

# Inside the Neighborhood: Salvadoran Street Gangs Violent Solidarity

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## Executive Summary

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### Problem

During the last decade, there has been a considerable increase in the level of violence and victimization among street gangs in El Salvador. According to the Salvadoran Institute of Legal Medicine (1999), the highest mortality rates due to homicide occur in young men aged 15 to 24, 41% of which were committed with a firearm. Many people around this age are currently joining a street gang or are already members of it. Although gang membership is not new for Salvadoran society, there is a great deal of concern because it constitutes one of the major reasons for the premature death of hundreds of young people, insecurity in an increasingly number of areas in the country, and bloody fights between rival groups that usually end tragically. Thus, the relevance of the situation is not only related to the fact that gang membership is becoming one of the options preferred by an increasingly number of adolescents, but also to the fact that the dynamic of violence that distinguishes these groups puts them at risk of violence both as victims and as perpetrators.

### Objectives

- To provide and update information on the situation of hundreds of young Salvadoran gang members.
- To propose an approach to identifying predictors of gang criminal violence and victimization.
- To provide useful information for policy makers addressed to violence prevention.

### Method

A five-section questionnaire was applied to 938 gang members (82.7% male, 17.3% female), most of whom belong to two of the biggest gangs in the country (the 18<sup>th</sup> Street and the Mara Salvatrucha). The questionnaire consisted of 75 questions that assessed

- demographic information,
- process and characteristics of gang membership,
- consumption of alcohol and drugs,
- type and frequency of violent acts carried out and received, and
- history and characteristics of early victimization and exposure to violence at home and in their environment.

A probability sampling was not possible in this survey due to the inherent difficulty of interviewing a street-gang member and to the nonexistence of a registry that can give an accurate idea of the number of people involved in gangs. Trained former gang members from the *Homies Unidos* team were the interviewers. Technical support, training and supervision were done by IUDOP members.

## Results

- The mean age for becoming an active gang member is 15.2 years.
- Seven out of ten gang members declared having weapons on them (mostly handguns, knives, "homemade" guns, explosives and rifles). This is most frequent among active, older male gang members.
- The number of young people involved in gang activities who do not want to quit behaving violently and consuming drugs has decreased, compared to a previous study carried out in 1996 (1996 = 84.9%; 2000 = 42.8%).
- 85% of the interviewees confessed to drug consumption during the 30 days prior to the interview. Among the most frequently consumed drugs were alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, crack, inhalants or combinations of these.
- A multiple linear regression model was used to identify those factors more strongly correlated with criminal violence and victimization.

The variables detected as more robust for aggression were as follows:

- being an active gang member
- having been in prison
- using and abusing alcohol and drugs
- being male
- having a history of domestic violence.

The predictors detected as more robust for criminal victimization were

- being female in the gang
- high consumption of illegal drugs
- being an active member of the gang
- being employed, and
- having been a victim of violence at home.

## Conclusions

The problem of gang violence as witnessed and perpetrated within the group, especially toward members of the "rival gang", as well as excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs, have worsened in comparison to previous studies. In addition to this, the study shows an increased number of gang members who want to remain active in his/her gang; thus, the probability of their becoming a lethal victim of street violence has shown an exponential increase.

The problem with street gang has worsened, among other things, because the leading factors—both personal and socioeconomic—have not been effectively addressed. Hence, primary prevention becomes an important tool to reduce or avoid gang membership and violent activities. However, gang membership—as any other problem that has its roots in the social structure—has to be taken care of, and prevented, by means of directing efforts and resources towards its multiple dimensions.

This study is a valuable source of information for policy-making. Although gang violence is quite complex, it can be understood and potentially prevented by using good and reliable information on its risk factors. This research offers concrete guidelines on factors that increase the likelihood of a young people joining gangs, committing acts of criminal violence, and becoming one more victim of the cycle of violence.