

# An Ecuadorian Alternative

## GANG REINTEGRATION

High murder rates in Latin America are often attributed to the rise in youth gangs. The small country of Ecuador is no exception. Over the past three decades, political instability, urban poverty, and inequality, coupled with easy access to firearms, have accompanied the proliferation of these groups. At the same time, suppressive law enforcement measures have had limited success in combating gang violence.

This chapter profiles the efforts of the non-governmental organization SER PAZ ('Being Peace') to reduce violent crime in Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city. Over the past decade, the organization, founded by Nelsa Curbelo, has been a major player in public discourse about gangs and has sought, with some success, to 'reintegrate' youth gangs into Ecuadorian society.

More specifically, this chapter reviews how SER PAZ—through a radical reinterpretation of the youth gang phenomenon as embodying valuable qualities that can be channelled for social change—set about trying to reestablish and strengthen the bonds between gang members and their communities.

**Suppressive tactics to dismantle youth gangs in Ecuador have often backfired.**

The chapter considers three core components of SER PAZ's strategy for the prevention and reduction of youth gang violence: (1) replacing suppressive strategies with the strategic use of gang attributes for positive social ends; (2) involving the broader community, including state institutions, in the development and implementation of gang programmes; and (3) providing gangs with alternative livelihoods and social recognition.

The chapter highlights one of SER PAZ's most notable initiatives, the Barrio de Paz experiment, which granted gangs microloans to start their own small businesses. Participating gangs were required to renounce crime and to work with rival gang members. It also describes the ceremony during which gang members voluntarily surrendered their weapons to the police and had them run



A gang member cuts a client's hair in the Barrio de Paz barber shop. © Zach Johnston

over with a steamroller, and a conflict resolution initiative known as the ‘White Helmets of the United *Naciones*’, which saw a group of gang leaders associated with SER PAZ peacefully mediate a violent dispute between two rival gangs.

In addition to considering the extent to which SER PAZ’s approach could be applied more broadly, this chapter examines the current state of gangs and youth violence in Ecuador, especially Guayaquil, including their culture, engagement in criminal activity, size, and scope.

A selection of key findings from the chapter:

- Estimates of the number of gangs in Ecuador vary widely, partly as a result of different definitions, but two sources put the number of unique groups in Guayaquil at around 1,050.
- The majority of Ecuadorians fear being a victim of a violent crime and many say that fights between gangs or groups have affected them.
- SER PAZ programmes led directly to a ceasefire between two of Ecuador’s largest gangs—a major achievement—and appear to have been associated with a reduction in homicides in Guayaquil, though evaluation data is incomplete.
- The many SER PAZ successes appear grounded in the limited economic means of most Ecuadorian gangs, the absence of the threat of police action, and the commitment of a wide spectrum of public and private stakeholders.
- By recognizing the positive potential of gangs, and by working with—rather than breaking apart—existing gang structures, the SER PAZ programmes have yielded encouraging changes while avoiding the negative side-effects common with suppression approaches.

The chapter also analyses the political, economic, and social trends that have accompanied a rise in the number of youths joining gangs in Ecuador over the past three decades. It examines the type of violent activity linked to Ecuadorian youth gangs—which has become one of the most serious issues in Ecuador—and reflects on the effects of the media’s portrayal of the phenomenon.

**SER PAZ focuses on the positive attributes of gang culture.**

Further, the chapter reviews some of the suppressive—and largely ineffective—law enforcement measures used to dismantle gangs and explores how differing definitions for the term ‘youth gang’ can have serious implications for the public’s perception of these groups and how policy towards them is determined.

While SER PAZ and other organizations in the Americas presented in this chapter have developed innovative and often successful responses to gang violence, there are potential limitations to their effectiveness and broader applicability. Their programmes do, however, offer important food for thought for policy-makers seeking to reduce rates of gang-related armed violence. ■