

# **Social Inclusion from Below**

## **The Perspectives of Street Gangs and Their Possible Effects on Declining Homicide Rates in Ecuador**

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Services Division by:

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**Institutions for  
Development Sector**

**Innovation in Citizen  
Services Division**

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## ABSTRACT\*

Since 2007, the Ecuadorian approach to crime control has emphasized efforts to reach higher levels of social control based on policies of social inclusion and innovations in criminal justice and police reform. One innovative aspect of this approach was the decision to legalize a number of street gangs in 2007. The government claims the success of these policies can be seen in homicide rates that have fallen from 15.35 per 100,000 in 2011 to 5 per 100,000 in 2017. However, little is understood about the factors and their combination that have produced this outcome. To explore this phenomenon, we developed a research project focusing on the impact of street gangs involved in processes of social inclusion on violence reduction. From April to October 2017, we collected multiple data sets including 60 face-to-face interviews with members from four different street subcultures in several field sites, field observations, and archival materials to answer two primary questions: *How has the relationship between street groups and state agencies changed in the past 10 years? How has this changed relationship contributed to a hitherto unexamined role in the homicide reduction phenomenon of Ecuador?* We found that legalization helped reduce violence and criminality drastically while providing a space, both culturally and legally, to transform the social capital of the gang into effective vehicles of behavioral change. In policy terms, we argue that the social inclusion approach to street gangs should be continued and highlighted as a model of best practices of the state.

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Keywords: crime reduction, deviance amplification, Ecuador, gang transformation, homicide reduction, legalization, police, state intervention, street gangs, street organization, social control, social inclusion, violence reduction

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2007, the Ecuadorian approach to crime control has emphasized efforts to reach higher levels of social control based on policies of social inclusion and innovations in criminal justice and police reform. Public security in Ecuador is viewed holistically, with improvements in education, health, and welfare seen as equally important as community policing and crime prevention. One notably innovative aspect of this approach was the decision to legalize a number of street gangs in 2007.

The government claims the success of these policies can be seen in homicide rates that have fallen from 15.35 per 100,000 in 2011 to 8.17 per 100,000 in 2014, while recent crime statistics show the country is close to meeting its goal of 5 per 100,000 in 2017. However, as a former Senior Advisor to the Ecuadorian Minister of the Interior opined, “We do not know precisely what factors have produced the reduction in homicide. It is all of these factors, social, political, economic, and cultural, that somehow come together” (Brotherton and Gude, 2016a).

To explore this question, we were commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to develop a six-month qualitative research project focusing on the impact on violence reduction by street gangs involved in processes of social inclusion. From April to October 2017, we collected data including 60 face-to-face interviews with members from four different street subcultures (the STAE [Sacred Tribe Atahualpa of Ecuador], Ñetas, Crazy Souls, and Masters of the Street) in multiple field sites (Quito, Guayaquil, Santo Domingo, and Esmeraldas). We also used field observations and archival materials to answer two primary questions: *How has the relationship between street*

*groups and state agencies changed in the past 10 years? How has this changed relationship contributed to a hitherto unexamined role in the homicide reduction phenomenon of Ecuador?*

The first group to be legalized was the STAE, which served as a watershed moment in the nation’s security policy. This transformation from street gang to youth organization was possible because the group’s identity was not rooted solely in criminal activity. Legalization made it possible for members to embrace their identity as an urban subculture. Emerging from a clandestine organization and being formally recognized by the state meant that they could dress in their distinctive attire and hold meetings in public spaces, both practices important to their collective and individual self-identity.

The state, therefore, rejected the tactics of repression and opted for a long-term strategy of crime reduction through direct engagement with such groups. The heavy-handed, repressive approach was replaced by a more holistic one, including job creation and education outreach as well as cultural activities and the recognition of gangs as cultural street organizations. This strategy encouraged gangs to collaborate and cooperate with formal state institutions and change their course of development.

This allowed the group to maintain the social cohesiveness of a gang, as well as the aesthetic aspect so important to their identity, while gaining access to public space and increased state services. In exchange for leaving criminality behind, these groups were able to receive state funds for employment and recreation purposes, proving a powerful complement to other structural changes that together helped reduce crime and homicide rates. The STAE built strong

collaborative relationships with several state ministries and set an example for other gangs that soon realized they needed to follow suit, leading to the legalization of the two subsequent largest street organizations, further cementing the decline in inter-gang conflict.

One of the reasons the process was sustainable is that a generation of members grew up and matured within the legalization process. Legalization thus became the default setting for gang leaders—the knowledge of how to navigate ministries, apply for funds, and build alliances with other gangs and the police were all skills a gang leader needed. After 10 years, this reform process has remained stable but lacks an assured path of development. Thus, although this policy has been an undeniable success, more needs to be done to work with these groups, especially in the area of job creation. We argue that legalization should be further formalized within institutions so that these policies can function independently of the political parties in power.

While it is apparent in policy circles that purely repressive strategies of crime control are ineffective, even counter-productive, we need to propose a viable and tested alternative. This is precisely the importance that the Ecuadorian model has for the country's regional neighbors. Legalization helped reduce violence and criminality drastically while providing a space, both culturally and legally, to transform the social capital of the gang into an effective vehicle of behavioral change. All gang members agreed that the legalization process helped to reduce street violence and improve the quality of life and security in their communities. Inter-gang violence was greatly reduced, homicide levels dropped, and previously antagonistic gangs began to cooperate with each other with the help of the government. These reduced threats from previously warring gangs, combined with effective relationships with government ministries amid new practices of funding and organization, helped to change the way gangs operated and interacted with their communities. Although the process has had its challenges, a certain

level of continuity has nonetheless allowed these groups to continue their forward trajectory.

However, the conditions that led to the successful legalization of three of Ecuador's largest street gangs are not easy to replicate. While we believe legalization could successfully be carried out in other countries, we must be cautious about universalizing this process. It is important to bear in mind that the legalization policy was enacted and conceptualized within the political discourse of the "Citizens' Revolution," with the modernization of the country as well as the new role of the state used as tools to proactively improve and complement security goals. In Ecuador, we saw a nation state that took urban violence seriously and acknowledged its link with security and development goals. What made these efforts uniquely effective was the larger context of national transformation. A major lesson of the 10-year period of gang legalization is that deviance amplification can be avoided if we take seriously the hopes and agency of youth who will build innovative subcultures if their dreams are denied or deferred (Merton, 1938).

In policy terms, we argue that the social inclusion approach to street gangs should be continued and highlighted as a model of best practices of the state. Governments must go beyond traditional prevention and repression approaches to develop strategies of effective intervention. The holistic conception of social control with state agencies playing a proactive role in community building, public space expansion, and street-level engagement should be extended with lessons learned embedded in future projects. Further, the community policing initiative should be upgraded with lessons of the street gang experience included in the training curriculum. Finally, the role of tertiary institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities should be better understood and their importance for improving the life chances of gang members, which in turn positively affect public security, should be recognized and incorporated into a comprehensive plan of gang social control and community empowerment.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the Ecuadorian government launched a country-wide policy to increase public safety for all its citizens called the National Plan for Citizenship and Security. This concept of security was different to the crime-prevention model traditionally applied in Ecuador and most other Latin American government policies, which primarily emphasized the role of the police in a reactive solution to rising crime rates across the continent.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the new Ecuadorian approach was to view crime control through a holistic lens, with efforts to reach higher levels of social control based on policies of social inclusion linked to other major goals contained in the government's strategic agenda. In this perspective, the state would make good on its commitment to the citizenry through increased resources in welfare, health, and education, while citizens would be expected to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities by building community cohesion and mutually reinforcing the relationship between the state and civil society. A major innovative aspect of this approach was the decision to legalize a certain number of street gangs in 2007.

The radical turn in such a policy must be placed in context: Ecuador at the time was said to be experiencing a significant increase in the street gang phenomenon. Based on the few statistics and studies publicly available, the National Police had concluded that in 2008 more than 400 street gangs were active in the province of Guayas and approximately 178 were similarly present in the province of Pichincha, with such groups only included in the gang database if they were considered “delinquent” (Santillán and Varea, 2008). Meanwhile, other reports mentioning the growing menace of gangs vis a vis public security referred in

particular to the rapid rise of the gang phenomenon in the city of Guayaquil, with one study based on media reports highlighting the violent practices of the Latin Kings, also known as the STAE. According to the non-profit organization SERPAZ, this group was of special concern because it was found to be responsible for 27 percent of all the homicides in that city at the turn of the 21st century (Santillán and Varea, 2008). Such fears of the growing youth gang threat in this period might also be reflected in the change in national youth arrest rates between 1999 and 2005, showing a doubling in apprehensions over that time period to almost 8,000 (Torres, 2006).

