the same street gangs—MS-13 and Barrio 18—and the prominence of a myriad of other criminal groups tied to transnational drug trafficking. The Salvadoran project sought to understand the factors that lead to gang disengagement. Among other things, the study found that Salvadoran gang members willing to abandon the organizations must grapple with the outsized power of the gang, and disengagement usually entails a process of negotiation with the gang that includes conversion to Christian evangelicalism. The Honduran study found similar patterns but established that gang members usually manifest intentions to leave the gang in the early years of membership. It is somewhat easier for Hondurans to leave the organization than it is for their Salvadoran peers. These differences seem to be related to the geographical and structural characteristics of each country. In both cases, however, the findings dispute the notion that gang membership is a short period in the life of a youth (Cruz & Rosen, 2020).

The study in El Salvador also showed that the challenges for youth willing to abandon gang life can be amplified when the gang organization makes active efforts to keep the gang member from leaving. The Honduran study reiterated the importance of the role of the gang in the process. Therefore, in studying the process of gang disengagement, it is important to examine the structural and environmental conditions that prevent gang members from leaving the gang, even after they have matured and have the will to do so (Rosen & Cruz, 2018). These challenges include the lack of a support system outside the gang, unwillingness of the community to accept a former gang member as a legitimate community member, or a lack of legitimate opportunities and healthy support from the community.

Reducing gang involvement and helping individuals successfully transition to legitimate economic, social, and situational opportunities are central mechanisms for reducing violence and improving the health and well-being of Central America and the Latin American and the Caribbean region overall. We know from research of criminal dynamics in general, including recent gang desistance literature, that leaving a criminal lifestyle can be difficult when individuals do not have access to legitimate opportunities, may need additional skills or education to take advantage of legitimate opportunities, or may have personal (e.g., mental health, substance use) or interpersonal challenges (e.g., delinquent peers or family members) that frustrate their efforts.

I.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The focus of this research project is the process and the conditions that lead to gang disengagement in Guatemala. As part of a broad effort of data collection, we worked with USAID, local missions, and other relevant partners to answer key questions related to gang life and reintegration in Guatemala. We designed the study to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the current structure and organization of street (and local) gangs?
 - a. How are the various levels of gang involvement defined/understood?
 - b. How does gang activity vary by country and regions within countries?
2. Why do youth (ages 10–29) become involved with gangs? What are the differences in terms of gender and age?
3. Why do youth decide to leave gangs?
 - a. What implication does the level of group involvement have on the leaving process?
 - b. What underlying conditions and/or drivers influence decision making?
 - c. What patterns of thinking play a role in these decisions?
4. What do youth experience when they try to leave gangs?
 - a. What are the differences in desistance mechanisms by gender and age?
 - b. How do interpersonal interactions with gang members and communities change?
 - c. What challenges do they face?
 - d. Are some gang-affiliated youth more easily able to leave the group than others?
5. What roles do public and private institutions (e.g., education system, law enforcement, civil society organizations) play in the processes of gang integration and desistance from the perspective of both gang members and institutions?
 - a. How do community members think about underlying issues (e.g., youth, violence, gangs, opportunities) and reintegration specifically?
 - b. How do these perceptions differ by respondent characteristics by country and/or regions within each country?

I.4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To answer these questions about street gangs in Guatemala, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with former gang members and subject matter experts (SMEs) on gangs in the country. We used a cross-sectional design to collect data from a specific point in the process of gang disengagement to identify the intervening variables identified by the study participants. Because this is not a longitudinal study, in which we would follow the paths of gang members from the moment of membership through the steps of disengagement, we can only pinpoint the factors that gang members and former gang members indicate as critical in their experience and decision to leave the gang. Therefore, the information collected refers to the personal experiences of the individuals who belonged to gangs in

Guatemala, complemented by the perspectives provided by local SMEs. The in-depth interviews, which drew on personal narratives from former gang members, enabled us to understand how those variables manifest in the process of disengagement.

Originally, the research was designed to follow a mixed-methods approach. The initial research design included a survey with a sample of 1,200 gang members in prisons, juvenile centers, and facilities that work with youth with a history of gang membership in Guatemala. Following the studies in El Salvador and Honduras, the purpose of the survey was to provide a quantitative profile of people with a history of gang membership in Guatemala. The design also included several in-depth interviews with SMEs and a limited number of former gang members to enrich and contextualize the findings of the survey. Through different channels, we attempted to gain access to imprisoned and former gang members. However, the authorities established lengthy permission processes that made it difficult to gain timely access to the subjects. Then, unfortunately, the research approach had to be modified because of limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, just as the research team had secured the official permissions and had begun the survey fieldwork in Guatemala.

The new approach entailed expansion of the in-depth interviews with former gang members. We conducted 105 in-depth interviews with people between October 2019 and June 2020. The sample included 48 interviews with community stakeholders (20 females, 28 males) and 57 interviews with former gang members (13 females, 44 males). The interviewers used a snowball sampling technique to identify and contact respondents, including former gang members and community leaders. Community stakeholders represented diverse sectors, including youth services (e.g., community organization leaders, religious institutions), criminal investigators in government institutions, judges working with youth cases, rehabilitation services in the court system, law enforcement leaders, and subject matter advisors. Exhibit 2 shows the study sample.

Exhibit 2. Qualitative Interviews Conducted in Guatemala

REGIONS IN WHICH INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED	COMMUNITY MEMBERS	FORMERLY INVOLVED IN GANG
Guatemala City	36	12
Amatitlán	5	—
Mezquital	4	2
Ciudad Quetzal	2	—
Unknown ^a	1	43
TOTAL	48	57

^aThese interviews were conducted by telephone, and participants were not asked about their location.

DATA MANAGEMENT

Data were collected by Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPADES) in Guatemala and the FIU research team. Interviewers conducted the original batch of interviews face to face, but when the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person meetings impossible, we switched to telephone interviews, after receiving clearance from the FIU Institutional Review Board (IRB). IEPADES conducted all the interviews with SMEs, as well as 43 interviews with former gang members. The FIU research team interviewed 14 former gang members. All interviews were conducted using a semistructured protocol (see Annex A).

The AIR and FIU team monitored data collection with a tracking sheet that interviewers used to track metadata (i.e., length of interview, location, respondent type, and gender of respondent). The interviewers digitally recorded all interviews for which we received permission from the respondent to record. Interviewers also transcribed the interview recordings into Spanish. The research team consulted the audio recordings as necessary to verify content.

For the implementation of the survey and the in-depth interviews, the research team went through several rounds of full board review with FIU's IRB to ensure that all provisions of human subject protection were followed during the project. Because this project was a collaboration among several organizations, AIR, FIU, and DI agreed that FIU's IRB would serve as the IRB of record for AIR and DI.

ANALYSES

We developed a codebook using Microsoft Excel to guide data organization and the process of data reduction across four coders. Our codebook followed the structure of the interview protocol. Coders met weekly to ensure consistency, review progress, discuss emerging themes, and adjust the coding scheme as needed. After coding the raw data into the study's thematic categories, the qualitative team analyzed the interview data by characterizing the prevalence of responses, examining differences among respondent types, and identifying key findings related to the research questions. We synthesized key findings within each thematic area to answer the study questions, provide supplemental information for the survey findings, enhance our understanding, and allow for triangulation.

For the analyses of interview data from 57 former gang members, we also employed a technique called qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). In the absence of a large sample of gang members and a lack of survey data that we originally planned to collect, QCA allowed us to quantify interview data and examine mechanisms that lead to the outcome of interest. QCA is designed to analyze a small number of cases (typically, between 10 and 50) and combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Benoît & Lobe, 2009; Benoît & Ragin, 2008). In using QCA, we aimed to determine which factors, or their combinations, were more likely to affect one's decision to join the gang early. Accordingly, we used interview data from former gang members and coded the variables that we identified, enabling us to quantify our analysis. We used QCA Add-In, software that enables QCA analyses to be performed in Excel (Cronqvist, 2019). (See Annex B for more details.)

LIMITATIONS

Our study has two limitations. First, as described in the methods section, the COVID-19 outbreak prevented us from being able to conduct a large-scale survey as planned. Thus, we are not able to determine statistical significance and rely solely on qualitative data. Second, we were able to identify and interview only 13 female former gang members, so we did not have enough data from women to compare responses between male and female former gang members.

1.5. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Following a consensus from the scholarly research on gangs, gang disengagement is a process (Pyrooz et al., 2010). Among gang members, the process starts with personal doubts about membership; continues with attempts to view oneself as part of a different community, separated from the gang clique; and ends with the individual refusing to continue participating in gang activities and, sometimes,

renouncing gang identity (Decker et al., 2014). Frequently, this process is not straightforward. Individuals who have separated from the gang may return to the group and become even more engaged in the gang and its criminal activities. In many cases and as the Salvadoran and Honduran studies showed, disengagement is possible only after the individual has attempted it several times and found a way to avoid fallout from the gang.

In this research, we focus on the variables widely recognized as key factors for disengagement. Gang disengagement results from the interaction of several factors that operate simultaneously at different levels and in diverse forms. In examining these factors throughout this report, it is important to keep in mind that there is never a single condition that explains why some youth take a path toward gang engagement and disengagement. Instead, in explaining the process of disengagement from the gang, we need to consider how those factors operate at different levels of social interaction in the life of an individual, from structural constraints to community dynamics and family relationships. For example, two gang members might have the same individual characteristics (age, education, and income); they might have lived similar experiences and relationships with peers; and they might be part of the same social environment, in the same city and country. Yet only one of the two gang members might actually exit the gang because the immediate community in which the “deserter” lives provided effective support and resources once the individual decided to step away from the gang and start a new chapter in her or his life.

In addition, factors associated with the process of leaving the gang can be classified as “pushes” and “pulls.” Following a framework originally proposed by Decker and Van Winkle (1996) to explain why individuals join a gang, explanatory variables can be divided into push factors and pull factors. With respect to entering the gang, push factors are external conditions that lead the individual into the gang, such as family issues or the need for protection from other groups. In contrast, pull factors are conditions that make the gang attractive to a young person, such as friends who are gang members or access to resources provided by the gang.

With respect to gang disengagement, push factors are elements that make the gang life less attractive to gang members. Push factors can include the individual growing tired of the gang lifestyle and desiring to avoid violence, which is a part of gang life (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). For instance, gang members have a level of tolerance for experiencing and participating in violence (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pyrooz et al., 2010; Pyrooz et al., 2012). On the other hand, certain pull factors can lead gang members to leave a gang: employment opportunities; family and children; and new reference groups, such as the church (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Tonks & Stephenson, 2018). In this report, we focus on the push-pull framework to help us understand the complexity of gang life in Guatemala.

In the following pages, we present our key findings from in-depth interviews in four sections:

- We provide an overview of the context of gangs and gang violence and describe the structure and organization of street gangs in Guatemala, gang activities, and a critical event that changed gang dynamics in Guatemala.
- We discuss the reasons and the characteristics of the process of joining a gang in Guatemala.
- We delve into the core theme of this research: the reasons and the process of gang disengagement.

- Finally, we discuss the roles of institutions in the process of gang disengagement and rehabilitation.

We close the report with some recommendations stemming from the findings.

2. THE CONTEXT OF GANG VIOLENCE IN GUATEMALA

As in the rest of Central America, the main and most notorious gangs in Guatemala are MS-13 and Barrio 18. Both gangs have a vertical hierarchical structure, with a set of roles and norms that regulate their activities and behaviors. However, unlike Honduras, where gangs do not have a national leader, local authorities in Guatemala have pointed out that each gang has a national leader who oversees the operations of the gang (McDermott, 2013). In our study, we did not find consistent evidence of this assertion. Although some individuals are identified as national leaders of the gang, the descriptions about the gang structure and the way it works do not indicate the presence of regional structures that can exert control over their members in the way Salvadoran gangs do nationally or Honduran gangs do regionally. The information collected as part of this research makes clear that gangs are organized by *clicas* (“neighborhood cliques”) that are vertically controlled by senior members of the gang, who often are in prison. These leaders, however, watch over the operations and dealings of specific cliques, and they collaborate with the leaders of other cliques but do not control the operations of several cliques.

Although it is hard to determine the exact number of gang members in the country, Guatemalan authorities agree that Barrio 18 is larger in numbers and covers a larger territory. Nevertheless, respondents said that MS-13 is better organized, more professional, and wealthier compared with its rival gang. The type of criminal activity employed by each gang remains very similar, consisting mostly of extortion, petty drug trafficking, kidnapping, and hired assassinations.

In this section, we present our findings on gang structure and gang violence in Guatemala. Based on the information provided by former gang members and community experts, we first explore the structure and organization of street gangs. Then we present results on the type of criminal activities in which gangs are mostly engaged. Finally, we provide an account of the Rupture of the South, an event that constituted a turning point in the evolution of Guatemalan gangs, which helps explain some of the prevalent dynamics to date.

2.1. STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF STREET GANGS IN GUATEMALA

In Guatemala, both MS-13 and Barrio 18 have a similar structure, composed of different positions and roles within each group. Those roles are regulated by an informal but well-known system of rules and expectations common to each gang and shared by the diverse subgroups with the same gang identity. Both gangs in Guatemala recognize the existence of a national council, called *rueda* (“circle of the barrio”). This council is integrated by senior members of the cliques associated with the gang. All interviewees deemed the council as the highest level in the gang structure, and although the exact number of members on each council remains unclear, all its members remain in prison. At the regional level, both gangs have fragmented structures that operate autonomously, despite reports from some years ago that suggested a nationally led organization (McDermott, 2013).

At the local level, both gangs are a collection of groups, called *clicas*. These cliques operate independently and are closely linked to the neighborhoods in which they operate and conduct their criminal activity. Essentially, cliques are the basic unit of the gang organization and usually vary by size. Some respondents pointed out that their clique had 30–50 members, whereas others said theirs had 300–500 members. Compared with Honduras, clique membership seems to be particularly important in Guatemala. Gang members take pride in belonging to a specific clique and constantly make distinctions among cliques inside their gang. Respondents stressed that they would compete with other cliques even within their gangs to

see who made the most money, controlled more territory, or had more gang members. As one would expect, these dynamics produce constant conflicts among the cliques, and they are frequently addressed in the prison *ruedas*.

