

Three reformed gang members work at the Barrio de Paz print shop. © John Probyn



# An Ecuadorian Alternative

## GANG REINTEGRATION

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

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In one of the most dangerous neighbourhoods in Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest and most violent city, a dozen youths are busy working in the Paz Urbana Print Shop. By the entrance, a young man designs a T-shirt logo with graffiti paint. In the back, amid the hip-hop music and paint fumes, tattooed young men with baggy pants and baseball caps compile an order of worksheets for schools. The print shop is part of an organization of small businesses, including a bakery, a beauty parlour, and a dance school, with a surprising business model—they are entirely run by Ecuadorian street gang members, many of whom were once rivals.

Over the past two decades, Latin America has reported record-high levels of crime and violence that are often attributed to the proliferation of youth gangs (Strocka, 2006, p. 133). According to the Latin American Technological Information Network, the region has the highest murder rate in the world for young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (Waiselfisz, 2008, p. 12). Ecuador is no exception. Though the vast majority of gang violence is intra-gang, local television news and mainstream newspapers contribute to a sense of insecurity among citizens by regularly reporting on the latest gang crimes. Conventional policy approaches to gang violence have tended to emphasize strict punishment, rehabilitation, and isolation of members from their groups; yet these methods have been criticized in many quarters as ineffective over the long term (Cerbino, 2004, p. 16).

For the past decade, the non-governmental organization SER PAZ, founded by Nelsa Curbelo, has been a major player in public discourse about gangs in Ecuador, and particularly in Guayaquil, the home base of its operations and the city with the highest gang population (Santillán and Varea, 2008, p. 9). SER PAZ's main mission is to help gangs reintegrate into society by providing professional training and education, as well as outlets for creative expression. The chapter reviews the SER PAZ approach to gang violence prevention in depth and considers the extent to which it could be applied more broadly. Its main conclusions include the following:

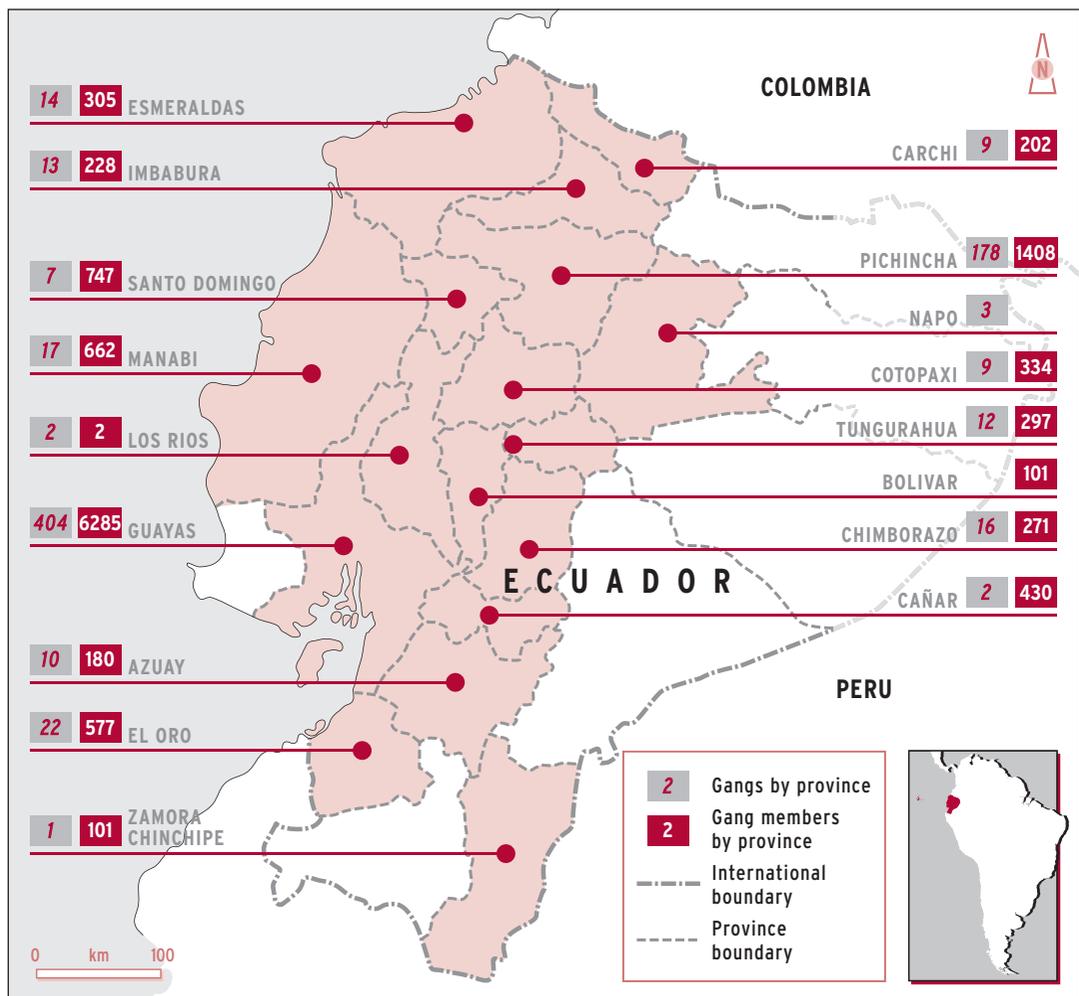
- Estimates of the number of gangs in Ecuador vary widely, partly as a result of different definitions, but two sources put the number of unique groups in Guayaquil, the country's largest city, at around 1,050.
- The majority of Ecuadorians fear being a victim of a violent crime and many say that fights 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 begins by examining the current state of gangs and youth violence in Ecuador, especially Guayaquil, and then proceeds to review many of the initiatives undertaken by SER PAZ during the past decade. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the policy implications of the SER PAZ approach, including potential constraints on its broader application, with brief reference to similar initiatives elsewhere in the Americas.

## WHAT IS A GANG?

It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many gangs there are in Ecuador. Figures vary widely, partly due to differing definitions of the term 'gang'. For example, SER PAZ officials estimate that the majority reside in Guayaquil, with roughly 1,050 unique groups and 65,000 youth gang members (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2004, p. 7).<sup>2</sup> But the National

Map 8.1 Number of gangs and individual gang members in Ecuador, by province



Specialized Police for Children and Adolescents (Dirección Nacional de Policía Especializada en Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes, DINAPEN) puts the total number of gangs in Ecuador at a more modest 712, with 404 gangs and 6,285 members in the province of Guayas—where Guayaquil is located—and 178 gangs and 1,408 members in the province of Pichincha, home to the country's capital, Quito (see Map 8.1). The discrepancy is partly due to definitions; SER PAZ includes groups that are not formally linked to armed violence, while DINAPEN defines gangs solely as groups that participate in criminal activity (Torres, 2006, p. 4).