Despite the risks of this policy, however, the government reports that its approach to security has been successful, particularly in terms of homicide, with rates falling from 15.35 per 100,000 in 2011 to 8.17 per 100,000 in 2014, and recent crime statistics showing the nation nearing its goal of 5 per 100,000 in 2017 (SENAPLADES, undated). This reduction in lethal violence makes Ecuador the site of one of the most significant decreases in homicide in the Americas, with Quito being named the safest big city in Latin America (Igarapé Institute, 2016).

While this homicide-related data might seem impressive, it has received relatively little social scientific scrutiny, leaving received wisdom to dominate the

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<sup>1</sup> Researcher Curbelo sums up the pre-2007 Ecuadorian reaction to the gang problem: “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” (Curbelo, 2010).

search for causal explanations by suggesting that the declines must lie in changes to the criminal justice system, i.e., that the reforms in the police department and its professionalization have been the biggest contributing factor. Nonetheless, as the former Senior Advisor to the Minister of the Interior opined, “We don’t know precisely what factors have produced the reduction in homicide. It’s all of these factors, social, political, economic and cultural that somehow come together” (Brotherton and Gude, 2016a).

To explore this question from a bottom-up rather than top-down approach, influenced by traditional sociological conceptions of social control (Janowitz, 1975) and deviance amplification (Young, 1971), the authors were commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank to develop a six-month qualitative research project focusing on the impact on violence reduction by street gangs involved in processes of social inclusion. From April to October 2017, we collected data including 60 face-to-face interviews with members from four different street subcultures in multiple field sites<sup>2</sup> (Quito, Guayaquil, Santo Domingo, and Esmeraldas), field observations, and archival materials to answer two primary questions:

- i. *How has the relationship between street groups and state agencies changed in the past 10 years?*
- ii. *How has this changed relationship contributed to a hitherto unexamined role in the homicide reduction phenomenon of Ecuador?*

To reveal the more discrete factors and dynamics in this crime reduction puzzle, we proposed the following two hypotheses: (i) a positive change in cultural values will positively affect social behavior, and (ii) increased opportunity structures for marginalized youth will produce decreases in crime and violence-related deviance. Such hypotheses point to the relationships between (i) the changing role and character of violent street subcultures during the last decade, and (ii) the multi-layered intervention of the state in vulnerable communities aimed at heightening community cohesion and social well-being while decreasing crime. Our findings are:

- The processes of legalization and social inclusion of street groups both directly and indirectly contributed to a reduction in societal violence including homicide.
- These processes and the changes that legalization and social inclusion helped to enable in the pro-social transformation of street groups occurred on multiple levels such as: (i) the social milieux where violence might occur, (ii) the culture of the groups, (iii) inter-group relations, (iv) relations between the state and the groups, (v) individual street socialization of group members, (vi) potential relationships between the groups and organized crime, and (vii) relations between the group and the community. These pro-social processes demonstrate the effectiveness of policies and practices that prevent deviance amplification, i.e., the contradictory impact of anti-crime policies that result in the reproduction and amplification of the deviance that is the target of control.
- Social control policies towards street groups/gangs based on concepts of social citizenship could and should be explored and implemented in a variety of terrains. However, each terrain has its own set of constraints and possibilities that need to be considered and taken into account for successful policy outcomes. In addition, these policies must be understood as a long-term process rather than a short-term solution.
- The success of this social control process must be conceived in a holistic approach that involves both state and non-state agencies in the implementation as well as an understanding of street subcultures as possessing potential for both problem solving and social transformation.

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<sup>2</sup>We prefer to use the terms “street groups,” “subcultures,” or “street organizations” (see Brotherton and Barrios, 2004) when referring to Ecuadorian groups such as the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (STAE), the Ñetas, Masters of the Street, and the Crazy Souls in their post-2007 guise, in recognition of the positive transformation engaged in by these groups and to minimize the tendency toward pathologization and labeling in much of the gang literature. However, in this report we also use the term “gang,” which is the more generic and pejorative term commonly used in criminal justice discourses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature was broken down into three areas: (i) gangs and social inclusion; (ii) Ecuador gangs, violence, and social control; and (iii) explanations for the Ecuador homicide drop. We found that the literature in all three areas was relatively thin, reflecting the lack of a criminological tradition in the social sciences in Ecuador as well as the overriding focus in gang policies on repression, especially during the last several decades, with the global popularity of “zero tolerance” strategies in policing and criminal justice.

### Gangs and Policies of Social Inclusion

During the last few decades, street gangs have been widely considered a target for repression and eradication on multiple terrains. Zero tolerance or *mano dura* policies represent the pinnacle of such policies and have been implemented both in the global north and global south as well as across the political spectrum of governments. Nonetheless, there is another set of responses to the gang issue that have borrowed more from a tradition of social inclusion rather than social exclusion.

In the United States, where much of the early research on gangs developed in the early 20th century (Thrasher, 1927), policies on street gangs were linked generally to policies on juvenile delinquency. It was not until the late 1950s that gangs began to receive special attention and the birth of the detached gang street worker emerged in Los Angeles and New York (Klein, 1971). Around the same time, the largest social inclusionary policy on gangs was developed under the aegis of Mobilization for Youth funded by the Ford

Foundation in 1957. This intervention was based on the theory of opportunity structures (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) that conceptualized gangs as social groups that emerged from a particular set of neighborhood sub-cultural traditions and socioeconomic opportunities for growth and development particularly for lower-class youth. Such was the broader influence of this gang intervention that it became the theoretical framework for the United States’ War on Poverty, a hallmark of the Kennedy administration’s domestic policy agenda in the early 1960s and later continued by President Johnson. These policies have been credited with reducing poverty more than any other social policy in the post-WWII era.

Following these efforts to address gang emergence through community development and social empowerment, various attempts were made to recruit gangs into pro-social political and economic activities in Chicago (Spergel, 1995), while in New York City a Roundtable of Youth was sponsored by the mayor’s office to bring together street gang leaders in an effort to mediate between street groups and quell any potential violence. Other efforts to work proactively with gang members on various employment, community-building, and anti-violence initiatives were tried in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Boston during the 1970s with varying degrees of success. Nonetheless, all such efforts were vastly outspent and socially counteracted by the mounting emphasis on gang-suppression tactics, particularly as the War on Drugs assumed such importance in both domestic and international policy decisions (Spergel, 1995).

In the recent era, social inclusionary policies on gangs have seen some resurgence with experiments

in Barcelona and Genoa (Italy), where city-led efforts to integrate gang members into civil society and destigmatize their subcultures were made in 2005–09 (see Feixa, Porzio, and Recio, 2006; Palmas, 2017; Cerbino, 2010) and, in many ways, laid the substantive and theoretical groundwork for the gang-inclusionary policies in contemporary Ecuador.

## Explanations for the Ecuador Homicide Drop

Most analyses of the Ecuadorian homicide drop have focused on the reform in the country's criminal justice policies and practices, most notably the reorganization and expansion of its Community Police force (Policía Comunitaria) in 2011 (Community Police members now total approximately 80 percent of all police officers), along with the doubling of the budget designated for national security and crime prevention (Bachelet and García Mejía, 2015). The dominant explanation for the nation's success in this area has been the improving police–community relations and the increasing sophistication of police organization and techniques; an increased use of crime information for smart policing; and a fourfold increase in police salaries and a purge of bad apples that has done a lot to attract better candidates, increasing professionalism in the force as well as reducing corruption. An overhaul of the justice system has also contributed to drastic changes in the previous levels of impunity for serious crimes. In other words, most emphasis has been placed on the increased effectiveness of law enforcement and the increased efficiency and accountability of the criminal justice system (Bachelet and García Mejía, 2015). At the same time, in many of our interviews with state actors related to both crime and homicide issues (Brotherton and Gude, 2016b), much was made of the country's embrace of crime prevention measures which seek to reduce risk factors in the production of crime, the importance of changing society's cultural values that endorse and enable violence as a means to resolve interpersonal conflict (e.g., Ministerio del Interior, 2016) and the increase in opportunity structures among marginalized youth populations that reduce pathways to criminal deviance.