Within each clique are different levels of involvement, which reflect clique hierarchy. The clique leadership consists of a selected group of individuals appointed by the top leader in prison. In the language of the gang, these individuals are known as *ranfleros* (“bosses”), *llaveros* (“key masters”), *primera palabras* (“first words”), *segunda palabras* (“second words”), and *tercera palabras* (“third words”). At the middle level of the organizational structure is the core and “muscle” of the gang. The individuals at this level are in charge of carrying out most of the criminal and revenue-generating activities, such as extortions, drug dealing, and murders. In both organizations, they are known as *homies*, *soldados* (“soldiers”), and *sicarios* (“hitmen”). The lowest level of gang membership consists of collaborators or informants. These individuals are not considered official members of the gang; they have not undergone an initiation rite, and they function as aides to the regular members. Their activities include communications, transportation of drugs and weapons, and surveillance, flagging the presence of strangers and potential rivals in the territory. Collaborators take different titles, which also may reflect a hierarchy within the group of collaborators: *chequeos* (“checks”), *paros* (“supporters”), and *banderas* (flag posts; Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3. Levels and Titles in Guatemalan Gangs

LEVELS	LEADERSHIP	SOLDIER/MEMBER	COLLABORATOR/ INFORMANT
TITLES	Ranflero	Homie	Chequeo
	Llavero	Sicario	Paro
	Primera Palabra	Soldado	Bandera
	Segunda Palabra	—	—
	Tercera Palabra	—	—

18TH STREET GANG

At the topmost level of their organization, Barrio 18 has the *Rueda del Barrio 18*, which comprises long-term members of the gang who have proven their commitment through service in their own cliques. The *rueda* takes place within the prison because all of its members remain incarcerated. According to former gang members, they convene on a regular basis to discuss affairs that pertain to gang activity. Imprisoned gang leaders send out orders to their respective cliques via *primera palabras*. These selected individuals act as a liaison between the cliques and the leaders. They are the voices of the leaders in the streets, and they report back to the *rueda* anything that might be of interest.

At the same level as the *primera palabras*, each clique has its *ranflero*, who essentially is the clique boss. The *ranflero* makes decisions at the clique level and oversees the criminal and economic operations of the gang. Under both the *ranflero* and the *primera palabra*, depending on the clique’s size, Barrio 18 has *segunda palabras* and *tercera palabras*. These gang members act as assistant or associate leaders and take the place of a *ranflero* or *primera palabra* in case they are sent to prison or killed. In those circumstances,

they also serve as aides to the clique leaders. Many former gang members pointed out that *segunda palabras* and *tercera palabras* are well respected within the clique.

Under the clique leadership, the *homies* are the core and muscle of the gang. They are in charge of carrying out most of the criminal and revenue-generating activities. Under the *homies* comes a series of collaborators inside each clique who are not official members of the gang but, rather, are sympathizers and potential gang members. The gang clique uses them as the “eyes and ears” of the neighborhood, as well as assistants to the leaders of the gang and couriers among the different members and leaders of the clique.

Nevertheless, even at a collaborator level, there are three levels of gang involvement. At the first level are the *chequeos*, who occupy the top rank of nonformal membership: young individuals who carry out and assist *homies* in criminal activities but who have not been formerly initiated as gang members. The word *chequeo* comes from the English word “check,” which suggests that the individual is in a test period to prove his or her loyalty to the gang. As explained by a former gang member, to reach this status, the individual must explicitly say they want to join the gang and talk to a higher ranked member, who essentially becomes the mentor for the new member. Second, the *paros* are individuals who provide auxiliary support to the gang but are not members and have not expressed a desire to formally join the group. A former *paro* said that their activities include hiding a gun, listening to what the authorities say after an assassination, and transporting small amounts of drugs. Finally, *banderas* (flag posts) act as the eyes and ears of the gang inside each neighborhood. They have a low level of gang commitment and are still at an initial stage of gang involvement. Children are the most frequent *banderas*, and, in many cases, this role marks the start of the long road of gang membership (Exhibit 4).

VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The Structure of Barrio 18

In the first place is “primera palabra,” or the “ranflero,” and this also has to do with the street issue because everything that happens on the street is always governed by what is known as the rueda (“the wheel”), which are leaders who are imprisoned. Leaders of different cliques and some people who have come from the United States and are in prison—they comprise the rueda. There is the “first word”; he is the one who quotes the people from outside, the soldiers from outside, the ranfleros from outside; [the one who] summons them to visit periodically to be able to discuss issues both inside and outside the prison. Outside would be the ranflero of the clique to which one belongs; there is “the second word,” “third word,” in some cases; then there are the “soldiers” and there are the “chequeos,” as they are known, which are all those aspiring to belong to a gang.

(Former gang member 45)

When you are a paro or a bandera, there is still a possibility that you will leave the gang. When you are a chequeo, you already have established that in the future you want to enter the hierarchy of the gang, and then there is no turning back. If you leave, your head is already rolling. . .

(Former gang member 29)

Exhibit 4. Barrio 18 Structure



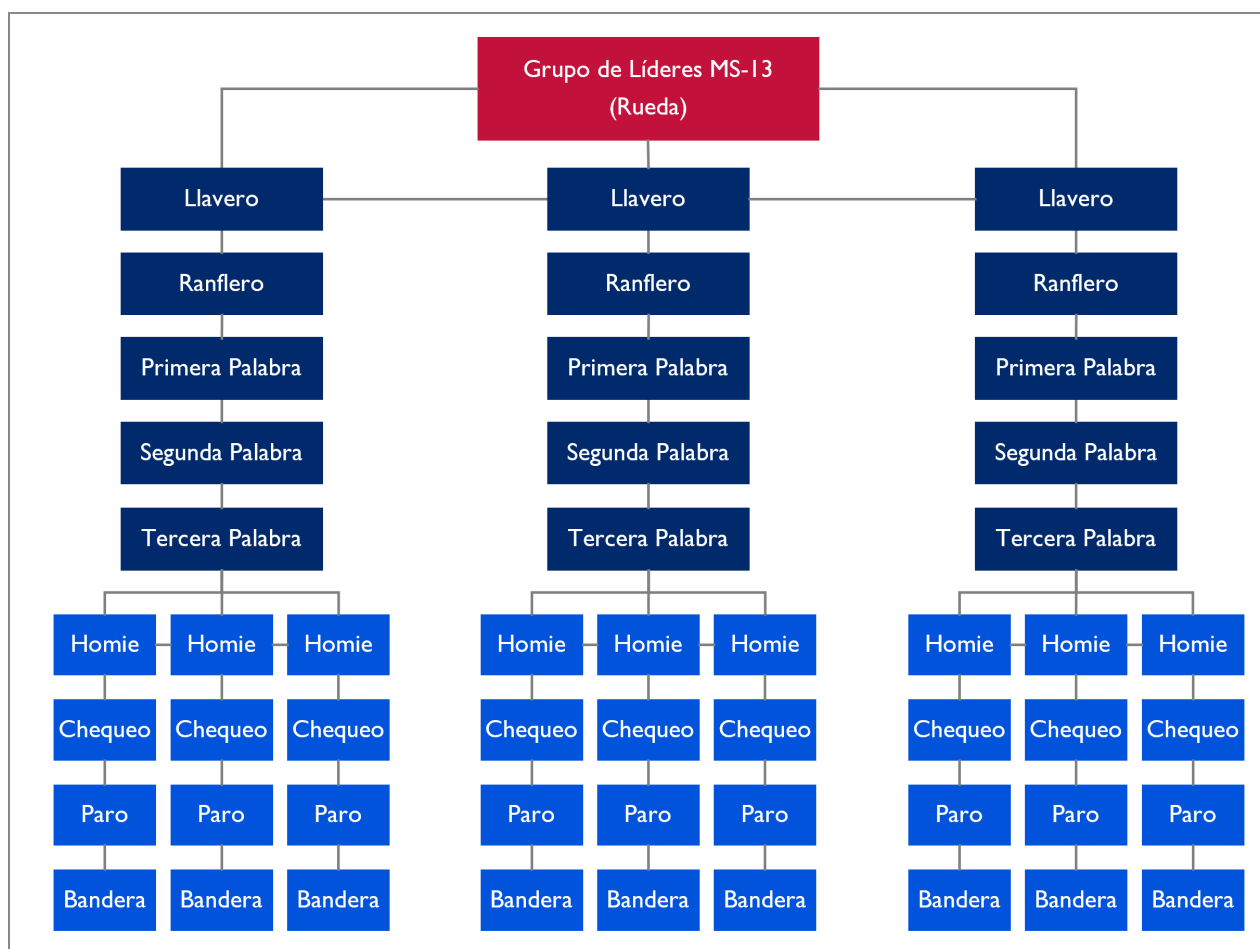
Source. In-depth interviews.

MARA SALVATRUCHA

In contrast to Honduras, where the two major gangs have different titles for their roles and positions, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 in Guatemala model a similar organizational structure where the hierarchy and the names of each level of organization are concerned. At the top of the MS-13 gang structure is a group of clique leaders known as *rueda*, who hold the ultimate authority in the gang cliques. The council consists of senior members of the gang, who are usually called *llaveros*. Their loyalty to the gang is unquestionable, given their years of service and their extended prison sentences. At the individual level, *llaveros* are in charge of the relationships between the leaders in prison and the members in the clique. In other words, they hold the “keys” to accessing the important decisions of the gang. Each *llavero* then delegates a specific clique to a *ranflero*, who, just as in the Barrio 18 gang, acts as the ultimate authority for each clique. *Ranfleros* are followed by the *primera palabras*, *segunda palabras*, and *tercera palabras*, all of whom act as interim leaders ready to step in when the clique needs them.

This structure marks a notable difference from that of the Honduran street gang structure. The appointment of first, second, and third leaders (*palabras*) also indicates an order of succession when the leader is taken out or imprisoned, which helps the cliques reduce internal conflicts and maintain order. All active members of the gang who do not hold a leadership position are called *homies*, and the collaborator/sympathizer levels model the same hierarchical structure as that of Barrio 18 (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5. MS-13 Structure



Source. In-depth interviews.

2.2. GANG ACTIVITY

The main objective of gangs in Guatemala, according to most interviewees, is to make money and gain power. They accomplish this by controlling and expanding territories in which they can establish their economic activities. One former gang member connected the economic purposes of the gang with the dynamics of solidarity:

The objective of a gang today is to recruit young people to kill, to extort money, to have more members and to be able to attack another gang. That was the objective, and when you arrived [in the gang], it was to be a family. They told you, “I give your life for you, and you give it for me.”

(Former gang member 33)

One expert described the dynamics of gang activities in the following terms:

When you go to some places like El Limón, you discover that there are whole communities that are taken over by gangs and that function normally . . . they control stores, gas stations, stores that sell seeds . . . they also control the cable service. . . The gang managed to strike a deal with the guy who installs the cable, and now they control the service. There is no other cable provider in the community . . . but, you see, what happens is that the more social control a gang gains, the violence tends to decrease.

(Advocacy group expert, Interview 37e)

Community stakeholder interviewees also said that providing a sense of community for youth is an objective of the gangs, but youth always succumbed to the overall objective of making money and gaining power and control.

Interviewees of both gangs identified extortion as the most important economic activity, followed by petty drug trafficking and murder for hire. Nearly all former gang members interviewed stated that their gang engaged in extortion activities. Gangs in Guatemala do not seem to be actively engaged in international drug trafficking, although some cliques may attempt to collaborate with drug-trafficking organizations. They consume drugs and sell them in their neighborhoods. A few interviewees also said gangs engage in organized crime, but it is difficult to ascertain whether they referred to transnational criminal organizations, such as drug cartels, or other types of organized criminal organizations in Guatemala, such as former security service organizations involved in human trafficking.

When asked whether the gangs' activities were different across regions, opinions were split. Half of the respondents said there were differences; the other half said there were none. Yet those who said there were differences generally, discussed the difference between criminal organizations such as drug cartels, which are more active in the border regions, and gangs, which operate mostly in marginalized urban areas in central Guatemala. Former gang members from both gangs agreed that to this day, both major gangs prefer to keep their operations in Guatemala City and its surroundings. The explanation stems from the fact that northwestern Guatemala is made up mostly of indigenous people who will not allow gangs to proliferate. In addition, the presence of drug cartels that extend along the eastern and southern parts of the country makes it difficult for gangs to thrive in these areas. A former Barrio 18 member offered the following explanation:

For example, in the West, to be more exact, our community is mostly indigenous, and they are people who are used to doing justice by their own hand. As a result, a gang member has to keep a very low profile to not be identified because if he is captured by the neighbors or the community, in many cases they could be lynched or killed. On the eastern side of the country, there is a lot of drug trafficking. So, the drug trafficker takes care of his people; he takes care of the community, and they eradicate any threat. To survive, gang members have to steal the radio from a car, rob a small store; but if the drug dealer identifies him, he kills them too.

(Former gang member 45)

2.3. THE RUPTURE OF THE SOUTH

In Guatemala, MS-13 and Barrio 18 formerly could peacefully coexist in some venues. Following the norms prevalent in prisons in Southern California, which is known as *la Corrida del Sur* (“Running the South”), active gang members could coexist and share spaces in prison without resorting to aggression. In the United States, this arrangement was possible through the influence of the Mexican Mafia, which controlled prisons in California and had an interest in keeping the peace in the penitentiary system (Skarbek, 2014). When MS-13 and Barrio 18 started to proliferate in Central America, they brought some of the same norms that allowed peaceful coexistence in the prison system. This practice was observed for many years in Guatemala. In addition, *la Corrida del Sur* referred to old California prison codes, whose main goal was to protect Latin gang members from groups of other ethnicities inside the prisons (Sanz & Martinez, 2012).

In the early 1990s, as gangs in Guatemala started to grow in the number of members, authorities began to redistribute the gang populations in prisons across the country. This created a problem for the groups because, at the time, each prison was controlled by nongang inmates, locally known as *paisas*. These individuals abused gang members. A former Barrio 18 member shared the following:

In the mid-1990s, if you fell into the prisons of Guatemala, you found many groups of drug traffickers, kidnappers, paisa people who supervised you and made you “talacha” (slang for “dirty job”). They charged you, they charged where you slept, where you went to the bathroom and everything. If you did not want to pay or did not know how to pay, it was your turn to do cleaning jobs for them.

(Former gang member 46)

Submitting to the power of nongang leaders did not sit well with gang members, especially among gang leaders outside prison. In 2002, Guatemalan gangs formed the *ruedas sureñas* (“southern circles”), a group of rivals from MS-13, Barrio 18, and smaller gangs (e.g., White Fence, Eleven Street, Chapines 13), united by the sole purpose of taking control over the penitentiaries. In many cases, gang members would force their convictions just to be sent to prisons and help “the South” take over (Sanz & Martinez, 2012). This venture was successful, and by the end of 2002, gangs had taken control of the prisons.