Despite the irrefutable link between gangs and violence (GANG VIOLENCE), there has been much debate among researchers as to whether the definition of 'gang' should associate the groups with delinquency and violence. Is it fair to say that all gangs are violent? Do all gangs commit crimes? Is criminal activity their primary objective?

Ecuador-based researcher Torres Chávez defines a gang as 'a group of three or more individuals with a common interest, a link or activity characterized by criminal conduct or delinquency' while the mainstream Ecuadorian newspaper *Diario la Hora* says it is 'an organization of delinquent youths' (Torres, 2006, p. 4). When a new type of gang, called *nación*, emerged on the scene in the 1990s, an article in the Ecuadorian news magazine *Vistazo* reported that these groups 'win over hundreds of children in Guayaquil, whose lives are then reduced to sex, drugs, alcohol, and a lot of dancing' (*Vistazo*, 1997).

While researchers define gangs in terms of collective and illegal behaviour, it is the

### Box 8.1 *Pandilla vs. nación*

The two most common terms for 'gang' in Ecuador are *pandilla* (gang) and *nación* (nation), and there are significant differences between the two. *Pandillas* typically consist of 20 to 40 members, mostly young men aged between 11 and 30. There is usually no clear leader, except for the most violent groups, and members proudly adhere to a certain type of dress and adopt certain symbols to mark their group affiliation (Curbelo, 2004, p. 6; Dowdney, 2006, pp. 200–01). The most well known *pandillas* in Guayaquil are: Los Contrás, La Muerte, Los Intocables, and Los Rusos (Dowdney, 2006, p. 201; Torres, 2006). In Quito, they include los Bayardos, Slimmers, MKS, Nenes Lindos, Hechiceros, and Punto y Coma (Torres, 2006).

By contrast, *naciones* are larger, with a minimum of 100 members; they are better organized with a stricter set of rules by which members must abide. There are multiple leaders, and the group is divided into cells across the city, country, or countries. Young men and women who join *naciones* under an oath of loyalty belong to the group for the rest of their lives; they are only excused if they join the clergy or get married (Curbelo, 2004, pp. 5, 9). Their main mission is power and dominance over certain territory as well as recognition from rival gangs (Dowdney, 2006, p. 201).

In order to become part of a *nación*, potential members must go through an initiation process to demonstrate their dedication and respect to the leaders. The tests can include anything from committing petty theft to assassinating a member of a rival group. Once accepted into the *nación*, members are often subjected to paying a monthly fee of USD 5 to 20 to fund parties, buy graffiti paint, and acquire arms (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2006, p. 10). SER PAZ estimates that there are around 50 *naciones* in Ecuador. The major ones in Guayaquil include: the Latin Kings, Los Ñetas, Masters, Rebel People, Hierro, Big Clan, New People, and Nemesis (Torres, 2006). In Quito, the Latin Kings and Vatos Locos are the most recognized.

Artistic forms of expression are an important part of gang culture, and each group boasts its own complex set of symbols, alphabets, and hand codes indecipherable to outsiders (Curbelo, 2004, p. 6). Gang members produce poetry, rap, and dance; they also sport tattoos, with some bearing a black tear for every death they have caused. *Chapeteos*—or writings—by gangs are manifested around the city, as are colourful graffiti murals that display their talent. It is evident that much of their artwork has been influenced by US hip-hop culture, but they have now shaped and moulded those ideas to reflect their own experiences on the streets of Ecuador. Their artwork, language, and symbols can be used for purposes of self-expression or for furtive communication during combat with rival gangs (Curbelo, 2004, p. 6).

use of violence that is most associated with gangs in the public mind. The media has played a fundamental role in generating this perception. Mainstream media outlets in Ecuador often attribute murders to gangs even when there is no proof. A 2006 study on gangs and murders in Guayaquil found that 40 per cent of incidents were attributed to gangs even though the name of the perpetrators could not be identified. The Latin Kings were deemed responsible for the largest portion of the murders—27 per cent of the total record.<sup>3</sup>

**The number of youths joining gangs in Ecuador appears to be on the rise.**

How the terms ‘gang’ and ‘youth’ are defined is a sensitive issue with serious implications for the public’s perception of these groups and how policy towards them is determined. Among the most frequently cited adjectives used to define youths in Quito’s *El Comercio* newspaper were *bandillero* (gang member), ‘violent’, ‘delinquent’, and ‘at risk’. In reference to the activities of gangs, the most common descriptions were ‘delinquency’, ‘violence’, ‘assassination’, and ‘drug addiction’ (Cerbino, 2004, p. 29). According to SER PAZ, which includes neither ‘violence’ nor ‘delinquency’ in its definition of a gang, this has led the general population to a narrow understanding of the gang phenomenon in Ecuador.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, research finds that the:

*[d]ominant discourse [in Ecuador] tends to focus and attribute violence to youths as if they were implicitly—biologically or psychologically—violent’* (Cerbino, 2004, p. 12 author translation).

According to George Asanza, a reformed leader of the Iron Nation gang who now works with SER PAZ, the reason gangs exist is:

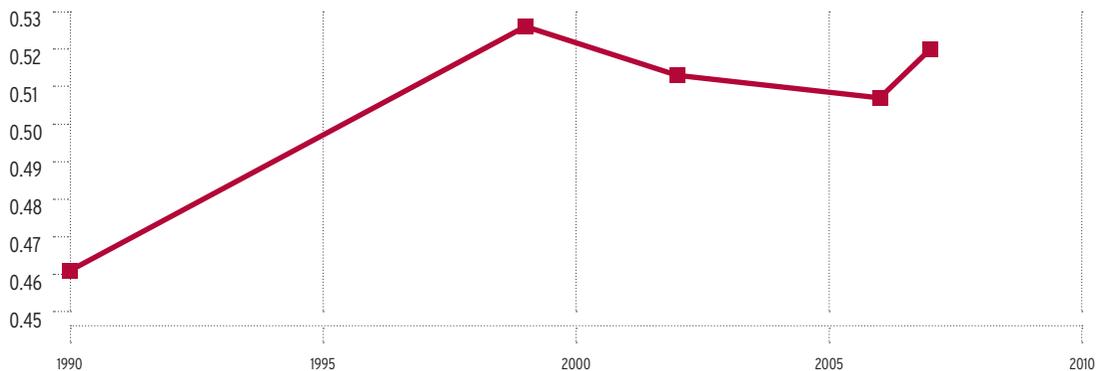
*to have a brotherhood, to have friends forever, and to try to support each other through the good and the bad. We are friends that get along like brothers, and the way we manage the group is through a set of rules, and we conform to a different culture* (Ciudad Segura, 2006, author translation).