## Ecuador Gangs, Violence, and Social Control

According to a recent summary of the literature on Ecuadorian street gangs (Rodgers and Baird, 2015), the emergence of these street subcultures began in the 1980s with the country's two major cities, Quito and Guayaquil, featuring predominantly as their main sites of operation. According to these authors, the gangs are divided into two organizational types, *pandillas* and *naciones*, with *pandillas* operating as locally based, territorial group formations and *naciones* more as street organizations (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004) with stricter sociocultural norms, hierarchies, and broader spatial and ideological aspirations. The numbers involved in these groups are significant; an estimated 65,000 members are said to be active in Guayaquil alone. According to Cerbino (2010), the Latin Kings and Queens (the official name is the Sacred Tribe Atahualpa of Ecuador, or STAE, which is used throughout this report) and the Ñetas developed as transnational organizations in Ecuador primarily in the early 1990s with deported U.S. gang members finding a receptive audience among the heavily marginalized youth in the poorest urban neighborhoods, while the Masters of the Street emerged indigenously, mimicking some of the same organizational structures as those practiced by their U.S.-inspired counterparts.

The Ecuadorian approach to the issue of security (Ministerio de Coordinación de Seguridad, 2011) views economic, personal, national, and political security concerns as linked to the provision of human rights. The key to increasing citizen security and hence internal social control, i.e., effective self-regulation (see Janowitz, 1975), should come from a community's shared cultural norms and practices of mutual respect, reciprocity, and effective self-organization that together enhance ties of social solidarity.

To reach the goals of heightened combined personal and collective security, the government has invested in the social provisions, obligations, and services of the state such as public education, national health care, housing, and public space. This holistic view of law enforcement reconceives the police as



community problem solvers. Hence, in 2011, large sectors of the national police were reconstituted as a community police force with a revised mission and training curriculum.

As part of this more humanistic approach to the security question, the Ecuadorian government through its various agencies actively reached out to several large street subcultures such as the STAE, the Ñetas, and Masters of the Street/Crazy Souls. By encouraging these groups to form pro-social associations through which activities such as sports competitions, music events, and job training opportunities are co-organized with public/private agencies, the government sought to achieve its goals of community empowerment and peaceful co-existence (Brotherton, 2015; Cerbino, 2012). There are three main reasons why the government has adopted such policies.

First, the government recognized that the success of its Citizens' Revolution rested on the level of engagement it could ensure with all sectors of society, including those in the most marginalized subpopulations. Second, the government saw that the repressive model of gang control was leading to increased rates of violence or what criminologists call "deviance amplification" (Young, 1971). One result of such increased violence was to destabilize government–community relations and undermine the legitimate power of the state to regulate society. Third, the government was anxious to avoid the implementation of policies that could encourage the establishment and spread of organized crime. The government reasoned that reaching out to street gangs could head off their corporatization (Venkatesh, 1997) and potential recruitment into the orbit of organized crime.



## METHODOLOGY

To answer the two questions highlighted above, we combined archival and qualitative research methods best suited to explore historical change and the perspectives of hard-to-reach subjects living in marginalized communities. This data allowed us access to the insider knowledge, perspectives, meanings, rituals, and interpretations of the groups' members, providing us with their political and cultural histories and the contexts in which changes in these groups emerged and decisions were made, as well as the grounded perspectives of members who are reacting to governmental initiatives. The sub-areas of our research focused on (i) the evolution of government policy based on the principles of social inclusion vis a vis street gangs, (ii) the reaction of street gangs to these policies, (iii) the changing nature of street subcultures across time, and (iv) the broader implications of both these changes and policies from the perspectives of street gang members. We were particularly interested in documenting the gained social capital of the gangs and their leadership through their relationship with different government ministries over the past decade and the effect this has had on their groups' structure.

### Data Collection

#### Interviews

We constructed a life history questionnaire focusing on (i) members' socialization, (ii) the conceptual and substantive roles of citizenship, (iii) views and experiences of the government's social inclusionary policies, (iv) experienced cultures of violence, (v) participation

in pro-social activities of the group, (vi) methods of resolving inter-group and interpersonal conflict, (vii) existing local opportunity structures, (viii) examples of neighborhood pro- and anti-social cultures, (ix) challenges facing the groups pro-social practices, and (x) collective and individual future plans and perspectives. All the interviews were recorded and included both experienced members who could speak to issues of change across time and the importance of leadership as well as new young recruits who provided insights into the attraction of these groups and the perspectives of this current generation on societal violence. In addition, qualitative interviews have been carried out with government agents, police leaders, former political figures, and leading members of the STAE related to the central issue of this project, i.e., the impact of these groups on the reduction in violence.

Utilizing contacts with the street groups the STAE, the Ñetas, the Masters of the Street, the Crazy Souls, and "El BUNK" (a coalition of street gangs including Masters of the Street and Wu Tang, in the neighborhoods of Carapungo and Calderón in Northern Quito), face-to-face interviews were carried out in Quito, Guayaquil, Santo Domingo, Esmeraldas, and Cuenca. Breakdown of the interviews: STAE: 48; Ñetas: 6; and Masters of the Street (in some locations the same group is known as the Crazy Souls): 6. Among the interviewees, 49 were male and 11 were female.

In addition, there were multiple informal interviews with members of all three groups, plus interviews with five family members of STAE members, two interviews with government officials—formerly with the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (Ministerio de Inclusión Económica y Social, or MIES)—and one interview with

a former national police chief. Most of the interviews were carried out at members' homes, community centers, and at the field researcher's apartment in Quito.

### *Field Observations*

Field observations were carried out in various locations, including large group meetings (in the case of the STAE, hosted monthly, as well as regional meetings also held regularly, which provided ample opportunities for interviews and observation), small group chapter meetings, leadership meetings, backstage interactions, public meetings with group presentations (such as the PUCE book fair), public holiday celebrations, and recreational barbecues.

We attended meetings of the three groups as well as self-organized activities that typified their official and unofficial practices, including many large and small meetings of the STAE and one with the Ñetas, and we have witnessed extensive interactions between the STAE and the government and the police. Field notes consisted of: degree of organizational proficiency, levels of cooperation between the group and state agents, pro-social statements and activities by group members, and role of state agents in the groups' activities.

### *Data Analysis*

All the interviews were transcribed, coded, and stored in separate files for each group. We used coded data to answer the two leading research questions, mapping the development of the state's social inclusionary

policies and the impact of their interventions on the evolution of the groups while tracing the links of these policies and group changes to homicide reduction.

We collected and analyzed archival data, particularly police homicide and violence-related statistics and any criminological and/or police analyses of this data; interview data particularly of the groups' leaders; new group practices and rituals to improve inter- and intra-group relations; involvement of group members in citizenship and community-building activities; views of changed relations between group members and the police; views of members regarding changed individual status and collective self-image; new measures to resolve inter- and intra-group conflict.

In answer to the two research questions relating to the effects of legalization of the street groups and its relationship to violence, the following sections provide details on the findings.

***Research Question One: How has the relationship between street groups and state agencies changed in the past 10 years?***

# THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STREET GROUPS AND STATE AGENCIES

## Police Relations

The relationship with the police is noticeably different after legalization, thanks to an arguably successful police reform project and the close collaboration of police officers as part of the legalization initiative. For many of the gang members interviewed, this relationship is intimately tied to their reclaiming of public space. Before legalization, if the STAE got together to hold a meeting in a park, the police would inevitably arrive to arrest and physically abuse them. This happened not only in parks, but in other public spaces as well. Legalization was primarily a reinstatement of the right to the city. For all the groups we interviewed, having their meetings in public and wearing their colors in public is a source of intense pride. Thus, the new relationship with the police signifies a return to full citizenship rights, as they are no longer stopped and frisked or targeted for wearing their gang colors in public spaces. Many noted that this was perhaps the biggest victory of legalization.

The members also note that the newfound respect afforded them by the police increased the legitimacy of the state in their eyes, and that working with a government that had successfully reigned in a notoriously violent police force demonstrated to them that they would be taken seriously. Hence, they felt a tangible change in the quality of their treatment in their daily dealings with state security actors. For example, as one member of STAE explained, “Being legalized, you become a public figure, and that makes the leadership use different strategies for working and organizing; it’s not like it was before when everything was resolved with punches, in wars.”

Further, the police reform was also important in that a more professional police force was needed to fill the vacuum left by gangs that had decided to legalize. In other words, the gangs were no longer able to enforce territorial sovereignty through violence, and a serious community police force was key in ensuring that threats from other groups would be thoroughly investigated. Increased police presence also helped to ensure that gang members who had left criminality behind were safe from other criminal elements who might take their legalization as a sign of weakness. The major gangs were able to keep their street credibility without engaging in violence because the state had ensured their marginal neighborhoods would also be secure.<sup>1</sup>

## Government Relations

The relationship with the government has clearly been transformed. For group members, this relationship during the past 10 years has been an education in how to interact “formally” with the state and civil society. Gang members learned to write proposals, interacted with state bureaucrats, and transmitted their goals beyond the street level. This promoted a change on many other levels, not only discursively, but also in

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that a major change in the country’s post-2007 anti-crime/public security policy was to put a great deal of emphasis on crime prevention. Thus, police become trained in problem solving rather than incident-driven policing, which brings agents much closer to the community and some of the root causes of criminal deviance.

how members interacted with other gangs and how they trained new members. This new relationship was a sea change in how the leadership planned its future as a group with access to state resources. Much of this relationship with the state hinged on this ability to gain access to funds for social projects, with the state seen as a desirable and powerful interlocutor and no longer resented as illegitimate and repressive. Now the government became viewed as a trusted partner that keeps its promises and is both willing and committed to meet the needs of the group and its members. As one member described the relationship, “Having a photo taken of the Latin Kings alongside the president breaks barriers and stigmas, not only in Ecuador but also worldwide.”