This arrangement ended on August 15, 2005. After several years of relatively peaceful coexistence, in which rival gangs protected each other from criminal organizations and security forces, leaders of MS-13 decided to push back against the growing power of Barrio 18. According to an MS-13 leader who witnessed the events, Barrio 18 gang membership was expanding significantly within the prison system, and penitentiary authorities sought to house both gangs in the same location. MS-13 interpreted these developments as a threat to survival, and thus responded with *El Rompimiento del Sur*: a declaration of war by MS-13 against Barrio 18 (Sanz & Martinez, 2012). On that day, MS-13 carried out simultaneous attacks in four different Guatemalan prisons that left many people wounded and several dead (Prensa Libre, 2005). A former Barrio 18 member explained the situation as follows:

We used to help each other, until we [Barrio 18] began to get a little more respect inside the prisons. This led to so much hate that in 2005, they broke the pact. They attacked us inside the jails, killing more than 45 soldiers from our neighborhood. This changed everything and changed things in the streets as well.

(Former gang member 46)

El Rompimiento del Sur created a significant fracture in the Guatemalan gang dynamics and reshaped the structures of the gangs across the prisons and the country. When asked about the evolution of gangs, many former gang members who had knowledge about the history of their gang characterized this event as the most important episode in determining the codes and expected behaviors within the gang. The ongoing rivalry between these gangs is still fueled by this event. As the president of the Supreme Court explained, every year in August, authorities have to double down security in prisons as gangs commemorate this day by trying to harm the rival gang.

3. GANG ENGAGEMENT

In this section, we present data related to the reasons for and process of joining gangs in Guatemala. We use the information collected from the in-depth interviews to identify the factors that drive young Guatemalans into street gangs. This section has two subsections. First, we discuss the critical pull and push factors that lead youth to join gangs, based on a qualitative analysis of the narratives provided by SMEs and former gang members. We also pinpoint the common patterns that we identified through the QCA (see Annex B for methodology). Second, we discuss differences by gender.

3.1. CRITICAL FACTORS THAT LEAD YOUTH TO ENGAGE IN GANGS

VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Family disintegration is one of the first reasons. For example, there are couples here who are alcoholics, or use drugs, so many times the children end up or get involved in these problems [. . .] because there is no longer anyone watching them, which is what they do.
(Community stakeholder, Interview 56e)

Sometimes the kids offer themselves to gangs for a hug, a simple hug from someone [. . .]. The child grows up in solitude, goes out in search of friendship and camaraderie, and, unfortunately, in every corner he finds bad company.
(Government official, Interview 13e)

During adolescence, youth want to belong to a group due to lack of attention from their parents, sometimes even because they fear their parents because they face domestic violence at home . . . youth go to find groups where they can feel good and feel loved somehow; and from my own experience, one seeks affection from other people that cannot be found inside the home and the family.
(Youth leader, former gang member 7)

Although most SMEs interviewed for this study perceived that the objectives of the gangs are intrinsically criminal—namely, controlling territories and committing crimes (including extortion, drug sales, and homicides)—the main factor driving youth to gangs in Guatemala is not criminal in nature. Instead, most community stakeholders and former gang members interviewed mentioned family disintegration; yearning for respect; and the need for protection, affection, and belonging as the most important factors that drive youth to join gangs. Although more than 60 percent of the former gang members interviewed cited lack of bonding or family dysfunction as a reason for joining gangs, less than 15 percent mentioned the search for material resources or income.

In turn, the gang offers a sense of community, identity, protection, and access to material resources. According to some criminal justice operators, gangs turn to younger recruits for two reasons. First, children, being more emotionally immature, are easier to persuade than older youth. Second—and more importantly—children 13 years of age and younger in Guatemala cannot be prosecuted for crimes. From 13 to 15 years of age, they can face a maximum of two years in detention; from 15 to 18, a maximum of six years. After age 18, people can go to prison for longer periods.

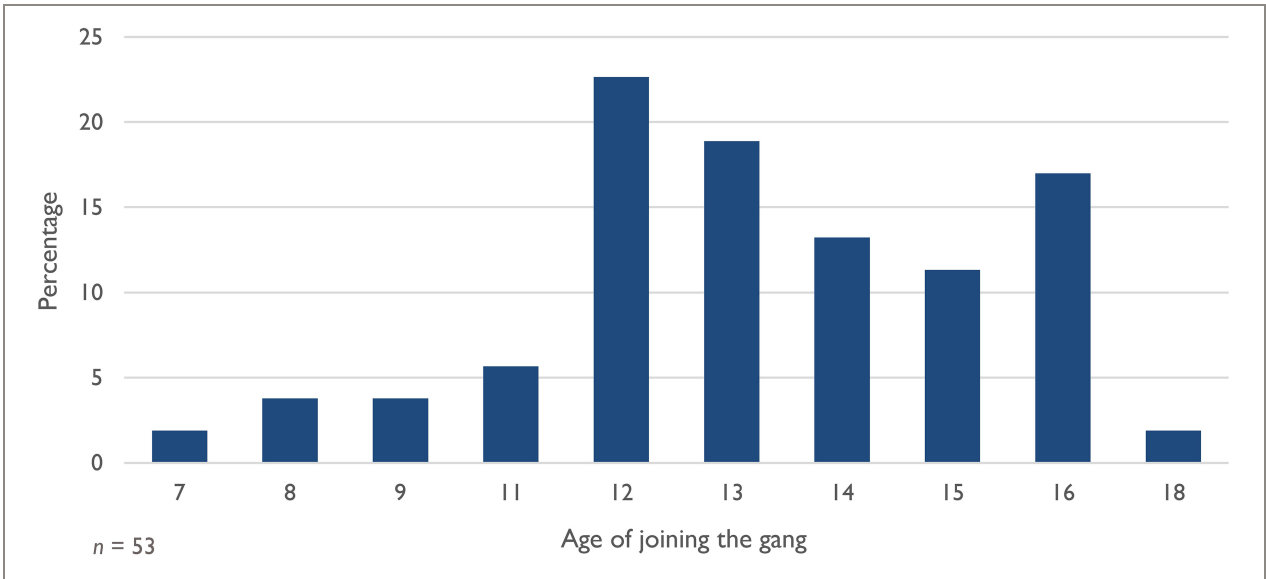
These findings are similar to what we found in the Honduran study, but the difference in Guatemala is that problems inside the family appeared to be more prominent push factors to joining gangs than in Honduras, where the influence of peers—or pull factors—seemed to be more prominent. Without an equivalent survey in Guatemala, it is difficult to compare the influence of these two main factors driving youth to gangs. However, virtually all individuals interviewed for this study acknowledged that family disintegration, incidents of domestic violence, and inadequate parental supervision push youth to the streets, where they are attracted to peers who are already engaged in gangs.

AGE AND YEAR OF GANG INVOLVEMENT

Our analyses suggest that the Rupture of the South is important in the history of gang dynamics in Guatemala in many ways, including changes in the age of recruitment. It appears that since the rupture, youth started joining gangs at a younger age than they did before 2005. Of 29 interviewees who were involved in the gang after 2005, the majority joined at a younger age than those who joined before 2005. Of 17 participants involved in gangs before 2005, 10 joined the gang when younger than 15 years old, and seven joined the gang at 15 or older.²

Among the 53 participants for whom data are available, the age at which they joined a gang varied from seven to 18, and the average age was 13.2. Compared with El Salvador and Honduras, where gang members, on average, join a gang at 15 and 15.7 years old, respectively, Guatemalan youth may be engaging with gang activities at an earlier age. Indeed, of 53 participants, 37 (almost 70 percent) joined a gang before turning 15 (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6. Age When Joining a Gang



This finding also may have influenced changes to the organizational structure of gangs in Guatemala. As described earlier, the lower category of gang hierarchy (informants or collaborators) consists of three levels (*chequeo*, *paro*, and *bandera*) that precede one’s process of “jumping into” the gang. This process of initial engagement with the gang may take up to several years and appears to be longer in Guatemala than in Honduras and El Salvador. For example, one former Barrio 18 member spent about six years—from 14 to 20 years old—as a collaborator. Given the limitations of qualitative data, these findings call for further exploration through a large-scale survey.

Most of the former gang members we interviewed noted that gangs in Guatemala became more violent and more economically motivated after the Rupture of the South in 2005. Conflicts among rival gangs within prisons resulted in more rivalry on the streets because both gangs began to arm themselves with firepower and new recruits. These external pressures propelled gangs to seek additional revenue

² Not all former gang members provided information on when they joined the gang.

sources, which led to the rise in extortion activities and greater violence toward residents of the affected communities. In turn, the need to increase their manpower may have led the gangs to recruit members at a younger age, a trend similar to our findings from Honduras. A former Barrio 18 gang member explained as follows:

When the “South” broke down, about 2005–2006, [the gangs] divided and started killing each other . . . Before that, households in the neighborhood were asked just for a small contribution, like for protecting the neighborhood. It wasn’t common to see that if they [community members] didn’t pay the extortion fee, they would have their families killed. You wouldn’t find this kind of extortion we see nowadays . . . Yes, [gangs] want more money nowadays because they help homies in prisons; they send stuff to them, help their families. Now it’s more like a business.

(Former gang member 57)

PULL FACTORS

Our analyses suggest that a combination of group- and resource-related factors explain why youth are joining gangs at younger ages. Younger recruits often are motivated by the sense of belonging to a group and the desire to enjoy its resources, such as money, respect, or power. However, a closer look across our dataset³ revealed that only four of the former gang members were motivated in part by these reasons to join the gang, and all four did so before they were 15 years old. Some used to hang out with gang collaborators and were attracted by the possibility of making money in exchange for small errands for the gang. Others aspired to belong to a group and carry a gun to feel respected and feared. Because this finding is not robust, we explored group- and resource-related factors separately.

Group-Related Factors. Among former gang members who mentioned group-related factors as a reason for joining the gang ($n = 16$) in the overall dataset, most ($n = 10$) were involved in gang activities before 2005. Although the gangs were less violent than they are today, they seem to have attracted youth by projecting a sense of camaraderie and power in the earlier years. One of the most important factors in engaging with the gang appears to be the interaction with peers in the gang. In this case, the school environment often does not fulfill its role of a protective factor and instead provides space in which youth encounter gang-involved peers. According to a former gang member,

You can be normally studying, but there is always a classmate who already has it [gang involvement], so one starts getting to know them, and then he realizes that he is already part [of the gang] because one gets carried away by it. I saw it many times how kids joined the gang just because they knew someone, and one wondered how they ended up there, but it was through an acquaintance they had there. So, one of the reasons they join is because of their own friends.

(Former gang member 31)

³ This information was available from 45 former gang members.

Some former gang members reported that they came from relatively nonviolent families and were not pushed to the gang by physical or psychological reasons, but, nevertheless, they decided to join the gang for a sense of belonging. Although these cases are significantly less frequent, they deserve attention and should be considered when designing violence prevention programs. One former Barrio 18 member who joined the gang in 1999 described it as follows:

In my case, well, I come from a disintegrated family, but I don't consider it to be a determinant factor to get involved in the gang, because I always had my maternal figure and it was a figure with a lot of authority, so I always feared and respected her. However, there was an obsession to belong to something, to be a member who could do more. I saw it then like a fashion. That's why youth see it like this; it's the aspiration to become an active member and to be able to pull the trigger (de llevar una "tilde"), so that everyone knows who I am.

(Former gang member 45)

A former MS-13 member similarly observed:

For many, family disintegration is a very important factor of why kids get into the gang nowadays. But it's not the rule. For example, I saw kids who had their home, money; they had anything they wanted at home, but either a mother or a father was absent. Another one [reason] that I think is the most common [is that] kids want to be part of something, to identify with something . . . When they don't find the identity at home, kids get involved with the gang because they feel they are part of it.

(Former gang member 28)

According to the interviews with community stakeholders, most youth join gangs voluntarily, although some are forced to join. Yet given the young age at which gang members are recruited, the distinction between voluntarily joining a gang and being forced to join is not always clear. Furthermore, most youth do not perceive the process as one in which they are forced to join the gang. Instead, many live the process as a choice, the result of their decision to go along with the gang. A former Barrio 18 gang member put it this way:

He [gang friend] talked to me good. He talked to me before I joined, all that stuff, what the situation was, how life in the gang was. He also told me, "But the decision will stay with you. It is your decision at the end if you want to live the gang life or not."

(Former gang member 30)

Finally, in contrast to Honduras, many former gang members and community stakeholders mentioned that in Guatemala, it is not unusual for family members to be part of gangs. In these cases, youth are driven to gangs because gangs are part of their family activity and are interlaced with the expectations of family members. In these cases, youth are not given a choice to join. In others, according to some community stakeholders, gangs threaten young recruits with harm to their families if they do not join.

Resource-Related Factors. As virtually all interviewees reported, joining a gang entails an active and intentional recruitment process on the part of the gang, accomplished mostly by a process of luring or enticing vulnerable youth, including children as young as eight or nine years of age, with small rewards, promises, or even threats in some cases. The following observations from a former gang member illustrate why gangs are enticing to youth:

I joined because since I was six years old, I realized my father hid gang members at home. They told me that I had to be part of the clique. The gang members came to my home as if they were family members. They wore my oldest brother's clothes. They ate with us, played with us, and they brought caps and rosaries for us. My father never told me to join; he was the one who had direct contact with gang members serving time at 'Infiernito' (prison). But my father's friends told me to join. This is why when I was 13, I had my first tattoo with my mother's name.

(Former gang member 16)

Although gangs make significant income through extortion and drug sales, the majority of gang members continue to live in poverty, even after becoming part of the gang organization. They may earn resources to pay for shoes, pants, or other clothing but not enough to significantly improve their livelihoods. Despite being lured by access to material incentives, most gang members remain poor. One government official said the following:

[I]n the long run, those who are good in the gangs are the leaders; those at the bottom are always fucked up. Then I have always said that those who have really taken advantage of this situation have been the leaders of the gangs. In the case of Barrio 18, their leaders do not share profits with those who are rising, starting within the gangs. Why? Because they already have monopolized that criminal market.

(Government official, Interview 16e)

PUSH FACTORS

Of former gang members who shared the reasons they joined the gang ($n = 45$),⁴ many cited a push factor, including lack of affection from their family ($n = 38$) and experiences of physical or psychological abuse at home ($n = 23$). Domestic violence, drug or alcohol addiction within the family, and school bullying were recurring themes in the personal stories of former gang members. One participant described it as follows:

⁴ Only 45 of the 57 interviewed former gang members provided this information.

I joined the gang to get protection. I grew up with a violent father who drank a lot and argued with my mom every day. I saw violence daily, very close. There was violence and bullying at school too, but I couldn't go to my family to complain and ask for protection; I had to be on my own. And if someone beat me at school and I responded, the administration immediately called my mom, and she beat me at home. So, in my case, violence pushed me to look for protection in the gang.