## HISTORY OF GANGS IN ECUADOR

There is little information on the history of the youth gang phenomenon in Ecuador, but its origin is thought to date back to the 1980s, primarily in Guayaquil (Torres, 2006, p. 5). Some researchers believe that these groups were initially formed by youths who shared a common interest in creating art together, but became violent over time as competition for territory and recognition intensified (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2006, p. 4). By the 1990s, partly due to increasing media coverage, youth gangs started to become more visible in society, and thus began to be regarded as a major problem and source of insecurity for citizens of Ecuador. Today the number of youths joining gangs in Ecuador, as in other parts of Latin America, appears to be on the rise (Santillán and Varea, 2008, p. 2).<sup>5</sup>

Ecuador, which borders Colombia to the north and Peru to the east and south, is one of the poorest countries in South America, with a wide gap between rich and poor. Today, the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population earns 3 times more income than the poorest 50 per cent and 60 times more than the poorest 10 per cent (World Bank, 2008). In 2009, Ecuador’s Gini coefficient climbed to 0.544 (World Bank, 2009; see Figure 8.1).<sup>6</sup> The country is composed of four major ethnic groups: Mestizo (55 per cent), Afro-Ecuadorian (10 per cent), indigenous (25 per cent), and Spanish descendents (10 per cent) (USAID, 2006, p. 3). Although social indicators improved between 2000 and 2008, poverty continues to be a major problem.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the United Nations’ 2009 *Human Development Report* finds that 46 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line (UNDP, 2009).

Figure 8.1 Gini Index: Ecuador, 1990-2009



Note: The Gini Index assigns values between 0 and 1 to each country, with 0 representing absolute equality and 1 representing absolute inequality.

Source: ECLAC (2009, p. 94)

Ecuador's recent history has been marked by chronic political and economic instability, a succession of ineffective and short-serving populist rulers, and a devastating economic crisis in the late 1990s. Despite a period of growth earlier in that decade, political turmoil combined with a drop in oil prices, on which Ecuador's economy is largely dependent, mishandling of the economy, failure of banks, and natural disasters to put an abrupt halt to the upturn (Reid, 2007, p. 139). In an effort to stabilize the economy after the crash, Ecuador's government under President Gustavo Noboa switched its currency to the US dollar in mid-2000. Practically overnight, Ecuadorians saw the prices of goods rise dramatically. Between 1990 and 2001, consumption-based poverty rose from 40 to 45 per cent and the number of poor people increased from 3.5 million to 5.2 million (Sánchez-Páramo, 2005, p. 1).<sup>8</sup>

In Guayaquil, the economic hub of Ecuador, where gangs are the most prevalent, the wide gap between rich and poor is startlingly evident. Alongside an urban sprawl of shantytowns, crumbling buildings and roads, and military police officers on patrol are gated communities equipped with Western-style shopping malls, expansive mansions, high-end restaurants, and newly built schools.

As a port city, located in the south-west on the river Guayas, Guayaquil is a key trade route through which 70 per cent of all cargo ships to and from Ecuador pass (Gonzalez, 2007, p. 1). In the past two decades, the city has experienced a surge in economic growth that has attracted workers from across Ecuador. It is believed that the densification of poor districts of the city that accompanied economic development has contributed to the rise in youth gangs by intensifying the competition for dominance over territory (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2006, p. 2).

The city contains 12 relatively poor districts, 3 of which are considered especially destitute: El Guasmo in the south-eastern zone, Isla Trinitaria in the south-western zone, and Bastión Popular in the northern zone. Together they have a population of around 900,000, with a large proportion of their inhabitants identifying themselves with a gang (Loor, Aldas, and López, p. 3). In December 2000, a SER PAZ survey of 1,688 students across Guayaquil found that one in every two young people had either a direct or an indirect connection to a *pandilla* or *nación* (SER PAZ, 2000).

The poorer areas of Guayaquil are marked by high unemployment and a lack of even the most basic public services, including healthcare, sanitation, and education. These districts have also seen a sharp increase in levels of violence, which has mainly been blamed on easy access to firearms, a factor discussed in the next section (*Comunidad*

Segura, 2005). Of the 914 children and adolescents arrested for breaking the law and put in detention at the Hogar de Tránsito de Varones No. 2 (Transit Home for Boys No. 2) in Guayaquil, between January and July of 2009, 498 were armed, according to the DINAPEN unit in Guayas (*El Telégrafo*, 2009).

In interviews conducted as part of a country-wide study in 2005, youth gang members said firearms were cheap and that they knew exactly where to buy them. Most gang members reported that they first picked up a firearm at age 14, and a high number admitted to having killed people. Though some gangs do not start out being violent, the gang members reported that fierce competition between gangs required them to become armed, or more armed, and constantly recruit new members.<sup>9</sup>

## GANG VIOLENCE IN ECUADOR

Since the early 1990s, violence has become one of the most serious issues in Ecuador. Though it is not a new phenomenon, it has become more urbanized and more diverse in its expressions (Carrión and Vega, 2006, p. 41). According to a report by the Inter-American Development Bank, the country's homicide rate was 10 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1990 (IADB, n.d.). By 1999, it had risen to 14.8, climbing to 17.6 per 100,000 inhabitants by 2006 (PDBA, 2008). In 2007, the Latinobarómetro survey found that 77 per cent of Ecuadorians feared being the victim of a violent crime either 'some of the time' or 'all of the time'. In 2008, 33 per cent said that either they or at least one family member had been the victim of an assault, attack, or other crime, and 17 per cent said that fights between gangs or groups had affected them (Latinobarómetro, 2007; 2008).

**Most gangs in Ecuador engage in some form of criminal activity.**

Levels of violence and engagement in criminal activity vary from gang to gang, ranging from petty theft to murder. Violent crimes committed by gangs include murdering rival gang members, committing murders as an initiation ritual or during a robbery, and the accidental killing of innocent bystanders during gang warfare. Violence is, in fact, a persistent feature in the lives of many gang youths. Curbelo explains:

*They've lived it—the violence of exclusion, of insults and of punches. And to resolve problems within their group and with other groups, they use punches, kicks and guns—and they do it well. And they have an organization that they respect a lot. There's a very clear hierarchy in most organized groups, and they respect it. And punishment is applied both within the groups and outside, too, with other groups.*<sup>10</sup>

Observers find that most gangs in Ecuador engage in some form of criminal activity and possess firearms, mainly for defence purposes (Dowdney, 2006, p. 200). Firearms cost relatively little, and all that is required to buy one at a hardware shop is the presence of an adult (p. 204). In order to fund weapons purchases, or their drug addictions, many gangs steal, traffic drugs, and charge membership fees of USD 5–20 per month (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2004, 10). There are an estimated 370,000 small arms and firearms in the hands of civilians in Ecuador: 117,000 legal and 250,000 illegal (Karp, 2009, p. 41).