To maintain and sustain this relationship, street organizations were willing to engage the government and its agents and enact deep changes. For the groups, this enabled them to be “taken seriously,” an important goal of each group that translates into being given respect, a form of status especially prized on the streets. The groups then saw positive outcomes from their collaboration with state agencies who, in turn, began to regard them as formal actors in civil society, deserving of state largesse and various levels of support. The groups subsequently underwent a “bureaucratization” in their relationship with the burgeoning state apparatus by (i) designating representatives and (ii) deepening their ties with non-state third parties who helped them with proposals to obtain funds as well as gave them legitimacy. The groups and their members thus underwent a steep learning curve in how to interact in the more formal spheres of society. This required them to leave behind old street practices and illicit and semi-illicit livelihoods to demonstrate a serious commitment to the reform process, while it also required agents from state ministries to be willing to work with groups that are unfamiliar with the inner workings of the state.

It is important to note that the legalization process was not regarded or implemented as a short-term policy that might be used as a temporary agreement in exchange for votes. Instead, group members recognized that the government was intent on a long-term commitment to working with gangs/street groups and

was willing to keep its doors open to them over more than a decade, through three administrations. This commitment and practice by the state was held in high esteem by group members, not least because of the long experience with other governments (both domestically and outside of Ecuador) that saw youth outreach as short-term projects and/or purely strategic, a policy priority only during election cycles. Several key individuals of the state were often referred to for having consistently reached out to the groups to reaffirm their commitment to the policy of social inclusion: the President of Ecuador, the Minister of the Interior, and the Senior Advisor to the Minister of the Interior.

Finally, the legalization process also recognized the groups’ memberships as part of the general youth population (defined by the government as a sociological and psychological category including anyone between 18 and 29 years old, approximately 21 percent of the population) and made a special effort to reach out to them—for example, in a national consultative process organized by MIES to create a Manifesto for Youth Equality to promote the principles of participation, equality, justice, and solidarity. One ex-member of the Latin Queens who was involved remembered how inclusive the government’s efforts were:

We worked really hard on that document, all of the groups. For example, you should know that the Ñetas were very influential in writing the piece on gender violence and equality. N., their leader at the time, was gay-identified and made sure the group really took this area seriously. Most of that piece was a result of N.’s input.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See “Agenda de Igualdad para la Juventud: 2012–2013” (MIES, 2012). Other important state efforts to reach out to youth are included in “Agenda Nacional para la Igualdad Intergeneracional” (Consejo Nacional para la Igualdad Intergeneracional, 2014) and the “Agendas Nacionales para la Igualdad” (Lopez, 2014). This latter document summarizes all the different policy statements for equality published by the various councils, demonstrating the country’s holistic perspective on equality as it relates to youth, gender, age, race/ethnicity, and sexuality.

## THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STREET GROUPS AND NON-STATE AGENCIES

Our data pointed to the importance of the key roles that third parties played in the legalization process and especially helping to monitor and mentor street groups in their transformation during the beginning phase. Particular praise is reserved for Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) and their role as a bridge between the STAE and government bureaucrats. FLACSO not only helped the group navigate the formalities and the systems of protocol in dealing with the state, but they also served as guarantors for the process, helping to convince government officials of the importance of the project and its feasibility. FLACSO, and especially Mauro Cerbino and Ana Rodríguez, set an example by leading workshops at FLACSO and setting up the first job training programs for the STAE in Turubamba in 2007.

The role of FLACSO and that of academics as cultural and institutional translators and intermediaries between the state and urban subcultures was crucial in establishing trust and the foundations of a mutually respectful working relationship. In recent years, the PUCE (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador) in Quito has served a similar role, helping to train STAE in several career tracks as well as helping them start their own catering business. To date, more than 100 members of the group have graduated from PUCE's programs in culinary arts and nursing.



Workshop led by the former Minister of Culture with STAE (Photo: R. Gude).

***Research Question 2: How has this changed relationship contributed to a hitherto unexamined role in the homicide reduction phenomenon of Ecuador?***





## LEGALIZATION AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF STREET GROUPS

A crucial aspect of the success of the legalization process has been the process of transformation of the groups that have been primarily involved and targeted by the government. In the following, we summarize what we have observed as the major factors and characteristics of the groups as they entered a new stage in their respective evolution.

### New Models of the Street Organization

The legalization of the STAE in 2007 had a domino effect. Soon after, the second-largest group, the Ñetas, quickly followed suit. The government legalized the country's most notorious and arguably largest

gang, the STAE, to set an example to other gangs that legalization was a desirable relationship to have with the state. If they were successful with the STAE, it was reasoned, they could replicate the process with other street gangs. This strategy worked and word travelled quickly. As recently as two years ago, different gangs/groups have opted for legalization, and in some cases different groups from the same neighborhood joined forces, as is the case of "EI BUNK" and the Crazy Souls in Quito. As one leading member of the STAE put it, "After we became legal, legalization became fashionable." This was confirmed during our six months of fieldwork through dozens of interviews with previously rival gangs. Ñetas, Masters/Crazy Souls, and other small gangs all confirmed to us that the legalization



A general meeting of the national STAE in Guayaquil taking place at a recreational center belonging to the Ecuadorian teachers' union. The site is situated next to a training center of the regional police. (Photo: D. Brotherton).

of the STAE set an example that everyone wanted to follow. As one leader put it:

(...) various proposals were generated [by the government] for us to work together with public and private institutions to achieve goals like education, training, and joint ventures in order to involve youth more effectively in public policies. Through this state recognition, we're changing the image that people have of these other kinds of youth organizations. So these new policies, in a new institutional moment and with a new constitution, all these changes have allowed our organizations to become stronger and to position themselves in civil society as political and social actors who can give answers to youth.

Thus, legalization set the stage for a new way to interact between the street organizations and established new norms of behavior, with even those members of the STAE who were originally opposed to legalization later changing their position. This was the case with a faction of the STAE that broke away during the legalization process, later forming what is now called the Association of STAE.

After a decade of fostering formal ties between the state and previously illicit street groups, the way street organizations have evolved shows a dramatic transformation. The largest street organizations have ties to different ministries and consistently collaborate with each other on different initiatives, learning alternative ways of funding their community and how to create, develop, and implement innovative cultural projects. This system of alternative funding opportunities made legalization attractive to many street groups where increasing cultural outlets for youth in their respective communities was regarded a priority.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while the groups were no longer at war with each other, the legalization process ushered in a period during which they could solidify new forms of coexistence within the same urban setting. One STAE member explained why working together with other legalized gangs was very practical and easier than before:

Of course, it's much easier because they are also legal. I mean, they also know that they

can lose their legalized status, because if we act badly on the street and people find out about it, they can take the legal status away from us as well as from them.

Consequently, with reduced inter-group threats and new funding possibilities along with opportunities of joint projects, many group leaders started to befriend their counterparts. On multiple occasions, we have observed previous enemies having lunch, discussing upcoming events, and giving advice to each other on how to organize and fund new cultural projects. Today these leaders continue to meet regularly and maintain almost weekly contact. As one leader commented, what really made a difference in building trust between gang leaders was the opportunity to work together, to get to know each other and learn to respect the other group. This member credits the many hours spent collaborating on various projects over the years with different ministries as a major foundation for trust that has grown between the leaderships.