(Former gang member 28)

Lack of Affection. In many cases, the street becomes the first gate into the world of gangs when youth escape an unhealthy home environment. Many former gang member interviewees ($n = 23$) mentioned that they spent a lot of time hanging out on the street unsupervised. One female former MS-13 member claimed that her main reason for joining the gang was the lack of parental supervision as a teenager:

Well, me, my way of living, well, there wasn't much attention, and I needed someone to talk to, and they [gang members] were my friends . . . You know, in those times, my mom worked a lot, my sister worked a lot; I was on my own. I didn't have anyone to talk to, and that's why I got carried away by the gang I had.

(Former gang member 42)

In extreme cases, parents themselves kick their children out of the home, thus laying the foundation for youth socialization with gang members and eventual involvement in gang organizations. As a result, youth on the street are especially vulnerable to the influence of older gang members, who often turn out to be the only providers of support and care for abandoned children. As discussed earlier, youth can be pushed to the street as early as eight years old:

I suffered a lot of violence at home, a lot of domestic violence, many beatings; nobody cared about me . . . my dad committed suicide when I was little, and at home I had my self-esteem really low. They used to tell me that I was worth nothing, that I'd [be] better [off dead], that I was useless and I'd never succeed. And so, since childhood, I got this resentment . . . I left home when I was eight years old; I went to live on the street. The street taught me, made me grow up, and on the street I met my family. That's how I refer to the gang.

(Former gang member 21)

Revenge for Abuse. A related motivation that drives youth in violent or abusive families to gangs is the search for respect and, in some cases, revenge from those who have physically, sexually, or emotionally abused them. One-third of former gang members said they joined gangs because they sought respect, protection, and/or revenge. In the absence of mechanisms to resolve conflicts peacefully, protect victims of domestic violence, and, more generally, promote justice and safeguard citizens' rights, many victims feel inclined to take justice into their own hands, even if that entails violent means or criminal activities. The following quote aptly illustrates this point:

From a very young age, I suffered many types of abuses, also sexual abuse because my uncle used to touch me and he asked me to touch his penis . . . I told my mother, and she did not believe me because the uncle was my father's brother. I told my father, and he hit me for being a liar. No one believed me; that generated a lot of anger . . . One day, I told one of [the gang members] what my uncle had done to me. He told me, "If you want, we can beat him up and scare him." I was angry, they heard me and believed me, so I agreed. One night, my uncle was walking, and I stopped him and told him, "Now touch me" . . . when he tried to hit me, three gang members approached him and hit him so hard they almost killed him.

(Former gang member 22)

The desire for revenge is typically intertwined with other factors. The perception of general violence, both at home and in the neighborhood, breeds resentment in youth and the desire to "get even," with more violence in response. One participant described it as follows:

My dad didn't live with us, but it wasn't the main reason [to join the gang]. My siblings died; four of my siblings died in those times, and now, just three years ago, my fifth brother was killed. I'm the only one of my six siblings still alive . . . some were killed in a gang-related violence; some were killed in general violence [not gang-related]' . . . but this was my main reason for wanting to belong to a gang, to do the same to them, to avenge my siblings. Although I knew I wouldn't achieve anything, but I had this intention to avenge; I had an idea who had done it more or less.

(Former gang member 31)

Community stakeholders cited similar push factors, including inadequate protection in the home, lack of supervision, and lack of parental affection as the most important reasons why youth join gangs. In their view, youth find in gangs alternatives to the family—organizations that provide physical and material support, recognition, and respect—even if in the end, gangs end up not providing their members with much affection or access to significant material resources. Similarly, former gang members mostly cited reasons related to a lack of family bonding, a lack of parenting or parental supervision, and a desire for gaining respect and recognition as the main reasons that youth are attracted to the gangs.

Indeed, the absence of educational and employment opportunities, health facilities, and recreational activities for youth are the risk factors that affect families and drive youth to gangs. Typically, youth who join gangs drop out of school during high school or earlier. More than 80 percent of the former gang members interviewed did not complete high school. Yet there is no evidence that joining a gang is a reason for school desertion. Most interviewees acknowledged that gang members actively recruit youth in poverty and who are marginalized because they are already disengaged from school or spend too much time in the street. A leader of an organization that works in communities heavily affected by gangs explained this situation in the following terms:

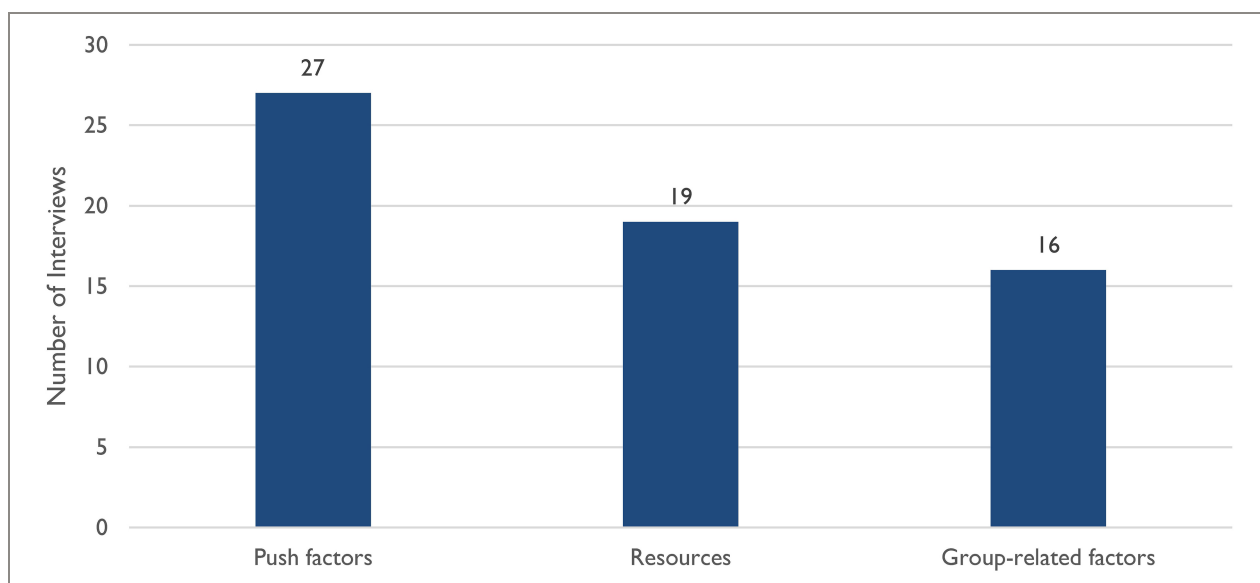
From the point of view of the state, there are no opportunities for adolescents and children. The issue of exclusion from the school system, the fact that there is no capacity to include children in the school system . . . Currently there are more than 2,500,000 children and adolescents outside the school system, which violates the Constitution and the Law for the Protection of Children and Rights to Education.

(Service provider, Interview 17e)

THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PULL AND PUSH FACTORS

Our analyses using responses from former gang members ($n = 45$)⁵ suggested that a combination of factors (push, resources, group) lead youth to join the gang, and push factors seem to be the most common, overarching reason (that is, mentioned first; Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7. Reasons for Joining the Gang



As stated earlier, in practice, push and pull factors combine to lead youth into the gang. A female former MS-13 gang member described this practice as follows:

But that happens here in Guatemala because, for that reason, . . . well, I only had my mother, and having only my mother, she went to work, and I was left alone for a long time. Well, then they started, influences of friends and all that. I wanted to go to the streets. My mom would hit me for whatever little things, and then I had my stepfather . . . and then we began to live in a very ugly environment and . . . then that's where I left home. This person came, and I fell in love very easily because I was a teenager. I was little, and I didn't have love at home, and I felt that there was love for me there, and then I went there, okay?

(Former gang member 51)

⁵ Forty-five of the 57 interviewed former gang members shared reasons for why they joined the gang.

Only one person, a female, was forced by her peers to join the gang. The other participants engaged in gang activities for a variety of reasons, and their initial steps followed a similar pattern. The gang met their needs and fulfilled the void left by other social institutions, including family, school, or community. The process of gang involvement is gradual; young people often do not realize the consequences of their actions. A former Barrio 18 member explained how performing small favors leads to a youth's deeper involvement in gang life and gradually evolves into full membership in the gang:

Through recruitment, which occurs by luring—let's say, it's psychologic—they [the gang] take advantage of your situation; they give you something you need at this moment, and you begin, like, accumulating favors. So, when they ask you for a favor, you feel like a pressure to do it . . . When I got to higher ranks [within the gang], I was part of a group of youngsters who [were] dedicated to recruiting in the schools, in the neighborhoods. Actually, the main thing we did was to study their [kids'] situation. The first thing we looked at was a weak spot, what he didn't have, and then we gave it to him.

(Former gang member 31)

From the perspective of interviewed gang members, engagement with the gang entails a voluntary—although not always a well-thought-out—process. Although some reports indicate that some gang members are forcibly recruited, those who have belonged to gangs in Guatemala described the experience as a process of seduction by the gang. In Guatemala, candidates for gang membership did not feel that they were forced to join the gang. Rather, they felt that the gang provided the affection and resources that they longed for.

3.2. DIFFERENCES BY GENDER

The underlying motives that drive young women to join gangs are not substantially different from the motivations that drive males. However, the most frequent reason that female former gang members gave for joining gangs is falling in love with a gang member or having a close relative in the gang. Yet during the interviews, all female former gang members talked about family disintegration, lack of protection, and searching for bonding opportunities and recognition. A few interviewees also mentioned seeking revenge as a reason for joining a gang. In most cases, women were physically and emotionally abused by their parents or guardians and sought refuge in gangs. One former gang member who joined a gang when she was 14 shared the following observations:

The parents are the ones who make their children violent. It is a psychological problem, perhaps too entrenched in our hearts. We grow seeking revenge, not only against that father that abused my mother but also against society at large, against men in general . . . the thought of "I will never let anyone to abuse me . . ."

(Former gang member 47)

Even when the factors that motivate females to engage in gangs are similar, most interviewees believe that there are strong gender differences in terms of the roles that men and women play and the power dynamics within the gangs. In contrast to the past, a larger number of women participate in gangs today.

Virtually all interviewees acknowledged that women have subordinate roles in Guatemala’s gangs, regardless of the gang.

VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

We have had women gang members whose parents do not fit the typical profile. They have studied, they have taken care of them, even studied in private schools, but they become the girlfriend of a gang member; they become the “haina,” and they are the ones who are in charge of guarding or protecting when the gang is going to kill someone . . . They can even kill but will never make it through the hierarchy . . . ; women are considered appendages of someone else.

(Government official, Interview 18e)

Former gang members and community stakeholders who were interviewed agree that it is extremely difficult for women to escalate within the gang hierarchy to leadership positions. Women seem to be recruited primarily because they either get unnoticed by the police and/or have sentimental relationships with a gang member. But once women are in a gang, they do not become leaders of a clique and do not command the respect awarded to males.

In contrast to Honduras, where women can escalate within the gang and obtain leadership positions, female gang leaders in Guatemala appear to be less prominent in general. In some cases, women do adopt more prominent roles, which happens in cases in which all the males in their clique are in prison or when the personal link to a gang

leader allows his female partner to use his authority. Although females may have some autonomy when making decisions about the clique, they still receive orders from the leaders in prison. They can even commit serious crimes, but they will not escalate to a leadership position. In one case, a female MS-13 gang member said that in Guatemala, there are no “all women” cliques, and if a woman were to be promoted to a leadership position, she would have to go to El Salvador to receive some “training” and then receive her promotion from the gang there.

4. GANG DISENGAGEMENT

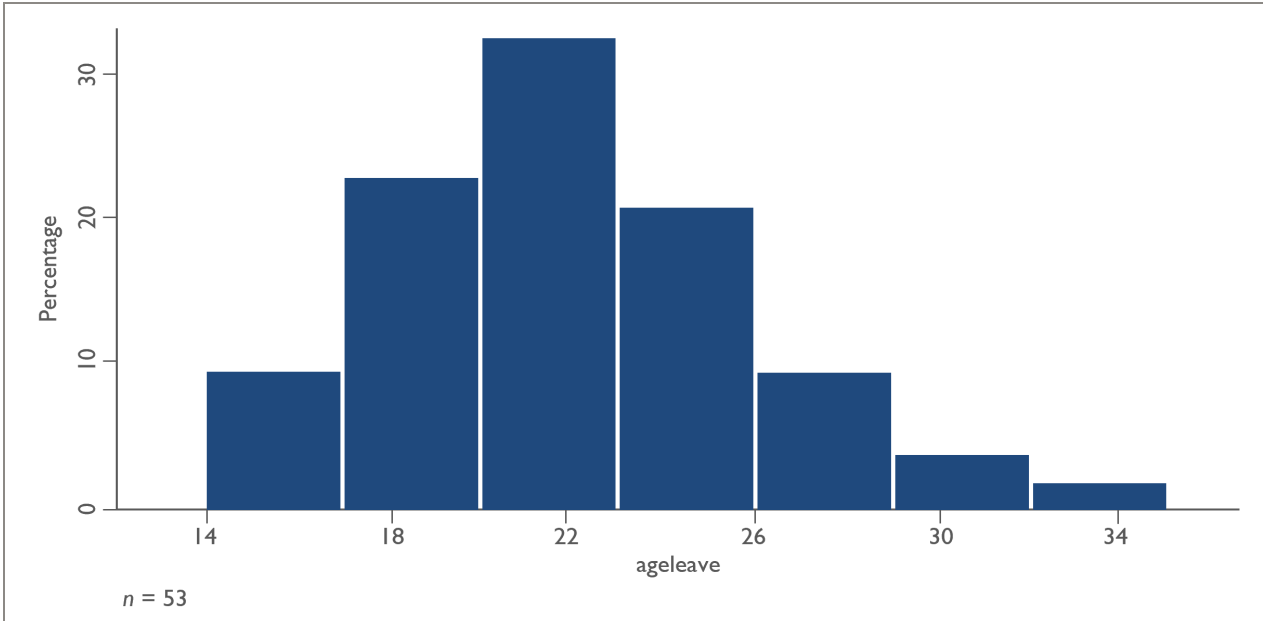
Leaving a gang is a process. For an individual, it usually takes some time and several attempts to separate from the organization and disengage in criminal activities. Our interviews with former gang members and community stakeholders suggest that gang membership is a life commitment in Guatemala. This narrative is similar to what we found in El Salvador and Honduras. However, the interviews with SMEs and, especially, former gang members portray a more severe environment for disengagement in Guatemala than in the other two countries. There is little tolerance for disengagement from gangs in Guatemala, whether through calming down (stopping participation in criminal activities linked to the gang) or leaving (fully abandoning gang-related activities and identity as gang members).