The types of weapons gangs use have changed over time. In the 1980s, gangs used sticks and stones and various sharp weapons to fight each other. Eventually, they graduated to 16-calibre *cartucheras* (home-made guns that fire one bullet at a time) and bazookas. Other modern-day weapons of choice include 4–10-calibre *cartucheras* that cost as little as USD 10 (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2004, p. 24), foreign-made firearms such as Smith & Wesson revolvers that cost between USD 200 and USD 250, and repeating rifles such as Mossberg models that run to about USD 600

(Dowdney, 2006, p. 204). Material to construct home-made firearms is easily accessible and gangs can build up their arsenals for next to nothing by carrying out robberies or assaults on other gun-wielding citizens, such as security guards (Dowdney, 2006, p. 204; Loor, Aldas, and López, 2004, p. 4).

The director of DINAPEN, Milton Barrero, reports that the number of youths carrying arms is growing rapidly, as gang leaders equip their members so that they can commit theft and acquire more arms (PDBA, 2008). In 2005, in an effort to combat the high number of crimes committed with firearms—often attributed to gang warfare—the Ecuadorian government decided to implement stricter punishment for those caught armed and without a permit. The new penalty carries a prison sentence of one to five years and a fine of USD 9–44 (DINAPEN, 2005).

Many gangs in Ecuador have also been found to consume or traffic drugs, which they typically sell within their communities. One study found that about 20 per cent of gang members consume and sell drugs (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2004, p. 8), including crack, cocaine, hashish, and *plomo* (a mixture of drugs) (Dowdney, 2006, p.208). *Pandillas* and *naciones*, however, are not typically at the forefront of organized crime; rather, they work as accomplices to organized crime gangs known as *bandas*, which are mainly composed of adult members, in exchange for drugs and money. Many members of *pandillas* or *naciones* eventually become part of *bandas* (Loor, Aldas, and López, 2004, p. 6).

In Ecuador, gangs do not openly display their weapons in their communities unless they are engaged in battle. Their guns are usually only revealed in front of rival gangs, as a way to instil fear and demonstrate their power. They typically do not steal from their neighbours, yet nor do they provide security. Gangs will leave neighbourhood residents alone as long as they do not mention their criminal activities to the police; in addition, residents who are not involved in a *pandilla* or *nación* are generally free to move between gang territories without incident. Nevertheless, there have been some reports of gangs threatening local residents if they know too much about a crime a gang has committed (Dowdney, 2006, p. 202).

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

## GANGS AND THE STATE

The government has repeatedly and ineffectively tried to dismantle gangs through curfews, rehabilitation, and strict punishment since gangs first appeared in the 1980s and fuelled a rise in petty crime. In 1986, a 'flying squad' was created to go after and arrest youths loitering on street corners or pavements in poor neighbourhoods (Dowdney, 2006, p. 200). By 1987, the Anti-*pandilla* Special Unit was formed under the government of President León Febres Cordero to try to dismantle gangs, mainly by pursuing the leaders. The government also imposed a curfew of 10 p.m. for minors to try to keep them off the streets and out of trouble. Although generally considered ineffective, this same measure was reapplied in 2001 and 2002 (Torres, 2006, p. 8).

The prevailing government position has been that these youth gangs are a wholly negative phenomenon and exist only to cause trouble; therefore, methods for handling them have emphasized breaking up groups by imprisoning the leaders, or by isolating individual members and 'rehabilitating' them. The intense bond gang members share and the important role their groups play in their lives, however, has led many of those initiatives to backfire. Indeed, SER PAZ states that government suppression actually led to the formation of *naciones*, for as officials intensified their crackdown, gangs responded by becoming larger, more organized, and more clandestine (Torres, 2006, p. 8). Meanwhile, gang leaders were still able to control their group from jail (PRISON). Instead of reforming gang members, suppression appears to have reinforced the stigmatization of young people who belong to gangs and their status as outsiders, strengthening the allure of gangs for these same people (Cerbino, 2004, p. 16).

In 1997, the federal government established DINAPEN, which was the first public department designed to tackle youth issues exclusively (Torres, 2006). The initiative was supposed to provide better protection and treatment of youths by the police, but police suppression continued. By the end of 2002, the Guayas provincial government, the sub-secretaries of Social Welfare, Education, and Health, and DINAPEN approached civil society organizations to take part in a new anti-gang initiative that would seek to address the ‘employment, educational, and recreational needs of youth’. The initiative failed, however, due to high administrative costs and a lack of resources (Dowdney, 2006, p. 203).

Meanwhile, between 1999 and 2005, the number of youths being apprehended rose sharply, by 115 per cent. The most common known crime committed by minors in 2005 was robbery (36 per cent), followed by assaults and robbery (13.7 per cent), and the possession of firearms (7 per cent) (Torres, 2006).

Besides adopting suppressive methods that proved ineffective to combat gang crime, government efforts were also hampered by the corruption of police officials. Many gang members in Ecuador have reported paying police bribes in exchange for freedom, especially those who were caught with drugs (Dowdney, 2006, p. 203).

## THE SER PAZ INITIATIVES<sup>11</sup>

*[Nelsa Curbelo] supports us a lot, she gives us advice and we are very grateful. We are here because of her. Before I was always getting into trouble. If we weren't throwing rocks at each other, we were shooting each other, but now, thank God, we've changed.*

—Daniel, reformed gang member<sup>12</sup>

**According to  
Curbelo, young  
people join gangs  
for emotional—not  
economic—reasons.**

This section reviews the initiatives undertaken by SER PAZ to combat gang violence during the past 10 years.

Nelsa Curbelo, a 68-year-old former nun and school teacher originally from Uruguay, began her work in Ecuador as a researcher for a non-governmental organization (NGO) that probed abuse in the military and police forces. Her focus subsequently shifted to the prevention of violence among Ecuadorian youths. Before she officially established SER PAZ in 1999, she spent two years becoming acquainted with the neighbourhood that would be the testing ground of her first initiatives, getting to know the young people there and trying to understand why they were in gangs and the kinds of activities in which they engaged (Hart, 2008).

Curbelo found that youths typically join gangs in the early stages of adolescence, sometimes as young as 11, in disadvantaged areas characterized by poverty, high levels of unemployment and underemployment, broken families, social exclusion, and criminality.<sup>13</sup> She concluded that young people are not lured into gangs for the thrill of committing crimes or for the accumulation of material wealth. ‘It’s not an economic need, it’s the need to have a group where they feel like equals, where there’s protection, where there’s solidarity.’<sup>14</sup>

In Curbelo’s view, the extreme violence carried out by many gang youths is a reaction to the society around them and life circumstances that they did not choose. ‘Youngsters are the mirror of the kind of society they live in. They reflect their problems and bring back an image that we often do not want to see’ (Curbelo, 2004, p. 3). In this paradigm, gang youths are, at some level, victims—trapped in a situation created by adults—who then become victimizers. Gang youths live in an unjust and unequal society; they are most often poor with little chance of becoming productive members of society, and adults make easily accessible to them the firearms and drugs that destroy their lives. In essence, Curbelo sees gangs as a survival mechanism for young people living within a society that rejects and fears them.