## The “Maturing In” of Members

In the criminological literature, gang desertion or gang desistance from crime is commonly referred to as “maturing out.” In our research, however, we have noticed a completely different phenomenon, that of “maturing in.” What legalization has ultimately meant for these various gangs is a group transformation as opposed to individual transformation. This is a radically different approach to violence reduction and, in this case, has been highly successful. We have observed entire gangs, over the span of several years, that have transformed their structures and their street practices. This transformation manifests itself in two major ways. First, gangs must change their leadership style to maintain formal avenues of communication and cooperation

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<sup>1</sup>Paz Urbana comprised a series of important events organized in 2007, 2008, and 2011 that brought members of all the street groups together to perform in or simply attend various hip-hop-related cultural activities in Quito. Members of the STAE were major players in the initiative, working with various government ministries.

with heavily bureaucratic ministries. Second, these gangs have experienced a unique aging experience that has contributed greatly to the gang maturing as a whole. As older members stayed in the gang, the transformation of the group towards nonviolence was more cemented. As one female member put it:

Beyond the formal recognition of being “legal,” it’s the maturity of the members who make up the Nation that signifies the real change. In our day, we were young adolescents and pre-adolescents, but our mentality kept developing. Perhaps we were no longer aiming to create problems but were more directed toward progress. Adding all this to the legalization, which established norms for peace, led to certain adjustments, rules, and accommodations within the system, which ended the threats from other street groups and caused the violence between the groups to end. Of course, the legalization helped us a lot, but the maturity of the members played a significant role. There are very few young members. The Nation is largely made up of older and more mature members. We’ve been through a lot and, as I’ve told you, we’re here to build a path for those who come after us. We don’t want those who come behind us to have to live through the same situations.

The leadership of these various gangs has had to adopt very different management styles after legalization took place. In exchange for formal recognition and access to job training and state resources for social projects, these groups left behind old practices of violence and illicit rent-seeking strategies. The risk of losing state funds for projects meant that leaders had the task of sustaining these ministerial relationships, and over time they became conditioned to think and operate differently. Consequently, new skills and talents began to be emphasized over others. For example, those who knew how to execute projects, were good at public speaking, or were more politically astute became valuable assets to a group that was transitioning to be a formal social actor in a very politically charged environment.

Due to legalization, many members who would have either been killed in conflict, left the gang on their own accord, or ended up in prison are still around and active. This has meant that there is a critical mass of older, experienced members, which is rare in most gangs, as younger members tend to swell the ranks. In the case of STAE, for example, there is a balance between young and older members in general, but in some cities, such as Ambato, the balance was tipped toward older members. Legalization allowed older members a social space to continue being gang members while still taking part in community life, but without the fear of going to jail or being denied work because they identify openly as a member of a street organization. These older members created a critical mass of mature members who were in favor of legalization and reforming the group, thus enabling the group to pursue a different trajectory that has been sustained over 10 years. The positive example that more experienced members set for neophytes was very clear from interviews with those who joined post-2007, pointing to a culture change within these street organizations.

Thus, the combination of these two factors—a different leadership style and an aging group—have had a big effect on both initiating and sustaining the changes brought about by legalization, helping the groups to avoid backsliding into possible criminal deviance. As the leadership aged over the years and was given a space to think politically, they began to learn to leverage their numbers and their social capital in more pro-social ways. One member in Guayaquil put it this way: “We started to realize that anything was possible, so we began talking to our brothers [fellow members] in a different way. We no longer spoke about problems in the streets; instead, we spoke about progress and solutions to all our problems.”

## Transformational Types

Regarding gang transformation, there are typically two types: the radical transformation, as is the case with the STAE or the Chicago Young Lords, and the gradual historical transformation, where gangs are absorbed by political and economic processes and virtually disappear.

Both seem to be happening in Ecuador at the same time. The STAE and the Masters/Crazy Souls have made the leap from gang to formally recognized social and political youth movements, but they are also slowly being absorbed by local and federal government bodies as leaders are increasingly aligning themselves with politicians for resources. One leader put it in these terms:

Before, we were invisible. We suffered a lot of discrimination from various institutions, like the police. We were not allowed to occupy public space, let alone participate in politics. Within this new political moment, new spaces for dialogue were created where we were able to interact with political actors in influential positions.

These street groups have strengthened their ties to local governments, established working relationships with the police, aligned themselves with other cultural or youth organizations, and seen their leaders increasingly encourage members to become agents in the making of their own futures by becoming entrepreneurs or entering college to attain some form of further education. In other words, we see leaders and their messages actively oppose a lifestyle based on stereotypical gangster “focal concerns” (Miller, 1958) that promote instant gratification and an emphasis on the performance of violent feats or the themes of nihilism and hedonism that are found in much popular youth culture. A member of the STAE explained how the group’s legalization attracted new members and new supporters:

It caught a lot of young people’s attention, you could say, that the Kings were no longer a criminal organization, that they are now legalized and have clear objectives and a new purpose. You could say that legalization broke many stigmas about us and helped to attract new members to the organization.

## The Emergence of a Professional Strata

As we have seen, as part of legalization, gangs were expected to interact formally with state institutions.

The members began to look at the state differently: “I began to understand how things were done inside formal institutions and how I could help channel support for my brothers.” Naturally, those most fit for these new roles began to emerge, leading to a new stratum of professional members who served as a bridge between street politics and state politics. All groups have delegated members to serve in these roles. Some members, for example from the Masters/Crazy Souls, rose through the ranks to hold important local or municipal posts. In the case of the STAE, three members were hired by the Ministry of the Interior and one by the Ministry of External Relations. These members gave sustainability to the process, cementing the relationship between certain ministries and the legalization process while also helping to groom a professional class within the groups to help them gain access to funds and, in turn, accompany their respective groups. One such professional member put it this way: “There was a willingness to receive us and listen to what we had to say, and that’s how we strengthened and honed our skills to negotiate, transmit our ideas, and eventually influence others with our initiatives and projects. Without any doubt this has been a learning experience since 2007; since then we have acquired new skills in order to work with public institutions.”

We conducted several in-depth interviews with these professional members, and it is clear that they served important roles as stewards for a group that, after years of legalized status, needed to constantly evolve and renegotiate their relationship to changing political and ministerial dynamics. The group provided a collective space of meaning creation, but increasingly it has become a vehicle of social mobility. Those who steered the gang successfully through legalization were seen as having secured new opportunities for their members, and as time went on the street group’s new status was seen as an effective route to self-improvement. In many of the interviews, particularly with female members, but also in general, the organization was seen as a tool of self-betterment and community building, with the stigma of the gang as a space of violence replaced by a reimagining of the group coming through the ideas now presented by street reformers who have succeeded in treading a very different path out of their lower-class

origins. For the members of this stratum have broken through racial, class, and gendered boundaries and attained both a status and social position not normally associated with members of street gangs or of persons from similar social origins. Such members, therefore, bring messages of hope and possibility into the organization and demonstrate what is attainable rather than reinforce messages of futility and fatalism, which are often rife in the world views of highly marginalized young people.

One young leader commented to us about his first political conference with other youth organizations in Quito. His anecdote about representing the Latin Kings (STAE) at a national conference is very telling about how the group's image has changed, and what this has meant for its members. He recalled his first time speaking publicly:

I told them, "I represent the Latin Kings." They all stood and looked at me. It's kind of unexpected for society. For us to go from being on the streets, blamed for some of the highest rates of violence in the country, to taking part in a forum where you can speak openly and express yourself as a Latin King, and have everyone pay attention. I think that is one of the proudest aspects of the legalization process, to be able to attend important events and proudly say that you represent the Latin Kings."

He added, "It's very gratifying to be able to go and say, 'I'm a Latin King,' and not have people look at you as a murderer, an assassin, or a gangster, but rather see you as just another citizen of Ecuador who can also contribute ideas."

These professional members also served the important role of replacing the third-party groups that helped the legalization process in the beginning. In order for the transformation to be engrained and, as one FLACSO academic put it, "for them to be able to walk on their own two feet" without the help of others, it was necessary to encourage members to study and pursue a career. These members would later serve as bridges between institutions and the street

organization, providing technical help, for example, in writing grants, attending ministerial meetings, and transmitting needs and ideas between these organizations and the state. Such members articulate ideas, strategies, and long-term goals to the group and to the government alike.

As legalization has progressed, new competencies and necessities for the group emerge, and those with professional skills and positions secure the necessary influence to further establish the credibility of the street organizations not only in the eyes of the state but also in the eyes of their own members (who are proud to see how far the organization has come) and the community at large. As the priorities of these groups have changed, their success depends more and more on their professional members to help guide them and articulate their changed relationship to society.

Professional gang members who have become part of the government not only inspire members of their group that they can succeed beyond the streets, but their accompaniment also helped to formalize and legitimize the legalization process, particularly for government bureaucrats who deal with the day-to-day of gang outreach. This was of great importance in making decisions on whether to dispense funds for different projects. Many of these members were recognized for their work and professionalism as well as the unique experience they brought to their jobs, which helped to convince state agents who were doubtful of such collaborations. Some of these professional gang members were given college scholarships and, in one case, completed a Master's degree in Community Development.