In this section, we explore the conditions that led gang members in Guatemala to disengage from gangs. We first briefly discuss the period of gang membership. Then we describe experiences that motivate members to leave the gang and factors that deter gang members from doing so. We then refer to the mechanisms that support disengagement and some challenges along this path. We also explore gender differences in the disengagement process.

4.1. GANG TENURE

Our former gang respondents reported that they remained in the gang an average of eight years. In fact, 56.6 percent of our sample stayed in the gang between five and 10 years, with nearly 25 percent staying in the gang for 11 years or more. These numbers indicate a longer average of gang membership than reported in El Salvador and Honduras, where the average membership time frame was approximately six years. As Exhibit 8 below shows our respondents disengaged from the gang at different ages. Although they were on average 22 years old, the youngest was 14 and the oldest 35. In addition, more than half of our respondents (56%) reported that they were between 19 and 23 years of age when they disengaged, and a much smaller number of them were younger than 19 or older than 23.

Exhibit 8. Age When Disengaged from the Gang



4.2. CRITICAL FACTORS THAT LEAD TO DISENGAGEMENT

Former gang members provided different reasons for leaving the gang, which we categorized into five factors that played a significant role in decision making: (a) fatigue and weariness from gang membership; (b) traumatic experiences, personal victimization, and death of a close person; (c) religion or personal experience with God; (d) family demands, marriage, and having a new child; and (e) the influence of external person(s), such as nongang friends. Because our data are qualitative, it is impossible to determine what factor or factors are comparatively the most frequent. It also is difficult to associate these reasons with the respondents' personal characteristics or determine the extent to which those reasons are influenced by gender, age, or the type of gang. In this section, we discuss the reasons that former gang members chose to disengage from the gang. Their narratives are complemented by the perceptions of community stakeholders.

VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

There are several reasons [for leaving the gang]. For example, I just spoke with a friend of mine who was 18 and he said, "Look, I had everything; I had weapons, I had guns, and everything, but I didn't feel well afterwards." I believe there comes a time when the mind enters a maturity of saying, "Well, what am I doing?" Here I am not going to do anything; they are going to kill me, and I am going to pass by in this life. Some leave because they are bored; they no longer feel like following the same path as others. I think there is an age when people understand that this is not for them.

(Former gang member 37)

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND MATURATION

One of the most frequently cited reasons for leaving the gang was articulated as "being tired of" the gang and being weary with gang membership. Nearly 21 percent of the interviewees with a history of gang membership said they ultimately left because they grew tired of gang life. Some respondents said they were "fed up" with the gang, whereas others had grown disillusioned with gang membership because of the negative consequences to them and the family. One female former Barrio 18 gang member, who joined the gang at age 14 and left at age 22, shared the following observations:

There comes a time when you get fed up, fed up! There is a conscience that we all have, and that conscience is the one that tells you that you did wrong . . . , that you did wrong, and that certainly one day you are going to pay for it, but then you don't want your last days to be like this.

(Former gang member 47)

A female former MS-13 gang member, who recently left the gang at age 18, talked about realizing the consequences of gang activity:

Well, there are people who reconsider; they say, "No, I am doing wrong, and I'm hurting my family members, the society" . . . There are people who they reach a point of saying, "No, I no longer want the same because it does not bring me anything good."

(Former gang member 42)

The most frequently reported reason that SMEs and community stakeholders believed youth wanted to disengage from the gang concerned changing perceptions toward gang membership as the gang members

matured developmentally. In other words, young people who might have perceived that gang membership would offer a sense of safety, belonging, respect, or access to resources began to realize that they had misperceived gang membership as they aged. One community stakeholder described this process as follows: “They begin to suffer the deprivation of liberty, the humiliations that they are always receiving orders from; they never give orders.”

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

Experiencing near death, surviving a devastating attack, or losing a close family member or friend as a result of violence are some of the most frequently cited reasons that gang members start the process of disengagement from the gang. One of every five former gang members we interviewed mentioned different traumatic experiences as turning points leading to disengagement. In several cases, a turning point was triggered by a single, momentous event. A 24-year-old former gang member, who left Barrio 18 after he was shot, described one such experience as follows:

It took me three bullets in my body. It affected me a lot. I was in bad shape. I spent years with my intestines outside—bags and a lot of things—I mean, it went bad. Then all that time [in the gang], I was wrong, and I had the opportunity to say that I was going to leave, that I will leave and that they could give me my “cuadros.” So they gave me the choice: Go ahead. Right now, you have the chance to square off [leave]. Then I thought about my future . . .
(Former gang member 29)

In other cases, many traumatic events involving not only personal or family victimization but also participating in violence can cause members to want to disengage. These accumulated experiences combine with feelings of weariness about gang life, as illustrated by the following observations of a former gang member:

But you experience a lot of things and you get traumatized, you get traumatized! You can’t sleep peacefully. You feel that people follow you; you can’t sleep with that . . . I feel my heart and my thoughts tearing apart. And when I began to think about that part of my [gang] life, I said, “No! I have to change!”
(Former gang member 30)

Community stakeholders similarly explained how an accumulation of these types of traumatic experiences led several gang members to decide that they wanted to abandon the gang. Violence against family members was the most cited traumatic experience by community stakeholders, as in this example from a service provider who worked with gang members:

Some say they are tired of it, but it is the family. More than one case has happened that has touched the family; they have already messed with the family, and that’s where they decide to withdraw.
(Community stakeholder, Interview 31e)

Finally, a former Barrio 18 gang member who joined the gang at age 12, became a clique leader, and remained in the gang for nearly 15 years described the impact of losing a family member:

My wife died pregnant. She was six months pregnant with a male child. My wife was shot. Damn! And it was hard, really hard! And I went out to the street and had the opportunity to continue in the same [vein] and know that sooner or later they were going to kill me . . . But I recognized that God brought me and gave me a new opportunity to improve.

(Former gang member 46)

RELIGIOUS REASONS

As in the last statement from a former gang member, several gang members referred to religion and God to explain their decision to leave the gang. Although these kinds of experiences were mentioned by 26 percent of the former gang members, they seemed to be less frequent than in El Salvador and Guatemala. Former gang members described the religious call in different ways. Some recalled the need for transformation as coming from inside, as a kind of supernatural event. Others described it as an experience prompted by their relationship with other people who found God and served as models for disengagement. For example, one former gang member said,

I'll be honest with you: One never wants to change. One always wants to do wrong, be evil. But thank God for changing different people who have been the same as me, or worse, or perhaps better. It is God. They approached me so that God changed my life.

(Former gang member 32)

Although several former gang members cited religious experiences or a connection to God as instrumental in the process of leaving the gang, few community stakeholders mentioned that gang members turned to religion for support as they decided to leave. A service provider explained that a connection to God may not be adequate to overcome the challenges faced after disengagement, “When they collide again with reality and the religion does not offer them what they thought, it makes them return.” In addition, the role of the church as an institution to provide social, emotional, and physical support was not mentioned as frequently, in contrast to our study in Honduras.

FAMILY AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Former gang members frequently talked about how getting married or having a child prompted them to change and seek to disengage from the gang. This factor also is related to maturation, which contributes to the formation of intimate relationships and reinterpretation of gang membership through the experience of being a parent. A former MS-13 gang member, who left the gang when he was 19, shared the following experience when asked about the reasons to leave the gang:

Yes, my wife and son who was on the way. When I got married with my wife was when I decided to leave, and [I] did not want my son to take the same steps.

(Former gang member 41)

The influence of the family goes beyond the formation of a new family or having children. In some cases, members of the old family play an important role in pulling individuals out of the gang. The following observations illustrate the tension in the individual between following his family or his friend and how the presence and persistence of a family member made the difference:

Before, I kept meeting with my [gang] friends. I talked with my sister; she advised me. I went out and talked with my friends, and I was upset: “I am going to do what those [my] friends say. I want to be ‘en la chingadera.’” But my sister told me, “No, you have already seen the consequences. You’ve seen where I rescued you from.” That is what made me change. I started to choose my family. They were the ones who were supporting me, not my friends.

(Former gang member 36)

Community stakeholders also frequently mentioned that intimate relationships and starting a family often led gang members to consider disengagement for the sake of their children and family:

I have documented and interviewed cases where young people who talk about how the family has begun to force them to leave the gang; I think that, in fact, this is the key.

(Service provider, Interview 35e)

Family and intimate relationships seemed to play a role in not only driving individuals out of the gang but also keeping them away from cliques. Respondents indicated that social and emotional support from family, intimate partners, and other facilitators is important, regardless of the mechanism of disengagement. For example, one former gang member said, “My mom, my wife and my little baby . . . I have to fight for them, and that motivates me to keep going and prevent me from falling again.”

Several respondents said the lack of supportive relationships outside the gang was a significant challenge that discouraged gang members from leaving the gang. For example, one community member said, “They are homeless because many families abandon them completely. In other words, the families have chosen to go somewhere else.”

VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

I did give him a year of financial support as well. It was good. He was trying to live well; he got together with a girl, he had his son, but he couldn’t get a job. Look, from there, he went back to extorting, but without being in a gang, as a way to get money for something, but he did try.

(Service provider, Interview 5e)

However, the social and emotional support may not always be adequate if the disengaged gang member does not have a means to support himself financially. One service provider described how a former gang member, who eventually was killed, found it difficult to stay away from the gang despite the support he received (see “Voices of the Participants”).

OTHER INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

Community stakeholders and SMEs also mentioned other conditions that facilitate gang disengagement. Those conditions are related to the role of the individual within the gang and the availability of rehabilitation services.

Role and Number of Years in the Gang. Community stakeholders perceived that the role of the individual within the gang and how long a person was in the gang were key determinants in decision making related to disengagement. Most interviewees indicated that those who occupy the lowest positions within the gang are more likely to leave. Respondents said a low-ranking role in the gang may make it easier for gang members to disengage because those members would be less likely to pose a threat or reveal information to rival gangs or the police. In contrast, disengagement was perceived to be more difficult for someone who ranked higher in the gang. One community leader said, “The higher they go, the more they know. When you’re too high up, you can’t get out anymore.” Community stakeholders also said that because higher ranking gang members with fewer marketable skills or opportunities for training are unlikely to find comparably paid economic opportunities outside the gang, they may be less likely to consider leaving.

Rehabilitation Services. Respondents who worked in the judicial system explained that the social welfare program for youth who are incarcerated contributed to helping change their thinking with regard to gang membership through education and therapy. Several service providers who worked closely with gang members said the key was to give youth a different sense of hope for the future by “opening up a little space to visualize himself as a better person.” One respondent said,

A girlfriend can motivate him, the church can motivate him, any event can motivate him that breaks his daily life of committing crimes, of mistreating, of taking drugs, of having access to girls. In other words, it is a moment that can impact all human beings, if we have that moment.
(Mental health service provider, Interview 42e)

Community stakeholders consistently referred to two factors that made it less likely for gang members to leave the gang: Gang members in higher positions and with more time in the gang and those with family in the gang experienced more difficulty disengaging.

4.3. CHALLENGES OF DISENGAGEMENT

The main challenge to gang disengagement in Guatemala is that the gang, whether Barrio 18 or MS-13, does not easily allow members to disengage. In contrast to what we found in Honduras, where some cliques would accept disengagement in different circumstances, or in El Salvador, where the gang structure was such that its members seemed more open to considering disengagement through religious conversion, almost all respondents in Guatemala indicated that members cannot really leave the gang. One former gang member said,

There is no way out of the gang. They take you out at once. The way out is death.
(Former gang member 41)

Still, many members do leave the gang, but exiting the gang in most cases entails living in fear of being killed. Respondents formerly in a gang, as well as community leaders and service providers, said that the threat of being killed by a rival gang or their former gang is a known challenge to disengagement. Respondents reiterated that many who disengage would get killed, as described by a government official:

I would say that we are talking about 10 percent that can get out, but of that 10 percent, three of those 10 that got out are going to be executed because of what they know, because the gang has the risk that that person can open his mouth and can give all that information and can say who are the ones who give the orders, who are the ones who execute the orders. For that risk is that the gang does not run it, does not run the risk, and what they decide is to kill them.

(Government official, Interview 7e)

A few respondents also described the risks of requesting permission to leave the gang. Even if the gang granted permission, the gang members were killed during the last task they were asked to perform or were given a “quota of murders” that was not achievable. “So they allow them to leave, but it is no longer a real exit, so regularly what they have is a trap.” A few respondents also referred to a “red light,” which a community stakeholder described as follows:

The gang will never accept that someone leaves the gang. In fact, it is conceptualized as an army that is at war, and the person is seen as the deserter, then within the gang, what they say they turn on the light. That red light means that the gang member who deserts the gang will be killed.

(Service provider, Interview 3e)

A former Barrio 18 gang member who left the gang last year described how he pushed back on the threat made by the gang leader when he announced he was leaving the gang. The respondent returned the threat to the gang, which illustrates the complexities of gang disengagement in contexts controlled by violent groups:

When I told them I was going to leave, they told me they were going to kill me. I told the leader, “Look, if you want to kill me, go ahead. But remember that just as you taught me to do bad things, if you are going to do it, do it well because your family lives here in the community. So, remember that you taught me to do bad things, and if you are not going to do it well, I am going to do it against you and your family...” That was the last time he called me. I am talking 2019. To date, I have not had problems because I was not afraid of him either. I spoke with authority because if you are afraid of them all your life, it’s all your life. They are going to have you as the cat and the mouse—intimidated.

(Former gang member 36)

Respondents also highlighted the risks of being an informant. One respondent observed as follows:

Many who have tried and disassociated themselves have been killed after having accepted or obtained some kind of cooperation—even trying to do so.

(Community stakeholder, Interview 17e)

Finally, respondents said that having family involved in the gang makes it more difficult for a gang member to leave. Some gang members are born into the gang or join because they have family members who are already part of the gang. This phenomenon also was noted in Honduras, but it seems more prevalent in the Guatemalan context. A community leader who worked with young gang members shared examples of youth whose family members were in the gang, which made “the possibility of leaving less likely” because leaving the gang also would mean breaking away from family and one’s connections. In addition, this respondent said that when a gang member is incarcerated, the family continues to get paid, which “does not allow the adolescent to want to leave the gang because the family lives from the link that it has with the gang. So, leaving the gang has to be a structural process and work of crime prevention.”