In formulating her approach to gang violence prevention, Curbelo identified positive forces that had brought these youths together and that she felt could help reintegrate them into society, reversing their disappearance from public life.<sup>15</sup> For example, gang-members worked well as a team, could develop their own language, flags, and symbols, and adhered to a strict chain of command. They also exhibited creative talents in graffiti painting, dance, and music. While the government, other NGOs, and the Church have conducted initiatives to combat gang violence by isolating members or breaking up groups, SER PAZ has allowed gangs to stay together, while giving them a new purpose that does not include violence. Underpinning the SER PAZ approach is the belief that, to be effective, any policy designed to combat youth violence needs to recognize as a starting point the validity of the gang organizations.

### Getting down to business

SER PAZ has implemented myriad initiatives over the years, reaching more than 4,000 gang youths across the country, its largest project being the financing of small businesses through micro-loans in the neighbourhood now known as the Barrio de Paz, discussed in the next section. This chapter presents a selection of typical SER PAZ projects, all of which emphasize legitimizing youth gang sub-culture; securing access to education and training for gang youths to create an alternate mission for their groups; fostering peace (gang youths are required to give up violence in order to receive support for their projects); and promoting dialogue between gang youths and the public.

SER PAZ projects aim to get youths in conflict to work together on a project of their choosing.

The peace process began with creating ‘peace murals’ in the city (*El Universo*, 2009c). In the early stages of the organization, after establishing trust with a number of groups, Curbelo arranged a meeting with the provincial governor in Guayaquil to negotiate an agreement between the two factions, with each side outlining what they wanted from the other. They met in a neutral area with no police and no media present. The leaders asked the governor to cease discriminatory measures, in particular the policy of arresting them for merely being on the streets. They also requested an area to paint graffiti and practice break-dancing, as well as financial assistance to produce an album of songs in the style of hip-hop, rap, and reggae that promoted peace. In exchange, gangs said they would stop the violence on the streets and keep the parks where they congregated clean (Curbelo, 2004, p. 13).

As a result of the meeting, the local police offered the gangs wall space on police station grounds and at a hospital to paint graffiti. Several private businesses and embassies donated paint supplies and other equipment to the project. Twelve days later, the gangs presented their first graffiti mural to the public in the presence of the police music band, provincial authorities, and the media (Curbelo, 2004, p. 13). A second mural was soon put up, a collaborative effort between 20 gang youths, with financial support from private businesses that donated airbrushes, ten gallons of paint, and 100 spray cans (*El Comercio*, 2002).

These initial projects by SER PAZ were defined by several key achievements. First, gang members from different groups managed to work together on the wall. Second, the mural was in a highly visible, public space and therefore brought the gangs public recognition. Finally, instead of competing for turf, gangs competed to have the best artwork (Curbelo, 2004, pp. 13–14).

Subsequent projects also aimed at getting youths in conflict to work together on a project of their choosing, in addition to bringing them together with other members of the community. For example, four participating gangs managed to secure enough funding to produce a rap album. The launch party was held in the Central Bank where the youths were met with applause by the attendees, including political dignitaries and military authorities (*El Universo*, 2002b).

As word spread in the media of SER PAZ,<sup>16</sup> increasing numbers of people expressed their desire to assist the initiative. For example, several private banks offered to meet with gang members who needed a loan to start a small

business. Gang members attended a meeting at the bank with its manager and credit officers. For SER PAZ, this represented a significant step in the reintegration of gangs as a positive force in society, for they were invited to a place where they would normally be shunned to discuss terms of legitimate business with respected members of society (Curbelo, 2004, p. 14).

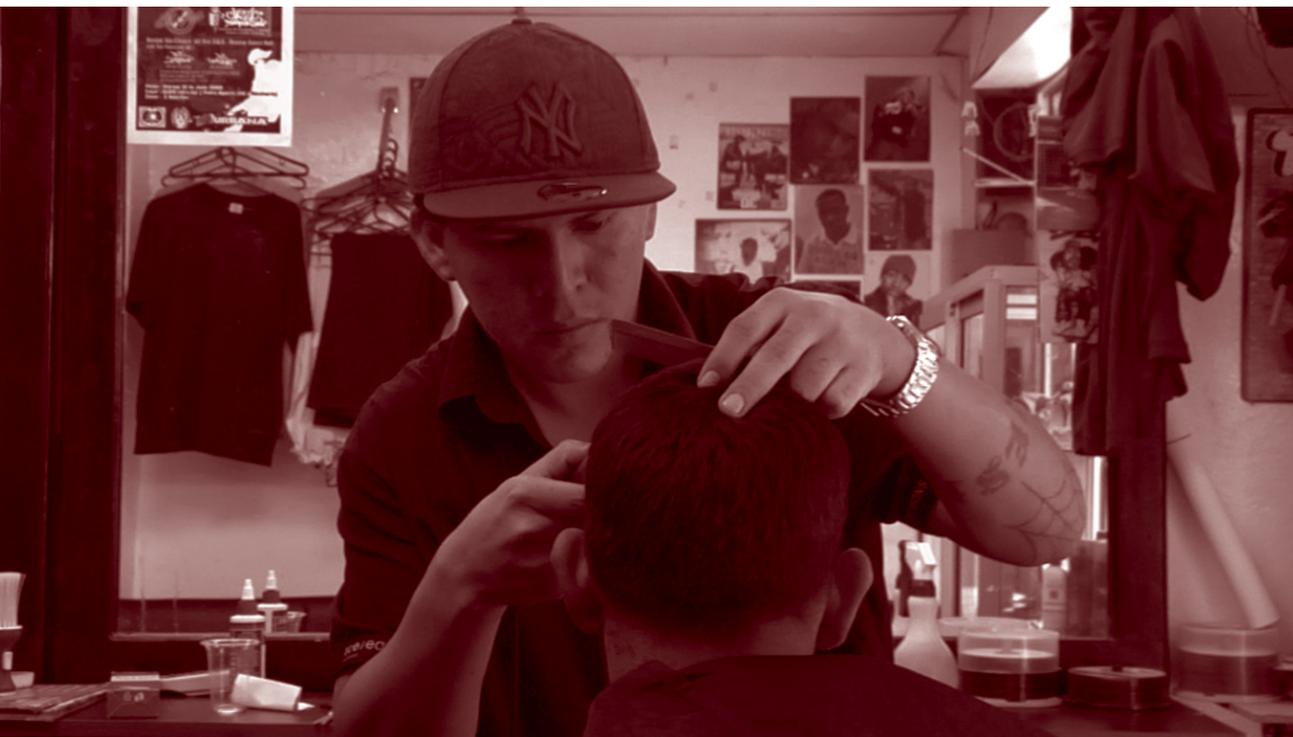
A local university also allowed SER PAZ usage of one of their rooms to hold meetings between leaders of various gangs. In addition, 16 leaders attended a leadership training course that required 20 hours of class time. They were required to pass an examination in order to receive their diplomas, which they were awarded in a ceremony in front of the members of their groups. Several youth gang members were also asked to appear on local television programmes or to talk with journalists (Curbelo, 2004, p. 14). Finally, university students and business people helped gangs create their own magazine, which included comics, articles on music, graffiti art, and sexual education. It also included a history of a different *nación* in each issue. The launch party was attended by approximately 1,000 people, including rival gangs and university students (Curbelo, 2004, pp. 14–15).