## The Changing Roles of Gender

A major accomplishment in the transformation of these groups was particularly noticeable in the role of females. This was especially important for the STAE, a group that has a separate section known as the Latin Queens, who meet and organize separately from the males but come together at general regional and national meetings. Two of the major leaders of this group have a very high status within the organization

and exert a powerful influence over a range of members, both male and female. The presence of these self-organized females functions as a countervailing force to the male-dominated hierarchy that went previously unchallenged. The empowerment of females through these groups has had a pro-social influence on their development, as it tends to support a non-violence trajectory of the culture and its norms, resisting the currency of violence that often characterizes the street environment. In addition, the enhanced role of females helps to prioritize the importance of family and children within the overall subculture, which again can deepen the group's commitment to a more future-oriented and socially positive evolution. As one Latin Queen described the meaning of her membership:

For me, being a Queen is a show of strength and represents a struggle for survival. We women have often been the guides and counselors in the most difficult of situations and in the face of adversity. For me, being a Queen, after all the time I've been in the organization, not only means family, but it's my identity and it's something I've earned with sacrifice, love, and through many trials over the years. And even though we women are few in the organization, we continue to thrive. We're few, but it's not the quantity but the quality that matters inside this organization.

## Self-Understandings and Presentation of Self

In the case of the STAE, the evolution has been, in their words, the evolution from a street gang to an *agrupación juvenil urbana* ("urban youth group"). The current challenge is to further evolve into a social movement with stronger ties to other civil society actors, particularly youth movements with a political platform. Their public discourse, as we have observed repeatedly at meetings both public and private, is that they are not a gang any longer. In fact, the STAE and other groups prefer the word *agrupaciones* (simply "groups") to refer to themselves. They perceive the

term "gang" (*pandilla* in Spanish) as pejorative, facilitating stigma, labeling, and a misrepresentation of what the group and its members stand for; members of the groups have consistently corrected us when we use the word *pandilla*. As one member of STAE stated, a *pandilla* is what they were, but now, "We're a good gang, a gang with culture." Although the word *pandilla* is still sometimes used, it is only to refer to the group's beginnings. Therefore, a new understanding of the group was formed, creating a break from the past:

Just try to imagine, there were many enemies back then that could hurt you at any moment, that could kill your brother, and later you'd see them on the street and you'd have to control yourself, learn to do things differently. You couldn't keep thinking like before, so things started to change, and little by little we got used to this new lifestyle. With time, our members began to make the changes that we all expected from them. You could say that we've left the street corners and are now concentrated on building up the Nation [Latin Kings] that we all want.

These street groups have also learned to project a different image of themselves to the public, rooted in a new self-understanding. In one interview with a STAE leader, the reinvention of what it means to be a leader became clear. His discourse was extremely professional, polished, and even practiced, but not in a staged way. Rather, it was obvious that he had been stating the same thing for many years and saw himself as the living proof of the changes that have been made. After years of talking to government ministers, local politicians, police officers, university professors, and other social actors, the groups have developed a discourse of the "reformed gang," becoming confident in presenting themselves to outsiders.

In addition, they also saw positive aspects of the term "transnational," which is usually applied negatively to organizations such as these. In the case of the STAE, for example, there is a great degree of shared experiences and institutional collective memory that

is exchanged. The Latin Kings and Queens underwent profound changes in New York, Barcelona, and Genoa before 2007, and these experiences were built upon and taken into consideration when Ecuadorian members decided to emerge from their clandestine existences and enter into a formal relationship with the state. The involvement, for instance, of Antonio Fernández—the former leader of the New York Latin Kings and Queens and now a leading player in a Washington, D.C., juvenile justice reform movement called the Credible Messenger Initiative—is instructive. Fernández has visited Ecuador many times to

speaking at STAE national meetings and has consistently brought the positive lessons of the New York experience into the group, sharing his knowledge of managing both inter-group and intra-group relations with both the leadership and the general membership. This intervention has helped to broaden the perspective of the organization, moving its collective imagination from the local to the global. This reflective capacity of all the groups demonstrates an important break with the past and shows their capacity to learn from complex processes and experiences both within and across borders.





## OTHER FACTORS IN THE CONVERGENCE PROCESS

The legalization of the STAE, the Masters of the Street/Crazy Souls, and the Ñetas is not only due to shifts that happened on the street, but also to shifts that happened politically and, to a great extent, structurally, in Ecuador during the same time. The story of legalization in Ecuador is in many ways a story of the stars aligning to allow such a process to take shape. Legalization was a product of a convergence of factors, but can be understood on three main levels: politically, economically, and on the street.

### On the Street Level

The country's most violent and largest gangs were winding down the war between themselves due to a

truce in 2005 in Guayaquil brokered to a large extent between Ñetas and STAE but also including the Masters of the Street. This truce, negotiated by Coronel Alulema, quickly became enforced on a national level, affecting all major cities. The STAE and the Ñetas publicly handed in their weapons and a large degree of calm returned to the street. Leaders from the two largest and most notorious street gangs met each other in 2006 and 2007, and this opened up an avenue of communication between them. This truce also served as an important antecedent for the government when critically assessing the feasibility of working with and potentially legalizing street gangs. A successful and nationally recognized truce helped to reassure government officials that the gangs could be taken seriously. Before legalization took root as a political project, the



On the legalization of the STAE in 2007, a meeting was held at the official residence of the Ecuadorian president with members of the group.

gangs had already begun an internal awakening and set in motion changes on the street level. Their first “negotiation” with state representatives, in this case the police in Guayaquil, had left the gangs with the impression that more could be done and that entering into a fruitful dialogue with the state was possible.

The government understood that here, in Guayaquil, the murder rate had dropped. Because we, the gangs, had put an end to the war. The government saw this and said, okay, yes, they’re serious about this. They agreed to support us after that, and I think that was a really important moment—we complied with what the authorities asked of us, and they also complied with what they had promised us. For example, the police began to allow us to hold meetings in the street.

## On a Political Level

The government had begun a Citizens’ Revolution and was writing a new constitution. As part of this process, new ideas on social inclusion had begun to take hold and gangs found themselves finally part of that national debate on citizenship rights, taking the opportunity to rebrand themselves as urban cultural groups. This political “opening” allowed them to take a new direction previously not available to them. At the same time, the process helped create enough good faith to convince gang leaders that sitting down at the table with the government was not a waste of time. The successful truce in Guayaquil encouraged gang leaders, as well as helping to convince some doubtful government officials that these groups were capable of keeping their side of the bargain. The excitement of a new political moment combined with a new national discussion on the rights of citizens created a unique situation that diffused the taboo of working with street organizations. This window of opportunity was recognized by several key players, such as the president himself, leading academics at FLACSO, and the leadership of the three largest street organizations. “Going legit” was eventually seen by other gangs as

a feasible way to secure benefits for their members once it was confirmed, after several years, that the STAE had successfully transformed themselves and the state had genuinely rejected *mano dura* (hard-line or iron-fist) types of practices that were characteristic of previous governments and their anti-gang policies.

The result was that Ecuadorian street gangs went from *agrupación ilícita* (“illicit group”) to *agrupación juvenil urbana* (“urban youth group”) in a remarkably short period, wasting little time in taking advantage of this historical moment to begin changing their image. In short order, they invited journalists to cover their events, and within a few years, STAE almost disappeared from the crime section of the newspapers and began to appear in the cultural section. We should also note that new media laws that took effect in 2013 made it illegal to discriminate and defame certain people and groups and introduced the term “media lynching” into legal discourse. Various members of the groups, particularly those in leadership positions, mentioned in interviews and informal conversations that this legislation was evidence of the government’s continued commitment to the defense of vulnerable groups and a way to forestall media-inspired sensationalism of deviant groups such as themselves. They perceived such media coverage as integral to the history of moral crusades they had been subjected to, often leading to policies of repressive social and criminal justice. As one Latin Queen reflected on this treatment:

On television there used to be a horrible program called *Pasado y Confeso* [Past and Confessed]. It was really awful, just awful. It was shameful to see just how their reports used to dramatize the Latin Kings, and because of that, much of society thought we were monsters.

## On an Economic Level

Important economic improvements were made more generally, helping to foster a burgeoning middle class and decreased levels of inequality. The reduction in relative poverty took place in many neighborhoods

with long histories of a gang presence. The increasing economic opportunities that came with expanding economic and anti-poverty policies reduced the economic motives for crime. More importantly, the increased government spending contributed to the sustainability of the legalization process by funding job training programs, back-to-school programs, and infrastructure projects where gang members could hold meetings, record music, and receive trainings.

The government understood that to successfully substitute illicit livelihoods on such a scale, a major emphasis on jobs and education was needed—interventions that required personnel and significant funds. To ensure the seriousness of these state-led interventions, the state had to be willing to invest and designate funds. It was due to the government’s willingness to invest in such programs that groups like the STAE were able to enjoy such strong support for different initiatives including concerts and technical training. Indeed, approaches seen in other countries in the region, especially when it comes to gang intervention, tend not to enjoy the same level of state resources and ultimately do not produce significant results. There were many other factors that contributed to the success of legalization, such as a successful police reform, but all of these factors converged and collectively allowed for a change in attitude of gang members towards the state and government authority.