4.4. MECHANISMS OF LEAVING

Although most respondents said that disengagement had dire consequences that could cost gang members their lives, they also described some mechanisms that allowed gang members to disengage. Those mechanisms are (a) getting permission from the gang, (b) going into hiding, or (c) leaving the country altogether. Some SMEs mentioned seeking witness protection from the government, but such a mechanism did not come up in the interviews with former gang members, suggesting that they do not view it as a viable route of disengagement.

PERMISSION FROM THE GANG

In theory, anyone who seeks to disengage from the gang must obtain some form of authorization from the gang. This permission is provided by the immediate leader in charge of the individual wanting to leave, and, in several cases, the request is analyzed by the gang leadership. A former Barrio 18 gang member who left the gang at age 19 explained the process:

First, he [the gang member] speaks with the segunda palabra . . . and if the second word considers that he is a candidate to have his cuadros [to leave] and calm down, they both appear with the ranflero. The ranflero analyzes again the case, and if the gang member is a very important member of the gang, it is necessary to take him to the rueda (barrio circle).

(Former gang member 45)

Most gang members and community stakeholders noted that getting permission, or *cuadros*, from the gang leader was one mechanism for calming down. However, typically only well-connected members could get permission and only under “very personal situations.” However, gang members received permission on the condition that they were watched closely or that they came back to serve the gang whenever requested. One respondent said, “They are always sending someone to supervise them, to see if they comply or not with that situation.” A former gang member said,

If the gang asks, it is necessary to summon this gang member who already has his “cuadros” or has already calmed down. And if he reacts, that is one of the reasons why the former gang members or many former gang members have ended up dead . . .

(Former gang member 45)

Similarly, a community leader said that older, higher ranking gang members could get permission to calm down but would not completely disengage from the gang activities:

There were several old ranfleros, I tell you, because they are the oldest ones who began to disassociate themselves from the gang because they began to set up businesses like mechanic shops, bakeries, [and] carpentry shops. So in a way they began to demonstrate to the clergy that they were no longer gang members. And somehow they were, like, asking for permission, authorization to break away, and they were able to do it until it got to the point where they broke away quite a bit. But they don’t lose contact because they are useful, but they no longer participate in operations, in attacks, in such direct things, but they are already as if giving a type of advice.

(Government official, Interview 32e)

FLEEING AND HIDING AWAY

Given that permissions to disengage from the gang are rare and granted only under special circumstances, the action of requesting cuadros is, in itself, a risky move by anyone who wants to leave the gang. In many cases, candidates for disengaging from the gang voice their requests after carefully weighing the conditions and securing some mechanisms to avoid violent reactions from gang leaders. However, in most cases, they are unable to disengage. Thus, the most commonly cited mechanism that community stakeholders and former gang members described was to hide away from the gang. One community leader referred to a former gang member’s fear of being killed during mass killings of gang members in 2007, which led him to go into hiding:

He told me that when he saw that many of his companions, friends, known members of the gangs themselves were disappearing, he himself withdrew from the gang, and, in fact, he no longer comes to the capital, nor does he go out to the city. He is where he works; he works on a farm.

(Community stakeholder, Interview 16e)

One former gang member described the rationale for fleeing and hiding away:

In most cases, people prefer to flee because they are going to get killed. This is because you cannot get out easily. First of all, because of all the information you have about the gang and if a rival seizes you, you will go, they will still kill you, but you will sing before [telling] where the others are. For them it is better to kill [the deserter] themselves than to have someone else grab them or get information from them. That is why most of them prefer . . . there is no difference between a deal between a man or a woman to get out of a gang. You get out, they kill you. The difference is that some run away and go into hiding. For example, [in] my case, I had to go into hiding for more than two years to be able to return to my neighborhood.

(Former gang member 37)

Under these circumstances, gang members who decide to disengage must take steps to ensure they will survive. Another former gang member explained the way in which his disengagement plan unfolded:

. . . and when I decided I wanted to get out of the gang, I called the pastor and said, “The truth is that I no longer want to do anything with the gang. I want to leave. I want to square off (los cuadros), and the truth is that the homies don’t want me to square off.” So he came and he took me out of the community and sent me to another place. And there I was in that place. I started going to church. I began to change my life and fulfilling the time I was there.

(Former gang member 56)

Very few respondents discussed emigrating to the United States, although some former gang members raised this possibility. Most respondents mentioned moving to other communities in Guatemala City or other regions to hide from the gangs in their region.

GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES FOR DISENGAGEMENT

Employment and a stable income are some of the primary reasons that gang members decide to stay in a gang. For gang members who disengage, losing a job may push them back to extortion or other criminal activities—a reason that they could then be killed by the former gang. Three government officials referred to financial incentives to gang members for disengagement; however, none of the former gang members shared this information. These government officials reiterated that incentives were most attractive to lower ranking gang members, as described by a community leader:

A homie, a person who has already been tested and has passed certain tests, is no longer going to tilt, but someone who is entering, if he is identified and has received a certain economic benefit of 300 quetzals per week, which is more or less what a gang member earns, right?”

(Government official, Interview 33e)

Several community stakeholders indicated that some gang members disengaged through collaboration with the government. Gang members used this opportunity as the last resort to avoid getting killed by the gang because “they made a mistake” or “they were coerced to continue to generate revenues for

those in jail” to seek protection. One community leader noted that Barrio 18 gang members were more likely to collaborate with the police than those from MS-13:

Mara Salvatrucha have been very closed. I think they have a code of never telling anything, even when they are stopped. It is very difficult for a MS-13 member, if they see the processes of investigation, very few MS-13 decide to be effective collaborators, and they no longer get involved with the Mara Salvatrucha within the processes that the public ministry has had. In most cases, those of the Barrio 18 gang are more effective collaborators because they have to decide, to leave, to change even in the centers.

(Government official, Interview 18e)

4.5. POTENTIAL DIFFERENCES IN DISENGAGEMENT, BY GENDER

Given that more women have been actively involved in gangs in recent years, we explored the potential role of gender in disengagement. Although more research is needed to better understand women’s experiences in a gang, our respondents—including 13 female gang members—offered insights into disengagement specifically for females.

Some factors that motivated women to leave the gang differed from those that motivated men to leave. However, disengagement was as risky for women as for men and was influenced by the role they occupied in the hierarchy of the gang. Women in the gang often were involved as a result of intimate relationships they had with others in the gang, in the role of a girlfriend or mother. One service provider said women’s sense of connection with the gang was different:

A woman doesn’t get so involved, for example, tattooed. She doesn’t put on so many marks than, I think, men, [who] get more into the role of “I’m a gangster,” and they get more into it; they get more involved than women themselves.

(Community leader, Interview 48e)

Respondents explained that women “. . . do not have membership; they have affinity.” Women were described as “collaborators” with “no ranks” and “half the time only served as an object for sex, for pleasure, to go buy the beers at the stores, to go bring the marijuana, [and] to go buy the drugs.” Because a female gang member “doesn’t know anything,” many respondents said it was easier for women to disengage because “there’s not much fuss about it; she’s not wanted when she gets out of the gang.”

Some former gang members said women had an easier mechanism to disengage from the gang. They referred to pregnancy as an event that facilitated calming down or leaving:

For women [it] is easier because . . . well, women have the blessing of being mothers, and a woman in the barrio who gets pregnant is enough reason to calm down.

(Former gang member 45)

The risks of disengagement for females depended on the extent to which a woman had information or whether she had a relationship with a man who would not allow her to leave. Thus, a woman's connection to a man put her at great risk if she wanted to separate herself from the man. Multiple respondents mentioned femicide, a dire consequence for female gang members who tried to disengage. One government official said,

We have had cases where young ladies have withdrawn, and soon after they came to give us the news, they were found and murdered. For females there is also the death code, but it is easier for them to withdraw.

(Government official, 40e)

5. REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

Community stakeholders and gang members both said that economic and social factors are the primary challenges of reintegration. They recommended that government and civil society work together to provide focused economic and social support services. Both groups also emphasized the importance of prevention, indicating that it would be more effective to target the root causes of the problems that drive youth to join gangs, rather than address their needs after experiencing the often traumatic realities of gang life. In addition, gang members indicated that an absence of understanding of and affection toward youth—both before joining a gang and after disengaging—is one of the primary issues related to both prevention and disengagement that government and civil society should work to address. This section presents findings from the interviews with community stakeholders and former gang members about reintegration challenges and support needs.

5.1. SOCIAL AND RELATIONAL SUPPORTS

The challenges to reintegration that community stakeholders and former gang members mentioned most frequently were discrimination and stigmatization from the community in particular and society in general. Specifically, former gang members said that the psychological trauma of a person who is trying to reintegrate necessitates strong relational support from mentors or a close community. Most former gang members emphasized that the psychological trauma experienced by gang members during their time in the gang is compounded by the discrimination that former gang members encounter from the community.

One former gang member who left the gang at age 22 described the feeling of being singled out:

I know many people who are similar to my case, how difficult it is for them to go out because people saw them; they recognized them, and they pointed to them. And it is complicated for that reason because they discriminate against you. You cannot say anything because they take it as a threat.

(Former gang member 30)

Among other respondents who emphasized the weight of guilt that some former gang members may feel for the crimes they have committed, one community stakeholder described the need to understand former gang members as individuals who want to live a different life:

I think maybe they'd ask society to be taken into account. That would be a very fundamental basis because I think you live in fear that since you're a gangster, you already panic, even though you may no longer be in [the gang].

(Former gang member 26)

When asked about the challenges to reintegration, many former gang members we interviewed also cited the need to address the root causes that motivate youth to join the gang in the first place. More specifically, they discussed the need for prevention, including improving education and ensuring that youth feel they have a support network of family and other caring adults. In fact, after acceptance from

society and job opportunities, former gang members most frequently said that affection toward children and youth is a challenge. One community stakeholder addressed the need to strengthen the protection and education provided through the family and parents:

This is a very complex situation that the government would have to deal with from its base or from the beginning so that the new generations would have a family structure, the children would have a family structure where all rights would be protected. So I believe that a well-cared-for, well-protected, well-fed, well-educated child with an adequate family structure . . . I believe that a child who has all his rights is not going to make an easy prey of the gangs.
(Government official, Interview 47e)

Discussing the role of the family, many former gang members also emphasized the need for services to strengthen parenting, so parents understand how best to care for and support children. One former gang member said, “Well, maybe it would have a lot to do with support for young people, education, work . . . even families because, always, as I said, everything, everything, everything starts in the family.”

5.2. ECONOMIC SUPPORTS

The second most frequently mentioned challenge to reintegration—which also was the most extensively discussed—was related to the need for employment or training that would lead to employment. Community stakeholders and gang members both said that the primary needs in terms of services are those that help former gang members find employment and training opportunities to gain marketable skills. One former gang member, who equated jobs to “opportunities for reintegration into society,” shared the following thoughts:

I think it would be essential to create sources of work to be able to give these boys the certainty that they can earn a living without having to commit an act of crime or a criminal act. I am a witness to fellow ex-gang members who are currently working honestly without committing anything illicit. If we had had the opportunity at the time from an authority or the government to isolate ourselves or distance ourselves from the gangs, and be sure that we can get ahead safely, I believe that the gangs would not have the strength or the number of members they have today in Guatemala.

(Former gang member 45)

In addition to the obvious economic need for employment, many respondents discussed employment as a means of ensuring confidence and a feeling of contribution to society among former gang members. For example, one respondent who disengaged from a gang indicated that employment gives former gang members confidence in their ability to make a living outside the gang structure, especially because many people who disengage from gangs have never had to maintain a job or support a family outside the gang. In addition, one local government administrator explained that employment could simply provide an alternative opportunity to the gang to have an income: “Give them job opportunities because they are already working, already occupying their mind in something, having an economic income, and they consider that they would leave the gang.”

5.3. THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Multiple former gang members mentioned the importance of continuity in social reintegration support and long-term efforts in the community. A former gang member said it would be important for organizations to “have real involvement” rather than engage former gang members in programs that eventually end without offering a means of ongoing support. One government official suggested that prevention and reintegration efforts be coordinated among entities:

It has to be as comprehensive as possible because it is not just to say, “Good, we will attend to 100 former gang members, and we are going to give them the opportunity to work.” [There should also be] a process of accompaniment that has to do with the emotional issue because in the end it also has to do with that . . . also work with the private company or recruiters to achieve as within their vision, also in the possibility of generating work for this type of population.
(Government official, Interview 29e)

GOVERNMENT ROLE

Most respondents said supports that focus on both prevention and reintegration should be government led, whereas only a minority of interviewees indicated that reintegration efforts should rely on the church. This finding contrasted with that of our study in Honduras, in which respondents suggested much more support from church-led reintegration efforts. One community member suggested the following:

The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Labor, the Secretariats, the municipalities. In each municipality there is supposed to be a commission for youth, for women, for children. I think that these institutions or these working groups have the challenge of creating these spaces.
(Community stakeholder, 31e)

A former gang member expressed these observations while describing the weaknesses of the state:

I think that in order to work well, it should be a union of different areas, but if we view it from the Guatemalan side—the state is failing a lot—we can say that it has presented results, but it is failing a lot, I can tell you. I am working right now for the Youth Secretary, who had a reintegration process. Young people who are released from the juvenile centers and have nowhere to go, to sleep. The government should take all this into consideration. Finally, it will be possible, but since there is much to tell you, so much politics . . .
(Former gang member 30)

Despite a consensus that prevention and reintegration efforts should be led by the government, respondents expressed feelings of distrust in the government’s ability to deliver effective services. Many respondents, for example, specifically described a lack of access to basic services, including educational, economic, and health-related support from the government, indicating that strengthening such services could go a long way toward contributing to prevention efforts.

Most former gang members said they did not know of any ongoing public programs to help with reintegration. One former gang member said, “There are no public policies in this country that give opportunities to young people.” A community stakeholder suggested that policies exist but are not implemented in a way that reaches youth as needed:

I think on the side of justice, there is no balance because we don't involve all the parties; society itself doesn't know much about gangs, and everyone is afraid of them, but who is going to get the opportunity to see themselves differently or do things differently if we all don't get involved and the institutions play very specific roles . . . These are very important policies where health is established, where prevention is established, but it is false if it remains only on paper . . . We observe it if a teenager wants to leave: He is 16 years old, and the family does not support him. Where [do] we send him? Who will support him? And you ask . . . that institution, is there a place where we can rehabilitate them, where he can stay while he gets a job, while we get him to have stability and access to an apartment, a room? There is not.
(Service provider, Interview 42e)

Finally, with respect to the mechanisms of disengagement discussed earlier, respondents said that one of the primary needs for reintegration would be some form of protection from the government that would prevent them and their families from being killed by their former gang or by rival gangs.