### The Barrio de Paz experiment

*We were enemies [with the other gangs] and now we talk to each other, and we no longer talk about problems, but about work.*

—Daniel, reformed gang member<sup>17</sup>

The neighbourhood in central Guayaquil where Curbelo established SER PAZ encompasses 49 blocks and around 1,000 families. Today it is known as Barrio de Paz, or ‘neighbourhood of peace’. Curbelo recalls that several charac-



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

teristics of this area made it ideal for her social experiment. For example, people in the community knew each other well; levels of violence were extremely high; and adults vigorously defended their youths, even when police were involved, and could be expected to take an active interest in working with SER PAZ to improve the security situation.

As of late 2008, the organization worked with five gangs numbering around 200 members in the Barrio de Paz (Santillán and Varea, 2008, p. 9.). Curbelo wanted to see if youth gangs could make agreements together, work peacefully side by side, and acquire job training. She also wanted to assess whether the level of violent criminal activity would decrease if gangs were given the tools to earn a living and an alternative, more positive form of social recognition.

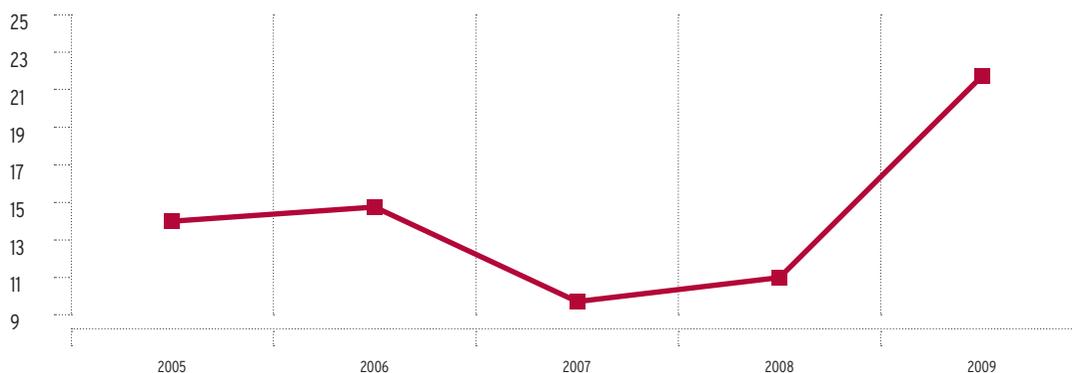
Today, gangs run ten different businesses, including a print shop, a pizzeria, a salon, a dance school, and a bakery. The gangs are entirely responsible for the businesses, which serve the neighbourhood and, in some cases, the greater Guayaquil community. In order to obtain funding for businesses, gangs had to submit to two conditions: to cease all criminal activity and to agree to work with rival gang members. While new members continue to join, not all who originally signed up to the project have stayed on board. For example, in August 2009, the Latin Kings announced that the group would break ties with SER PAZ following a dispute over obtaining funds for their micro-business; the gang said it was in direct talks with the government to receive financial support for their projects (*El Universo*, 2009b).

In addition to SER PAZ, the Barrio de Paz projects received support from several other organizations, including the Inter-American Foundation, the Civilian Security Corporation of the Guayaquil Municipality, the Ministry of Labour, the Ecuadorian Occupational Training Service, and the University of Cataluña (Salazar, 2008, p. 19).

SER PAZ also established a relationship with the Colegio Virtual Iberoamericano, paving the way for 30 gang members to obtain a college degree online. Another SER PAZ initiative enabled more than 4,000 gang youths to obtain scholarships from the Ministry of Labour to study in the Ecuadorian Vocational Training Service (Santillán and Varea, 2008, p. 9). In 2008, SER PAZ joined forces with the Campus por la Paz (Campus for Peace) in Spain for the pilot project Universidad Barrio de Paz, which equips classrooms with the resources for gang youths to be able to study online and to develop their digital literacy and graphic design skills (Rovira, 2008).

Figure 8.2 **Homicide rate in Guayaquil per 100,000 population, 2005-09**

**HOMICIDES PER 100,000**



Source: ESPOL (n.d.)

Curbelo has claimed that neighbourhood crime decreased by 60 per cent in the first six months of the Barrio de Paz project and that this reduction encouraged those working for SER PAZ to continue with the project. Due to the absence of neighbourhood-specific data, however, this statistic could not be verified, nor could the specific relationship between the project and violence rates. What is known is that the number of homicides dropped in the years after the project's launch in 2006, from 331 to 224 and 259 in 2007 and 2008, respectively (see Figure 8.2). In 2007, the project also helped bring about peace between two of Ecuador's largest gangs, the Latin Kings and Los Ñetas, which were formerly involved in a bloody turf war. Interviews with individual gang members in the Barrio de Paz also reveal the positive impact of the project on gang members' lives.<sup>18</sup> The Latin Kings gained legal recognition on 1 November 2009, after a meeting with President Rafael Correa. Group leaders now negotiate directly with government authorities to solicit financial support for their projects (*El Universo*, 2009d).

### Box 8.2 White Helmets of the United Naciones

In 2008, a gang in the Ecuadorian province of Esmeraldas killed a prominent member of a rival gang. The law of the streets dictates that members of the victim's gang must retaliate by killing at least two of their rivals, and from there an escalation into all-out war usually ensues. Five gang leaders involved with SER PAZ, however, decided to board a plane to Esmeraldas, unarmed, with the intent of brokering a peace settlement between the warring factions. They went from door to door to negotiate with gang leaders and facilitated meetings that included group members, sometimes holding five per day and lasting deep into the night. Eventually there was agreement to resolve the dispute peacefully (Curbelo, 2008).

Upon their return to Guayaquil, the five SER PAZ members were honoured at a ceremony for their success in mediating the dispute. In front of their peers, local dignitaries, and the media, a white helmet was placed on each man's head. This peacekeeping initiative has become known as the 'White Helmets of the United Naciones'. The term alludes both to the term *naciones*, used by many larger gangs to describe themselves (see Box 8.1), and to the United Nations' blue-helmeted forces, underscoring the fact that these peacekeepers did not carry guns.