## “Defanging” the Gang

We have found the word to “defang” (to render harmless or ineffectual) a useful term when describing the process of phasing out criminality and transforming the gang as a group into a non-criminal entity. To legalize the gang is essentially to defang it: to render it non-violent but intact as a group, both structurally and culturally. To recognize the social and cultural capital of the group, respect its social structure and, in fact, to empower it, is to encourage it to stay and work together, but with different goals. Taking away precisely what gave the group its notoriety does not mean the end of the group. Their metaphorical teeth are gone, but their past still gives them street credibility and they

are still culturally very much a gang, but simply without violence or criminal activity—a concept hard for some outsiders to understand.

In other words, the need (and ability) to violently enforce their influence on the street is no longer a viable option. Their structure is kept intact, as well as the way they leverage their power as a group, but the use of violence is severely reduced if not eliminated. A gang that does not engage systematically in criminality and that is led by a critical mass of reformed leaders, who in many cases would have left were it not for legalization, has led to a change in attitude as a whole.

We frequently sat with leaders of these groups who recounted the levels of violence in the past as soldiers might retell old war stories. These were narratives far removed from their current situation and they were well aware of how far they had come. It should be noted that these groups had violent pasts, but were glad to leave that behind. Violence was no longer an essential part of their culture, especially for older leaders with memories and a heavy conscience of fallen members. On one occasion, we interviewed leaders of one group days after one of their members had been violently attacked on the street. It was the only violent incident we were made aware of during all the months of fieldwork. In the aftermath, all of the group’s leaders worked with the local police to file charges against the offender, while rejecting the option of retaliation. Belief in the rule of law, in the authority of the police, and in the expectation that justice would be served outweighed any return to old practices and kept their reputation in check. When asked if it was hard to leave behind a tradition of seeking violent solutions to street conflict and what were the obstacles for overcoming such violent street habits, one member explained:

Well, that was a huge change for all of us on the street. After beginning a pacification process, job opportunities began to appear in Quito and in Guayaquil, so not only did we have to maintain the peace with the enemy, but we had to work together too. We’d go to work and there would be Masters and Ñetas... but after working on it, continuously, we got to the point where we were stable, and you

could say that we had left the streets behind us and focused instead on the opportunities that legalization had opened up. We became dedicated to creating a better future for the Nation here in Ecuador.

## Deterrence and the Cartels

Legalized gangs serve as a bulwark to organized crime syndicates because they can no longer recruit from these groups as they did before; changing the culture and ideology of street gangs in places like Guayaquil has disrupted former recruitment patterns. Organized crime groups like to cherry pick from gangs because they are generally from the same poor backgrounds and neighborhoods where employment in an organized crime group is seen as a lucrative option, part of the local opportunity structure. Cartels are used to outsourcing a lot of the smaller and high-risk jobs to gang members, but this process has, to a certain extent, been interrupted. That is not to deny that there are other candidates available, but the potential pipeline between street group memberships and organized crime has been severed. There is now a great deal of tension and conflict between some of these groups and cartel organizations, which can be particularly seen in prison.

This is one of the most important aspects of the Ecuadorian approach: *mano dura* for cartels but inclusion towards gangs. The government actively and consciously strove to avoid gangs working for cartels (especially due to the proximity of Peru and Colombia, both major drug-trafficking hubs), hence they aggressively pursued organized crime networks

while applying policies of social inclusion to street gangs, which they correctly identified as fundamentally different organizations with goals that were more social and cultural than entrepreneurial. Consequently, legalization provided a way of leaving such groups not only defanged but less likely to be brought into the orbit of organized crime groups as well. As gangs enjoyed increasing government recognition, this served as a more positive alternative to that of joining organized crime. Legalized gangs, therefore, provided young people with “street cred” without the risk of going to prison. In fact, the STAE leaders forbade their members from having contacts with drug-trafficking organizations, seeing them as a major threat to their legitimacy and control but also as significant threats to the communities where they resided. This process of rejecting organized crime increased the legitimacy of the gang leaders, both in the neighborhood and with the government, which helped prevent the group reverting to old habits, as no leader wanted to risk losing their hard-earned relationship with a government that appeared to have the upper hand against drug traffickers. Leaders of these groups paved the way for new job opportunities, which one member described as follows:

Our leaders told us that we were no longer allowed to go to war (...). After that, you know, the government began to give us job opportunities. So, if we began to act violently again, the government would take away what they had already begun to give us, so what we did was to reciprocate the government’s help [to ensure the relationship continued].

## GOING FORWARD

### New Issues

In a number of interviews, gang members lament that they still face threats and competition from mafias and that living off their reputation from pre-legalization days, as well as their government recognition, is not enough to thwart mafia efforts to infiltrate and encroach on their neighborhoods. It is noteworthy that the ranks of these legalized gangs are swelling within the Ecuadorian prison system as they alone, within a subterranean world of inmate subcultures, provide an alternative to well-funded organized crime groups as well as offer protection against their potential domination and abuse. While legalized gangs serve as a desirable exit for troubled youth stuck in a broken system, they require more support from the state. Members spoke of the irony that in the prisons the memberships of the legalized groups were increasing, while on the outside the legalization process has not offered much to compete with mafias that are flush with cash. Some gang members argued that to continue to be a positive example on the street they need more access to state resources to show the concrete benefits of legalization. Hence their argument that only by being more explicitly political and joining an alliance of other urban social movements can they continue to exist, attract resources, be relevant, and serve as a bulwark against the spread of organized criminal groups.

### New Coalitions

We attended several meetings between gang leaders who spoke about the legalization process and its legacy

as well as the future of that process. Many actively expressed doubts about the future viability of legalization were a new government to come in which was not favorable or sympathetic to continue the current rejection of *mano dura* policies. All gang leaders expressed that they feared a return to *mano dura* if the current political establishment were rejected by the electorate. They all agreed that a new phase in legalization would have to take place in the coming years to make sure it survived any government, regardless of ideology. Legalization occurred under the government of Rafael Correa, in large part due to his personal approval, but gang members regularly expressed doubts about whether this process could withstand a different government. Their current goal is to find ways to institutionalize the legalization process and give it a sustainability and legitimacy that would be impervious to political shifts. This is an important goal and many members have different ideas about how this can be achieved. One idea that has increasingly gained traction is to create a coalition formed by the original and largest street gangs that legalized in 2007: the STAE, the Ñetas, and the Masters of the Street, with other social movements and mobilized youth movements. Together they can help to influence policy and political approaches to youth groups, as well as secure a space politically for former gangs to continue serving as a bridge from the street to the Asamblea [Legislative Assembly]. At one of these meetings, a leader explained it in the following way: “Before legalization, our political vision focused strictly on gaining formal recognition, but now the political vision is a lot wider, encompassing new problems, national issues that not only affect members of our street groups but affect all youth in our country.”



## CONCLUSIONS: GANG LEGALIZATION AND THE DECREASE IN VIOLENCE

Legalization of the STAE in 2007 was certainly a watershed moment in security policy, but this transformation from notorious street gang to youth organization was also largely possible because their identity was not rooted solely in criminal activity. Gangs are inherently social. They are collective bodies of meaning creation, but committing crime is not their main activity. Replacing criminality with something else, or simply leaving it behind, is commonly mistaken to be seen as “impossible.” For many, legalization was the possibility to openly embrace their identity as a subculture. Emerging from a clandestine organization and being formally recognized meant most importantly that they could show their colors and their beads and hold meetings in public spaces.

By forgoing the electorally popular idea that all gang members deserve their comeuppance, the state instead opted for a long-term strategy of crime reduction that inevitably meant direct engagement. The heavy-handed approach was shelved for a more holistic one, which entailed job creation and education outreach as well as cultural activities and formal recognition of gangs as cultural street organizations. The positive results are undeniable. When gangs are used as political fodder and heavily repressed, their willingness to cooperate and possibly change course is severely undermined. Yet when the state genuinely reaches out, and this effort is backed up with real political will and resources, the gangs respond positively, at least in the case of Ecuador. The work originally done with the STAE served as a powerful example for other street organizations that wanted to follow their lead.