CIVIL SOCIETY ROLE

Some former gang members described the need to involve civil society—working through community-based, nongovernmental organizations—in prevention and reintegration efforts “so that they are more successful.” Interviewees also pointed out that involving community members in reintegration efforts would provide opportunities for communities to better understand former gang members’ position and empathize with their situation. Such involvement, respondents indicated, would help reduce the discrimination that former gang members face as they reintegrate into society. Further, respondents said that the involvement of civil society should include working with families to help them understand how prevention efforts can start in the home.

Although former gang members were not familiar with any ongoing civil society organizations, some community stakeholders described ongoing prevention or reintegration programs, such as the following awareness campaign:

It's the first awareness campaign, it's the Hashtag dame chance . . . It's about giving you a second chance. There is a tattoo that says, “My past doesn't mean I'm going to be . . .” It's the opportunity. When society gives a young person the opportunity, it is not the young person who benefits; it is society that benefits because . . . he is going to be good or he is going to go back to being bad. I mean, it's a cycle, it's a chain. If we reject him, he will return to committing crimes. If we absorb him, he will be a good citizen.
(Community stakeholder, Interview 20e)

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents our recommendations related to the main findings of this study. The recommendations are organized according to the type of intervention (prevention, rehabilitation, reinsertion) and the level of intervention (primary, secondary, tertiary).

Overall, our study results indicate that programs should prioritize primary-level prevention through family- and community-based interventions targeting young children before they reach the age of recruitment into gangs. The goal should be to make it less likely that youth will join gangs at all, while simultaneously reinforcing family communication and strengthening parenting skills. However, where gang disengagement is concerned, we recommend prioritizing rehabilitation and reintegration programs that target first-time offenders—that is, young gang members who are serving time in detention facilities or are under judicial supervision within the community. Research in the United States and other developed countries suggests that youth who are involved in the justice system, with no prior convictions, are at lower risk of recidivism and are easier to rehabilitate and reintegrate into society than offenders who have criminal records.⁶

We want to emphasize, however, that effectively preventing, mitigating, and combating crime and violence requires multiple efforts as well as commitment from government, civil society, and the international donor community. No single intervention implemented in one sector (e.g., families) will reduce violence and crime in Guatemalan communities. Violence exists and moves among home, schools, peers, and the community at large. For example, in our study, many community stakeholders reiterated that offering jobs to former gang members could be an effective way to enable more youth to disengage from, if not outright prevent, gang violence. However, it is unlikely that employment alone will be effective in reducing gang violence. First, as gang members noted throughout the interviews, they worry more about social discrimination and stigmatization than lack of employment. Without addressing the problem of stigmatization at the community and societal levels, an employment program is unlikely to be successful in reducing or mitigating the problem of gang violence. Furthermore, although offering employment opportunities is important, not all youth are equally ready or capable of holding and remaining in a job. Effective reintegration efforts in the United States have proven that employment alone is not a sufficient condition to prevent recidivism. Employment must be paired with psychological support and other efforts to promote prosocial activities and positive relationships. Most importantly, education and specialized training should precede employment opportunities for the latter to succeed in getting and keeping people out of criminal activities. Many gang members abandon gangs without any competitive skills for the job market.

Although we stress the importance of identifying evidence-based interventions proven to be effective in preventing or mitigating violence, any intervention proven to be effective in other countries should be adapted to the specific local context in which it will be implemented. In designing interventions, it is important to not only analyze the risk and protection factors affecting particular communities and individuals but also articulate clearly and realistically the specific results the activity seeks to accomplish and explain why this is the case. That is, successful intervention design requires the articulation of a good theory of change and an appropriate assessment of the social context in which it will be implemented. Government agencies should play a coordinating role and mobilize resources to integrate visions and initiatives from different actors.

⁶ See <https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/> for more information.

Finally, prevention, rehabilitation, and integration are all important elements to address the problem of crime and youth violence effectively. In Guatemala, as in most of Central America, despite the rhetoric, the government has prioritized suppression as a strategy for combating crime and violence. Although suppression plays an important role, it has not proved effective when unaccompanied by a more comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of crime and violence. More importantly, as many interviewees of this project noted, the police often collude with the same criminal organizations they seek to suppress. Without addressing the larger problems of government corruption, lack of transparency, and collusion with criminal organizations, rather than contributing to the solution of the problem, suppression efforts are likely to reinforce the problems of crime and violence in the country. Public accountability is critical in any policy that aims to reduce chronic youth violence.

Our study in Guatemala is consistent with the findings of our studies in El Salvador and Honduras. It shows that gang violence persists in communities with very low resources for youth to develop into healthy adults. It also corroborates the premise that youth violence reproduces in families that, for different reasons, have limited means to provide adequate protection and caring for their children. There is an urgent need to invest in resources in these communities through private- and public-sector initiatives to build self-reliance.

There also is an urgent need to build evidence in the region on the changing patterns of violence through longitudinal studies, implementation, and outcome studies of culturally and contextually relevant community-based programming, female gang members' experiences, and capturing the narratives of disengaged gang members and communities that show resilience despite their adversities and traumatic experiences.

In Exhibit 9, we lay out recommendations that are aligned with our study findings.

Exhibit 9. Related Findings, Intervention Focus, and Recommendations, by Level

RELATED FINDINGS	PREVENTION	RECOMMENDATIONS BY LEVEL
1. Youth are recruited to gangs at an early age, most often before they turn 15.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention efforts should focus on children, not only adolescents, because we know gangs recruit underage youth. Given the key role of parents in the lives of children, prevention should include parent engagement in early childhood prevention programming. 	<p>Primary: Community Based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize early childhood and parent education classes and programs in the community that are culturally and developmentally appropriate for urban and rural families in Guatemala and encourage healthy family relationships, improve parental strategies, and decrease child behavior problems. Support youth centers that target younger children between the ages of seven and 15. If feasible, offer group activities that promote positive and respectful behaviors in a safe and supportive environment that build on a sense of community for children and their families. Implement school-based programs that promote schoolwide approaches to teach students social and emotional skills and engage them through developmentally and culturally appropriate activities that build on school, community, and cultural pride. <p>(Continued in the next row.)</p>

RELATED FINDINGS	PREVENTION	RECOMMENDATIONS BY LEVEL
(See the previous row.)	(See the previous row.)	Primary: Community Based (continued) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify school-based interventions proven effective in advanced countries, such as School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Crime Solutions, n.d.), and assess the potential to adapt those interventions to conditions in Guatemala. Offer afterschool services for youth and children between the ages of seven and 15 to help retain children in school. Consider replicating an intervention introduced by Glasswing International in El Salvador, which has been rigorously evaluated and proven effective (Dinarte & Egana-del Sol, 2019). The intervention combined afterschool activities with elements of cognitive behavioral therapy. Directly address the risks related to gang membership with youth and children as part of programs. Emerging research on peace-building projects in conflict-affected societies indicates that direct communication about social issues—in this case, gangs and other criminal organizations—can help change attitudes and behaviors.
<p>2. The most important reason offered by former gang members for joining gangs is family dysfunction. Youth are recruited in the streets, even if they do not live in the street. Many come from broken families that exhibit high levels of violence or do not protect or adequately supervise children, leading youth to be out of school and in the streets.</p> <p>3. Gender-based violence and sexual abuse is a prevalent problem in families that push females to join the gangs and part of their experiences in the gang.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention programs should identify and target children and youth at risk who are exposed to violence and neglect in their homes. Youth who do not have safe homes are more likely to seek friendships in the streets, where they are exposed to gangs. 	Secondary: Family Based <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use screening tools to identify youth who are at risk of violence as a result of family disintegration and domestic violence (including gender-based violence). Tools such as the Youth Services Eligibility Tool or adaptations of other tools offer opportunities to identify specific risk areas and assess needs of vulnerable youth who might have been exposed to traumatic experiences. Consider adapting evidence-based secondary family and parenting programs, such as <i>Proponte Más</i> in Honduras,⁷ a program that seeks to strengthen family bonding, cohesion, and communication through culturally and contextually appropriate practices; the Positive Parenting Program, a parenting and family support system designed to prevent—as well as treat—behavioral and emotional problems in children and teenagers and implemented in advanced countries (Heinrichs et al., 2014). Consider piloting shelters or safe places for children who are at risk of abuse. Secondary: School Based <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify children in schools who are at risk of dropping out and assist them with mentorship programs and psychological support according to their needs.

⁷ See <https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/files/resources/Proponte%20Ma%CC%81s%20Brief%20Final.pdf> for more information.

RELATED FINDINGS	PREVENTION	RECOMMENDATIONS BY LEVEL
<p>4. Most youth who join gangs seek protection, camaraderie, and respect; they are not joining gangs for criminal reasons or with criminal intent.</p> <p>5. Similarly, most youth do not join gangs primarily to seek material resources. Although gangs offer a source of income for gang members, seeking resources was not the most important reason offered by former gang members for joining gangs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention programs should include activities that provide positive social circles, camaraderie, and a sense of mission or purpose. Programs also should aim to provide role models that youth do not find in their communities. 	<p>Primary: Community Based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organize youth groups with a sense of a common purpose, offer positive role models, and engage youth in positive relationships (e.g., through organized sports or boys' and girls' clubs). Provide youth with spaces and opportunities to meet and engage with positive role models, such as soccer players or celebrities who came from disadvantaged communities and have made an impact elsewhere. Consider vocational education programs for youth who drop out of school or show promise or interest in a trade-related field. Consider implementing focus groups with youth to inquire what types of activities should be offered in youth centers so that these centers offer services and programs that address their needs and interests.
<p>6. Youth who join gangs in Guatemala remain in the gang an average of eight years.</p> <p>7. Disengaging from gangs is more difficult as gang members rise within the gang's hierarchy and gain more access to information about the gang's operation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gang members who are detained in either prisons or juvenile facilities can be helped in the gang disengagement process if they are offered adequate support. Given that they have not yet had an opportunity to escalate in the gang hierarchy, it may be easier for them to disengage without fearing retaliation from gang leadership. 	<p>Tertiary: Individual Based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with the government to design a rehabilitation program for gang members who have recently been recruited to gangs. Prioritize first-time juvenile detainees, who would be more amenable to these programs than people with high levels of recidivism. In addition to enhancing vocational skills and encouraging high school completion, programs should include psychological support and information on sources of community support to help individuals once they leave the facilities. Ideally, facilities should provide a mentor for ongoing support because support from a mentor figure was critical for many people who disengaged. Provide psychological support as former gang members aim to reintegrate into society. Consider piloting a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) intervention that follows international protocols. CBT has proved effective in reducing impulsive and aggressive behavior in young offenders (Abt & Winship, 2016).
<p>8. It is possible to disengage from gangs but not without some support. Without an external source of support, whether from the family, the church, or a social organization, it is extremely difficult for a person to disengage from a gang.</p> <p>(Continued in the next row.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gang members who leave prison or who have never been imprisoned but want to disengage from gangs require external sources of support to then translate intentions to disengage into actionable behavior. <p>(Continued in the next row.)</p>	<p>Tertiary: Individual Based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support established organizations that work with former gang members to offer psychological assistance and a network of support to help those disengaged gang members resist returning to the gangs. Former gang members need to trust the organizations offering help; therefore, connections with established organizations are crucial. <p>(Continued in the next row.)</p>

RELATED FINDINGS	PREVENTION	RECOMMENDATIONS BY LEVEL
<p>9. Gang members incarcerated in prisons or juvenile detention facilities do not receive adequate rehabilitation services—an important, missed opportunity to help those gang members who have only a few years of experience in the gangs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gang members in the process of disengaging should be able to distance from the gang and former peers. The less contact they have with other gang members, the more likely they will be able to avoid criminal activities and recidivism. • Incarceration without rehabilitation is ineffective in reducing violence. 	<p>Tertiary: Individual Based (continued)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a needs and risk assessment to identify levels of risk and the specific needs of young gang members serving time in juvenile detention centers or under community supervision (alternative measures). Offer services and treatments according to results of these assessments, for example, CBT therapies for individuals who show impulsive behavior or lack of self-control, or other types of psychological therapies according to assessments of needs. • With the participation of local governments, create safe spaces for former gang members, away or protected from hot gang zones. These places, in the form of youth cultural centers, educational training facilities, or other safe spaces, should provide a secure environment in which former gang members can interact with role models, create new social networks, and develop new employment skills. • Organize networks of social support through clubs that engage former offenders in positive activities, such as groups of men to discuss what being a man means (following the guidelines of the Becoming a Man program in Chicago; see Lansing & Rapoport, 2016). • For women, a support group also can be created to allow women to bond and forge trusted relationships.
<p>10. Gang members who disengage are stigmatized by and subjected to discrimination by community members, even when they want to be productive members of society.</p> <p>11. Former gang members mentioned discrimination as the most important challenge they face, whereas community stakeholders mentioned obtaining employment.</p> <p>12. Having a tattoo is associated with gang membership and makes opportunities for reinsertion difficult.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gang members who disengage from gangs need to be not only rehabilitated but also reintegrated into society. In addition to enhancing the individual skills of former gang members and assisting them in recovering psychologically and spiritually, individuals need support to return to society, make a living, and prevent their children from joining gangs. • It is crucial to change the narrative about youth violence throughout Guatemala and raise awareness of issues of stigma and discrimination in poor communities. 	<p>Tertiary: Societal Level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the private sector in generating internship programs for former gang members. Consider replicating and adapting successful reintegration programs introduced in the United States, such as Transitional Employment programs implemented by Heartland Alliance (2020). • Consider providing monetary incentives to businesses that offer former gang members “a second chance.” • Pilot a small grants program for small businesses—focused on former gang members—in areas not serviced by the community. • Support the National Prevention Program in providing tattoo removal services. <p>Primary: Community Level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a communications campaign to combat stigmatization and discrimination at the community level. • Consider a violence prevention training program with community and business leaders, as well as representatives from media. • Design and pilot a restorative justice intervention, enabling victims and perpetrators to come together, seek forgiveness, and allow perpetrators to repair the damage inflicted in the community. These interventions have been evaluated in the United States and show promise in reducing juvenile recidivism.⁸

⁸ See <https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/practicedetails?id=70&ID=70> for more information.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX A. DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

All interviews were conducted in Spanish. The following protocol was used to interview former gang members. For community stakeholder interviews, the second part of the protocol was not used.