Sources: Curbelo (2008); author interview, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008 (translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet)



Nelsa Curbelo praises a gang leader, who is awarded a white helmet for helping to mediate a violent dispute between two rival gangs. © Zach Johnston

## Gang disarmament

Along with the small businesses run by reformed gangs, conflict resolution has been a core component of the SER PAZ experiment, including the facilitation or mediation of peace agreements between groups. One such process involved the leaders of ten gangs and was witnessed by the police chief and the governor of Guayas as well as the rector of the University of Guayaquil at a ceremony in 2002 (*El Universo*, 2002a). SER PAZ did not, however, oblige gangs participating in its projects to give up their weapons. Experts warned Curbelo that when young people in gang territories give up their guns, they are often killed soon after. 'A gun is more than what we think it is; it's a passport to walk down the street in peace. Relinquishing it is similar to relinquishing your family.'<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, youths working with SER PAZ approached Curbelo, expressing their desire to relinquish their weapons, and ultimately developed their own means of doing so. They decided to surrender their guns to the authorities, and—to ensure that they wouldn't return to the streets—arrange for them to be publically destroyed. Before the gangs surrendered their weapons to the military officers in accordance with Ecuadorian law, both sides met in an upmarket hotel in Guayaquil to work out an agreement. Interestingly, these discussions were eased by the parties' shared perceptions of guns.<sup>20</sup> The surrendered weapons were crushed by a steamroller at a public ceremony with the media in attendance. At the first gun surrender in 2006, 60 guns—including machine guns and sub-machine guns—were destroyed. There have been four similar rounds of weapons collection (and corresponding amnesties) since then. SER PAZ reported that, despite initial fears, three years after the first destruction ceremony there had been no attempt on the life of a gang member who had relinquished his or her weapon.<sup>21</sup>

In response to the Barrio de Paz projects and the pact by gangs to give up their guns, the municipal government has stepped in to repair several run-down buildings and roads in the neighbourhood.<sup>22</sup> In 2007, the Ministry of Labour promised youths who were involved in SER PAZ projects and had completed their vocational training a credit of USD 5,000 for a five-year period at an interest rate of five per cent (*El Universo*, 2007).<sup>23</sup>

Youths working with SER PAZ decided to surrender their guns to the authorities.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Youth gang violence arises out of the complex interaction of individual, group, and social characteristics (GANG VIOLENCE). Essential characteristics of gangs vary significantly from place to place and from group to group. There are no blanket formulas for preventing or reducing youth gang violence (INTERVENTIONS). The SER PAZ approach, with its strengths and weaknesses, does, however, offer important food for thought for policy-makers.

### The SER PAZ approach

The SER PAZ approach to gang violence prevention and reduction has three core components: (1) replacing suppressive (law enforcement) 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 ways to earn a livelihood and social recognition.

*Working with the gang.* Given the violent nature of many gangs, it is hardly surprising that suppression tends to be the default response. For SER PAZ, however, the gang is a logical consequence of an unequal and unjust society. In this paradigm, gangs are not inherently delinquent or violent; they can become negative social forces, but can also contribute positively to their communities.

Curbelo concludes from her research that stigmatizing gang members or imprisoning their leaders is likely to backfire, reinforcing the isolation of gangs from society, and causing them to strengthen their criminal inclinations. Instead of focusing on gang violence, Curbelo emphasizes the demonstration of teamwork, mutual respect, support, and protection that many gangs exhibit. By allowing gangs to stay together, and by promoting their positive traits, SER PAZ has achieved some important successes.

*Community involvement.* Curbelo treats the issue of gang violence as a problem whose solution required the involvement of the entire community. When Curbelo arranged for gang youths to meet with provincial authorities, police officers, and business people, and for them to present their work at widely publicized public forums, she began the process of reintegrating these youths in society and changing public attitudes towards them. In her view, it is not only gang members who need reform; Ecuadorian society also needs to develop a more nuanced understanding of youth gangs in the country.

*Alternative livelihoods.* Many of the SER PAZ programmes offered gang members alternative ways of developing their skills and, most importantly, supporting themselves and their families. SER PAZ incorporated the skills and interests gang members already expressed—in graffiti art, music, and dance—into projects that earned them money and gave them confidence in the transition from a violent to a non-violent lifestyle.

### Engaging gangs elsewhere in the Americas

In Peru, Father 'Chiqui' nurtures the positive aspects of gang culture.

Approaches similar to the one taken by SER PAZ in Ecuador have been applied in other communities plagued by gang violence in South America. In El Agustino, Peru, for example, José Ignacio Mantecón Sancho (Father 'Chiqui') of the Martin Luther King Association<sup>24</sup> has been working with youth gangs for more than 12 years. Like Nelsa Curbelo, he decided early on to nurture the positive aspects of gang culture in order to displace the negative ones (Dominguez, 2009).

In a neighbourhood plagued by poverty and high unemployment, Father Chiqui has focused on improving the lives of gang youths in four major areas. He has enlisted the help of local teachers who voluntarily teach classes and train youths, outside of the conventional school environment. He has also collaborated with the municipal government in El Agustino to help youths obtain micro-loans to start their own small businesses. Recognizing that sport is a great passion for the youths, Father Chiqui formed a sports club, which, under the direction of trainers, not only encouraged physical and technical achievement, but also academic education. In addition, the Martin Luther King Association has promoted community service initiatives that allowed gang youths to take responsibility for some of the damage they had caused. For example, they cleaned up the streets and participated in city Christmas festivities, during which they presented gifts to members of the community who had been negatively affected by their actions (Rospigliosi, 2008, p. 7).

The organization has involved 36 gangs and hundreds of youths in its programmes, with many remaining committed to a peaceful, drug-free, and productive existence (Dominguez, 2009). Nevertheless, some have not stayed involved with the project for reasons that include failure to fight their drug addictions (Rospigliosi, 2008). In a 2009 interview, Father Chiqui said another major challenge is that public and private institutions often get involved with gang initiatives and then abandon them after a brief period. 'This creates enormous frustration and afterwards it's very difficult to regain confidence' (Dominguez, 2009).

Another organization that has opted to engage gangs in combating street violence, rather than suppress them, is Homies Unidos, founded in 1996, and with projects in El Salvador and Los Angeles in the United States. Homies

Unidos began by bringing gangs in conflict together for meetings to thrash out non-violent alternatives to gang warfare. The organization makes extensive use of peer educators on the assumption that gang members will respond better to people who have shared their experiences, such as having their families torn apart by immigration and growing up in poverty. As with the SER PAZ ‘White Helmets’ example, gangs involved with Homies Unidos take the lead in finding positive alternatives to violence (Rose-Avila, 2009).

### Potential limitations

While SER PAZ and the other organizations presented in this chapter have developed innovative and often successful responses to gang violence, there are potential limitations to their effectiveness and broader applicability. For example, the issue of trust is critical to working with gang youths, and it takes an enormous amount of individual and collective dedication to attain their trust. Curbelo spent two years acquainting herself with the gang members before she started her organization. Once established, the programme relied on the participation and financial commitment of a wide range of state and community stakeholders, which can be difficult to maintain over the long term.