One of the reasons the process was sustainable (and this cannot be understated) is that a whole generation of members grew up and matured within the legalization process. Legalization has become the default setting for gang leaders: how to navigate ministries, apply for funds, and build alliances with other gangs and the police are all skills a gang leader in Ecuador must have in order to thrive. After 10 years, this reform process has remained stable, which is an achievement in itself, but it lacks evolution. In other words, it has been an undeniable success, as can be seen by our interviews and by the reduction in violence, but more needs to be done to work with these groups, especially in the area of job creation. Another reason legalization must be further formalized within institutions is that these policies need to work independently of the political parties in power.

It is one thing to criticize *mano dura* policies as ineffective but quite another to propose a viable alternative that works. Legalization helped reduce violence and criminality drastically while providing a space, both culturally and legally, to transform the social capital of the gang—mainly their cohesiveness and hierarchy—into effective vehicles of behavioral change, which is demonstrated not only in their successful projects with the government but also in the decline in crime rates. Based on our interviews, all gang members have agreed that the legalization process helped to significantly reduce street violence and improve the quality of life and security in their communities. Inter-gang violence was greatly reduced, homicide levels dropped, and previously antagonistic gangs began

to cooperate with each other. Reduced threats from previously warring gangs, effective relationships with government ministries, and new practices of funding and organization helped to gradually change the way gangs operated and interacted with their communities. The process has had its ups and downs, but generally a certain level of continuity has allowed these groups to continue their forward trajectory. They all agree that legalization has been a huge success and the desire to deepen the transformation is apparent in our interviews across gangs and rank.

The conditions that led to the successful legalization of three of Ecuador's largest street gangs is not easy to replicate, as many factors came together in the right moment, but there are indeed many lessons to take away. Laying bare the political, economic, and street conditions for legalization helps to show that legalization is not impossible in other contexts. We believe legalization could successfully be carried out in several other countries. But one must be cautious about universalizing this process, as it is based on a particular historical moment and an increased agency of street gangs while the agency of other groups was, perhaps, reduced during the same period.

We must remember that the legalization policy was enacted and conceptualized as part of the political discourse of the Citizens' Revolution with the modernization of the country as well as the new role of the state used as tools to proactively improve and complement security goals. Ecuador was one of the few governments in the region that took urban violence seriously. All ministries were instructed to invest resources and coordinate efforts to make cities safer. In the case of gang legalization, all ministries worked together, from the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion to the Ministries of Justice and the Interior, to help ensure gangs underwent successful transformations. Alternating in importance, the Ministry of Culture and the police played important roles throughout the last 10 years, summed up in the comments of the

Minister of the Interior on the signing of a peace accord between all the groups in this study in Guayaquil:

Never again will you be excluded from the small and large decisions that we take. We want to go forward together with you, with your organizations. We will make history with this great effort, and [bridge] the disconnect from centers of power in territories where there used to be violence and now will be sites of true social conversion.

What made these efforts unique was the larger context of national transformation in which they took place. The political process opened up a new way of meaning creation for youth gangs. In many of the interviews, members described the early years of the Correa government as providing a new political narrative where their own transformation had traction. They believed they would be accepted and taken seriously and that they would be given a real chance to change their ways. They believed that the political will was finally there to permit them short- and long-term opportunities to bring themselves out of the margins and claim their place as full-fledged citizens, as active players in the making of a more democratic and humanistic society. In the eyes of many group members, they fulfilled their half of the bargain and helped to bring violence down to new historically low levels. In a world of increasing urbanization and youth marginalization, where the default approach to the phenomenon of street gangs is ever more measures of repression and coercive social control, the Ecuadorian experience is a reminder that there are alternatives. A major lesson of the 10-year experience of gang legalization is that deviance amplification can be avoided, but only if we take seriously the hopes and agency of youth who, as the sociologist Robert Merton long ago warned, will build innovative subcultures if their dreams are denied or deferred (Merton, 1938).



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Best Practices of the State

Documenting the legalization of the STAE and their relationship with the state during the last 10 years provides best practices data showing how to steer gangs in new, pro-social directions. A number of policy-related lessons can be learned such as the following:

- Legalizing the gang and creating a corporation made a formal relationship with the state and other institutions socially more functional, increasing mutual respect and legitimacy.
- Formalizing avenues of communication and cooperation between the gangs and the state naturally encouraged gang members to desist from criminal behavior and aided the group in maintaining a legal status and social reputation.
- As the state provided access to jobs and job-training projects and funds for cultural activities to the reformed group, the state's legitimacy increased, and heightened trust was established in the poorest communities.
- Extending citizenship rights to gangs contributes to widening social control and more state legitimacy in societal areas where state legitimacy is increasingly challenged.

## Policy Actions

- State agencies need to develop and sustain formal and informal relations with these groups, engaging both the leaders and the rank and file, demonstrating in practice their

non-discriminatory approaches to the citizenry and both fairness and accountability in law enforcement.

- State agencies should collaborate and cooperate with these groups on joint cultural activities and learn from the successful youth and community-mobilizing experiences of “Paz Urbana” (see footnote 6 on page 20) and “El Tren” (a graffiti competition organized by the Ministry of Culture in Ecuador’s most marginalized communities) in 2016. Such collaborations provide avenues for shared work, mutual trust, and joint decision making.
- State agencies should invest where possible in job opportunities, education, and job training for members of street groups and build on the successes of Quito’s Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, which has provided opportunities to over 100 street group members in the culinary arts, graphic design, and nursing.
- State agencies should grant youth in these groups opportunities to exercise their citizenship rights and engagement in neighborhood security organizations such as “community assemblies” that grant youth some responsibilities but also make them accountable.
- Attention should be given to street members’ schooling experiences to build greater ties between youth and the school as a community institution involving greater communication between teachers, administrators, parents, and at-risk students.

## Community Policing

Lessons learned from the improved relationship between community police officers and the gangs can be used to improve police officer training. We have identified neighborhoods where both police officers and different gangs have contributed to the reduction in tension and levels of crime. By analyzing these experiences, officer training can be improved and future projects can be developed which build on concrete evidence of past success. A better understanding of youth gangs bolsters the role of police officers as local mediators and as brokers of peace among youth.

### Policy Actions

- A thorough analysis is required of the relationship between the police and these groups and knowledge learned should be incorporated into police training.
- In interviews, youth still complained of police harassment for marijuana possession and there was a general lack of clarity on what the state's drug policy entailed. The police and the criminal justice system need to improve in their provision of state laws in this area, working in tandem with state policies on decriminalization.
- Police training should include more criminology (both theoretical and empirical), which at present barely exists.
- A system of local rumor control could be incorporated into neighborhood practices and relations between police and street groups. Many inter-group conflicts are based on unfounded threats, misinformation, and unresolved past disputes.
- To aid in dispute resolution, efforts should be made to help street groups form coalitions (such as "EI BUNK"), which could involve trusted community police mediators and facilitators.

## Containment and Threat/Risk Assessment

By deepening the state's knowledge and experience with street gangs, the state, and particularly the police, are able to assess real threats before they turn into real issues. The policy repercussions for security threat assessment are twofold: (i) it avoids the state's knee-jerk reaction to treating gangs as folk devils and scapegoats for failings in citizen security, while avoiding the greater perils of deviancy amplification that accompany *mano dura*-style policies; and (ii) it allows for the state to objectively assess and contain gangs and inter-group conflict while containing the threat of gangs joining or collaborating with organized crime. The Ecuadorian experience with gangs is the most important and viable alternative to *mano dura* that we have seen in the region. This experience has the direct policy implication of furthering a strategy of gang containment instead of deepening inter-gang conflict.

### Policy Actions

- Increased attention should be given to distinguishing between the culture and practices of the street groups and the activities of organized-crime groups that may be linked to the cartels.
- State agencies should engage in more open public analysis of their street gang policies and the lessons they have drawn from their experiences.
- State agencies should increase their commitment to publicly analyze their crime data.
- The Ecuadorian government might take the initiative to establish a criminological institute to better understand and utilize its multiple databases and how they relate to the control of crime and population management.
- A conference should be organized to further analyze the Ecuadorian experience in crime control and bring into focus the comparative experience of neighboring countries.

## Recuperation of Public Space

By reaching out to urban subcultures such as graffiti artists and hip-hop groups through the promotion of concerts and other activities, the state helps to reduce the level of social stigmatization of youth culture, which in turn helps to improve intergenerational community ties and guards against youth marginalization. Reducing the cultural marginalization of youth in this way also reduces the appeal of street gangs and makes gangs want a more formal, reciprocal relationship with local municipalities.

## *Policy Actions*

- State agencies should search for ways to better utilize the knowledge and perspectives of street groups regarding the extension of public space.
- Extending public space could be enhanced with more knowledge coming from the fields of environmental psychology, social geography, and urban sociology, disciplines that at present play little role in the discussion of public space policies.
- To extend public space, the possibilities of public/private relationships could be better explored in full consultation with neighborhood residents most affected.



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