Guatemala Gang Desistance Study Interview Guide

Organization Name:

Expert's Position:

Organization's Role in Preventing or
Responding to Gang Violence or
Reintegration:

Length of Time Doing This Work:

Communities/Cities Where Work Is Done:

Primera parte: Temas generales

1. La estructura de las pandillas.
 - a. ¿Crees que las pandillas tienen un objetivo claro? ¿Cuál sería?
 - b. ¿Cómo están organizadas las pandillas? ¿Qué niveles de membresía y roles existen?
 - c. ¿Cómo la actividad de las pandillas varía por región?
2. El involucramiento en la pandilla.
 - a. ¿Por qué los jóvenes como vos entran en la pandilla?
 - b. ¿Qué diferencias existen en los papeles en términos del sexo y la edad?
3. La desistencia de la pandilla.
 - a. ¿Cuáles son las condiciones necesarias para que alguien se calme o deje la pandilla?
 - b. ¿Por qué algunos miembros de la pandilla deciden calmarse y otros no?
¿Es más fácil para algunos calmarse/dejar la pandilla que para otros?
 - c. ¿Cómo varían las maneras de calmarse/dejar la pandilla entre hombres y mujeres?
 - d. ¿Qué retos enfrentan los ex-miembros de la pandilla?
4. Las políticas públicas.
 - a. ¿Qué puede hacer el gobierno para resolver el problema?
 - b. ¿Qué puede hacer la sociedad para resolver el problema?
 - a. ¿Qué necesitan los jóvenes pandilleros para su futuro? ¿Qué le pedirían a la sociedad?
 - b. ¿Qué organizaciones deberían liderar los programas de reinserción?

Segunda parte:

Ahora te pido que recuerdes tu último año antes de salir de la pandilla. Trata de recordar las 10 personas más importantes en tu vida en aquel momento, con las que tenías contacto regular al menos 1 vez al mes. Empieza por pensar en las personas con las que vacilabas cada día. Después, piensa en las personas con las que hablabas o a las que veías más. Pueden ser miembros de tu familia, amigos, vecinos, o incluso personas que no te caían bien.

¿Me podrías decir las primeras letras de sus nombres?

[usar solo la primera letra, apuntar las letras en el orden de nombrarlas en un segundo papel visible para el entrevistado para que le sirva de guía]

Q1: Primera letra del nombre (10 personas)									
¿Es hombre o mujer?									
Q2: ¿Qué edades tenían más o menos? <i>[aproximada o exacta]</i>									
Q3: ¿Quién es cada una de esas personas?									
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiar (especifique), Pareja, Amigo, Maestro, Pastor • Otro (especifique) 									
Q4: ¿Cómo se conocieron ustedes?									
Q5: ¿Cuánto tiempo a la semana pasabas con cada una de esas personas? <i>[apuntar veces a la semana o al mes]</i>									
Q6: ¿Todos estaban en la misma colonia o no?									
No <input type="checkbox"/> especificar y marcar la distancia (otra colonia, cárcel, otra ciudad, etc.)									
Q7: ¿Con quién(es) de ellos te sentías muy cercano? ¿Quién(es) te caía(n) muy bien?									
Q8: ¿A quién(es) de ellos le pedías consejo si tenías problemas?									
Q9: ¿Con quién(es) de ellos te la pasabas bien / te gustaba vacilar más?									
Q10: ¿Quiénes de ellos vacilaban juntos, sin o con vos? Piensa en cualquier tipo de contacto, aunque uno no le caiga bien al otro.									

Q11: ¿Quién(es) sientes que tenía(n) efecto positivo en tu vida? Y ¿quién tenía efecto negativo?									
Q12: ¿Qué lugares visitabas durante una semana típica? <i>[NO leer opciones]</i> ¿Cuántas veces a la semana visitabas esos lugares?									
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escuela, Casa, Trabajo, Esquina/calle, Cancha (deportiva), Cárcel, Iglesia, Mitin, Casa de amigos, Casa loca, Plaza (de drogas) • Otro (especificar) 									
Q13: ¿En qué lugares estabas generalmente con cada uno de ellos? <i>[NO leer opciones]</i>									
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escuela, Casa, Trabajo, Esquina/calle, Cancha (deportiva), Cárcel, Iglesia, Mitin, Casa de amigos, Casa loca, Plaza (de drogas) • Otro (especificar) 									
Q14: ¿Quiénes de ellos pertenecían a una pandilla?									
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ¿A qué pandilla? • ¿Qué rango tenían? 									
Q15: ¿Algunos de ellos te trataban de convencerte salir de la pandilla?									
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sí □ ¿Quién(es)? 									
Q16: ¿Quiénes de ellos habían estado en la cárcel antes de que salieras de la pandilla?									

NOTE: En las entrevistas con los ex-pandilleros usar “pandilla”/ “mara”/ “grupo antisocial.”

ANNEX B. QUALITATIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The type of qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) used in this report is the so-called crisp set QCA (csQCA), in which all variables are dichotomous—that is, each case is assigned “1” or “0” on a corresponding variable, depending on the presence or absence of the condition, respectively (Benoît & Gisèle, 2009). For example, if the interviewee mentioned experiencing domestic violence prior to joining the gang, the variable “domestic violence” was coded as 1. If the participant stated explicitly that there was no domestic violence in their household, this variable was coded as 0. If the topic was not mentioned during the interview, the variable was marked as missing.

To detect common patterns among cases, we first assessed what conditions, or what combination of conditions, led a participant to join the gang before 15 years old versus joining the gang at a later age. Because the outcome of interest is the age of joining the gang, the selected cases include those who joined the gang before 15 years old (positive cases) and those who fail to display this outcome (negative cases). At the same time, the QCA method requires a certain homogeneity among the selected cases. Therefore, we removed outliers from the final sample, as later described in further detail.

We began by singling out each possible explanatory variable for both outcomes—joining the gang at an early age and staying in the gang longer—and creating a coding protocol with detailed criteria for each variable. Our choice of variables was based on theoretical knowledge of drivers for gang engagement and disengagement. We then created a dataset of all 57 interviews coded according to the coding protocol, wherein each variable was calibrated—that is, assigned 1 if present in the participant’s story and 0 if the condition was absent from it. It is important to note that the process of calibration is subjective and based on the researcher’s judgment rooted in theory and in-depth knowledge of the topic. To carry out the coding process in a reliable manner, five members of the research team conducted a pilot coding of three interviews and compared their codes.

The next step was to reduce the number of independent variables by leaving only those with sufficient data and sufficient variation across cases and by combining related conditions into one larger condition. As a result, we selected four major conditions that could have affected one’s decision to join the gang (Exhibit B.1).

Exhibit B.1. Summary of Indicators

VARIABLE NOTATION	MEANING
Conditions	
yearleft	Year when the participant left the gang
push	Reasons for joining the gang: looking for affection and love, disintegrated family, domestic violence, independence from parents, revenge
group	Reasons for joining the gang: sense of belonging, hanging out with the gang, peer pressure, partner
resources	Reasons for joining the gang: material resources (money, drugs, weapons), respect, protection
Outcome	
agejoin15	If joined the gang before 15 years old

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Because multiple interviews with former gang members and Guatemalan experts referred to the year 2005 as a breaking point in the history of gang evolution in the country, we coded each case by the year in which the individual left the gang. Those who left before 2005 received a value of 0, whereas those who left after 2005 were coded as 1. Essentially, the year of leaving the gang is a proxy for the historical context in which the participants lived most of their gang experience.

PUSH FACTORS

These data came from the account of the participant's personal reasons for joining the gang. Motivations such as the search for affection and love outside a broken household, the experience of domestic violence, a lack of affection at home, the desire to be independent from one's parents, and the desire for revenge were included in the category of push factors. If the interviewee named at least one of these factors as a driving force behind his or her decision to join the gang, the case was assigned 1 on the push variable. If none of the factors was mentioned, the case received a score of 0 on this variable.

GROUP-RELATED FACTORS

Similarly, group-related factors included motivations such as belonging to a group, hanging out with gang members, succumbing to peer pressure, and following a partner who was in the gang. If any of these reasons was mentioned in the interview, the case was scored as 1. If none was mentioned, the case received a score of 0.

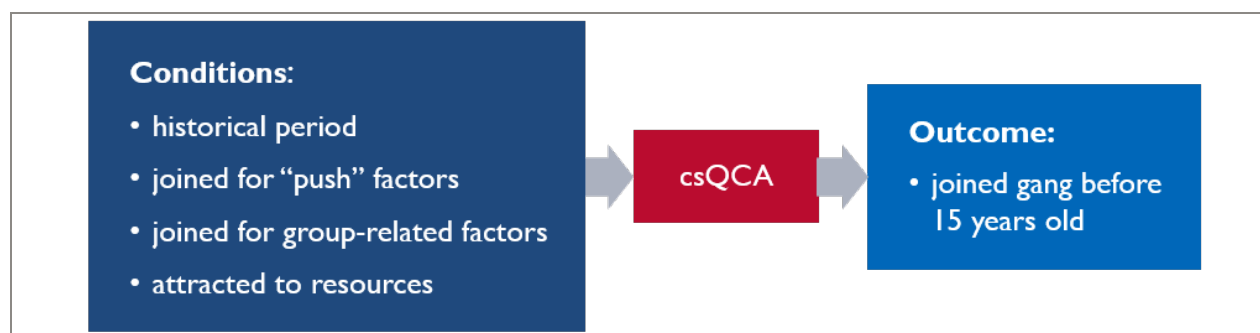
RESOURCES

The last set of factors includes situations when the participant joined the gang in search of material resources (i.e., money, drugs, weapons), respect, or protection from violence in the neighborhood. If, while answering the question about personal reasons for engaging with the gang, the interviewee mentioned any of the motivations listed, the case was assigned a value of 1. If none of the factors was mentioned as a reason for joining, the case received a value of 0 on this variable.

Once each case was properly calibrated (assigned a value of 0 or 1 on each variable), we removed those cases that did not meet the selection criteria of homogeneity among cases and data availability, that is, interviews with missing information on all the variables denoting a reason for joining the gang ($n = 8$); we excluded from the sample those cases in which the interviewees belonged to an old-fashioned youth group not involved in criminal activities ($n = 2$) or in which the only reason for joining the gang did not fit into any established category ($n = 1$). The reasons for joining the gang are far from mutually exclusive and often overlap. For analytical purposes, we selected, whenever possible, the first reason that the interviewees mentioned.

We created a dataset of the outcome—joining the gang before 15 years old—and four causal conditions (historical period, push factors, group-related factors, and resources) for each case under consideration. After completing the calibration process, we performed a csQCA analysis using all four conditions that could potentially lead to the outcome (see Exhibit B.2).

Exhibit B.2. General Outline of the QCA Analysis



This part of the analysis focuses on conditions, or their combinations, that lead a person to join the gang before 15 years old versus joining the gang at a later age. To analyze the patterns, the software created a so-called truth table in which the cases are grouped according to all possible configurations of causal conditions and the outcome. Typically, the table includes several contradictions, wherein the same combination of conditions results in different outcomes. Before proceeding with the analysis, these contradictions must be solved. We followed common strategies for resolving contradictions. Namely, we removed borderline cases in which reasons for joining could not be clearly discernible. We also recoded the outcome for those cases that fell within a larger group wherein the majority of cases had a different outcome value. The recoded cases are marked with an asterisk (*) in Exhibit B.3, and we included their original values in the broader qualitative analysis. As a result of the procedure of solving contradictions, our final csQCA sample consisted of 36 cases.

Exhibit B.3. Truth Table for Outcomes of Joining the Gang Before 15 Years Old

ID	YEAR LEFT	GROUP	PUSH	RESOURCES	AGE JOIN 15
Gang 50	0	0	0	1	1
Gang 14, Gang 19*	0	0	1	0	0
Gang 4	0	0	1	1	0
Gang 45	0	1	0	1	1
Gang 8	0	1	1	0	0
Gang 15	0	1	1	1	1
Gang 24, Gang 39, Gang 46	1	0	0	1	1
Gang 21, Gang 22, Gang 35, Gang 52, Gang 55, Gang 56, Gang 57, Gang 58	1	0	1	0	1
Gang 2*, Gang 6, Gang 9, Gang 10*, Gang 11, Gang 18*, Gang 23, Gang 28, Gang 30, Gang 36*, Gang 37	1	0	1	1	1
Gang 16, Gang 20, Gang 42, Gang 48*	1	1	0	0	1
Gang 12, Gang 29	1	1	0	1	1
Gang 51	1	1	1	0	1

Note. * denotes cases in which the outcome value was changed to resolve contradictions.

After resolving the contradictions, we conducted the minimization procedure. That is, the software uses the Boolean minimization algorithms to obtain the minimal formula from the configurations specified in the truth table. In the resulting formula (Equation 1), uppercase letters denote the presence

of a condition, whereas lowercase letters denote its absence; + means the logical denominator OR; and * means the logical denominator AND.

$$\text{YEARLEFT} + \text{GROUP} * \text{RESOURCES} + \text{push} = \text{joined before 15 years old (outcome 1)} \quad (1)$$

This formula reads as follows: Youth are more likely to join the gang at a younger age under one of the following conditions: in the context of post-2005 Guatemala (YEARLEFT); OR when they are attracted to the gang by group-related factors AND by resources (GROUP*RESOURCES); OR when push factors are absent (push).

We performed the same procedure for the outcome of joining the gang at 15 years old or later. The resulting formula (Equation 2) reads as follows: Youth were more likely to join the gang at a later stage in the context of pre-2005 Guatemala when driven by push factors AND absence of group-related factors; OR absence of resource-related drivers for joining the gang.

$$\text{yearleft} * \text{group} * \text{PUSH} + \text{yearleft} * \text{resources} = \text{joined after 15 years old (outcome 0)} \quad (2)$$

Given the data limitations and a significant number of contradictory cases, these results should be interpreted with great caution. Thus, we combine the csQCA with a traditional qualitative analysis of the cases to corroborate or refute the findings.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CSQCA METHOD

The csQCA method has several limitations in its application to the interview data in the context of the current research. First, the cases do not vary significantly on the outcome variable (*agejoin15*). Of 38 used in the final dataset, only 11 joined the gang at 15 or older. A similarly low variation is observed on the variable *yearleft*; 13 of 38 cases left the gang before 2005. Second, the outcome variable itself is not very appropriate for a csQCA because of the small substantive difference between the two studied groups of the sample (those who joined before and after 15 years old). Ideally, two groups to be compared should represent those who joined the gang and those who did not. However, the research team did not have access to the latter population and therefore had to resort to an alternative solution. Third, several interviews were not designed specifically for this type of methodology and thus present a large number of missing values. In fact, we had to resort to this methodology in the middle of the project, when we could not implement the survey because of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. Thus, the csQCA in this research project should be viewed as complementary to the traditional qualitative analysis of the in-depth interviews.