Curbelo’s organization worked with youth gangs of very limited means; they operated without the revenues brought by significant drug or other lucrative illicit businesses. The gangs in the Barrio de Paz formed for a variety of reasons, but financial gain was not a dominant factor. It is plausible that more profitable organizations would not react as well to the methods employed by SER PAZ in the Barrio de Paz. Youth gangs with stronger connections to international drug smuggling and related operations have financial incentives that microbusinesses can hardly supplant. And there is always the risk that micro-businesses fail or supporters back out, leaving the old life of crime the obvious default option for many participants.

It is also difficult for the state and its judicial institutions to abandon gang suppression strategies if that means gang members guilty of serious crime go unpunished. Moreover, although many SER PAZ initiatives owe their success to the involvement of various actors, including the government and police, the conflicting imperatives of these organizations can generate trouble. For example, the arrest of a Los Ñetas leader during peace negotiations caused ‘grave problems’ for SER PAZ; youths lost trust in the organization and decided not to disarm (Paredes, 2006). Curbelo has also reported numerous threats against the organization by disgruntled gang members.<sup>25</sup>

**The issue of trust is critical to working with gang youths.**

## CONCLUSION

Chronic political and economic instability, urban poverty, and widening income inequality appear to be among the key drivers in the rise of youth gangs in Ecuador over the last 30 years, exacerbated by increasing access to firearms. Successive attempts to rein in gangs using street corner sweeps, curfews, the incarceration of gang leaders, and other suppressive law enforcement measures have produced little long-term benefit.

A fresh approach came in an unlikely form. Reintegration is a well-established approach to dealing with armed groups in post-conflict contexts; it is largely unheard of in the realm of gang interventions. By radically reinterpreting the youth gang phenomenon as embodying valuable qualities that can be catalysed for social change, SER PAZ set about trying to re-establish and strengthen the bonds between gang members and their communities based on trust, mutual recognition, and respect. While other interventions have reached out to gang members with the offer of various services, the absence of the threat of police action is notable in the Barrio de Paz experiment.

Some significant, verifiable gains resulted. The organization provided gang members with the means to support themselves and their families, gave them access to education and outlets for artistic expression, and fostered a stable environment where gangs can settle conflict peacefully. Available data indicates that the programme was accompanied by a reduction in youth gang homicides.

The gang phenomenon is increasingly a global one; more and more cities are being forced to develop strategic plans, or are trying to come to terms with the limitations and failures of previous intervention approaches. While context-specific factors may be responsible for some of the successes in Guayaquil, the SER PAZ experience offers a new and innovative case study for consideration. ■

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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DINAPEN	Dirección Nacional de Policía Especializada en Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes (National Specialized Police for Children and Adolescents)
NGO	Non-governmental organization

## ENDNOTES

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- 1 This introduction is based on Johnston (2009).
- 2 See also Berkman (2007).
- 3 Sources include data obtained from the newspapers *El Universo* and *El Comercio* and cited in in Torres (2006).
- 4 Author interview with Nelsa Curbelo, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 5 According to DINAPEN, the number of gangs in Ecuador rose by 7.58 per cent between 2005 and 2008 (DINAPEN, 2009).
- 6 The Gini Index assigns values between 0 and 1 to each country, with 0 representing absolute equality and 1 representing absolute inequality.
- 7 Ecuador was ranked 72 out of 179 countries in the 2008 Human Development Index produced by the UN Development Programme. The ranking rose 17 places from 2007 and is now classified in the 'high human development' category. Ecuador is ranked ahead of its neighbours, Peru and Colombia (EIU, 2009).
- 8 Consumption-based poverty is a measure of household expenditure on selected goods relative to the prices of those goods (Aguirregabiria, 2006).
- 9 Interview with SER PAZ researcher Kleber Loor by Carola Mittrany of Children and Youth in Organized Armed Violence, 13 June 2005.
- 10 Author interview with Nelsa Curbelo, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 11 This section is partly based on an author interview with Nelsa Curbelo and gang youths working with SER PAZ, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 12 Author interview with Daniel Legovia, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 13 Curbelo emphasizes that most gang members come from the poorest sector of society.
- 14 Author interview with Nelsa Curbelo, Guayaquil, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 15 '[Society acts] to create non-people, individuals we do not care about, individuals who must be avoided, even eliminated, individuals in whom others are not interested and from whom nothing is expected' (Curbelo, 2004, p. 3).
- 16 In commenting on SER PAZ projects, including the mural project and rap album launch party, *El Universo* (2002b) reported: 'The response to these youths organized by their own initiative into *naciones* has been positive. Not only have they revealed that they're not as bad as we consider them to be, but that they are trained to serve their city in numerous fields.'
- 17 Author interview with Daniel Legovia, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.

- 18 Eva, a reformed gang member, who works in the beauty salon, said: 'We now have work and a way to provide for our families, which is the most important. I have many dreams. One is to open a large branch, well, a number of branches of the salon.' Adrian, a reformed gang member and workshop promoter, reported: 'Before, my life consisted of only three things: sleeping, doing drugs and eating. [SER PAZ] gave me a second chance in my life, and now I have the opportunity to help many young people who, like me, were caught up in drugs and street life.' Author interviews with reformed gang members, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008: Sara Benet.
- 19 Author interview with Nelsa Curbelo, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 20 Curbelo recalled: 'Both groups valued this instrument. They knew that it was important, and relevant in their lives, and they knew that surrendering it would be like surrendering their mothers—almost like that. And the military said that they called their guns 'mamita' and that they had a special ritual during which they would guard it for eight days and not use it.' Author interview with Nelsa Curbelo, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 21 Author interview with Nelsa Curbelo, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 22 Author interview with Nelsa Curbelo, Guayaquil, Ecuador, October 2008; translated from the Spanish by Sara Benet.
- 23 In August 2009, SER PAZ announced that it would close due to a lack of funds. According to Ricardo Koenig, sub-director of SER PAZ, the organization received funding from the Ministry of Labour, but this funding stopped for 'political reasons'. In an email he wrote: 'SER PAZ was born without the financing that would allow it to build a centralized organization, and the projects we carried out were done with the sporadic help of [various] institutions (Rotary Club, FIA, City of Guayaquil, etc.). Almost 100% of the donations were used for these projects and we didn't keep any money to cover the operating costs of SER PAZ.' Projects in the Barrio de Paz will continue as the businesses have become self-sustaining. Several reformed youth gangs that worked with the organization have also begun negotiating directly with the government to obtain support for their projects. *El Universo* (2009a); author interview with Ricardo Koenig, 26 January 2010 (author translation).
- 24 Father Chiqui named his organization after Martin Luther King as he was inspired by the Nobel Peace Prize winner's non-violent fight for civil rights (Dominguez, 2009).
- 25 The police later performed their own peace negotiations between the groups (*El Comercio*, 2006).

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