

GANG AND ORGANIZED CRIME RECRUITMENT & USE OF MINORS

Historically, illegal armed groups (IAGs) in Colombia have made a regular practice of recruiting and using minors. Given the prevalence of criminal gangs and bacrim (criminal gangs that emerged out of the United Self-Defense Forces demobilization in 2006), past precedent suggests that, unfortunately, youth recruitment will likely persist in some form in the Colombian context, even after current peace negotiations conclude in Havana. Children have been tasked with roles such as look-outs, gathering intelligence, transportation, and various forms of labor; they have also been used as key protagonists to carry out torture, assassinations, and to transport and plant explosives. Within the framework of the armed conflict, they have also been sexually abused, trafficked, and prostituted.

This Spotlight reviews both the recruitment and use of minors in the Colombian and international contexts. In the Colombian case, children who are recruited by illegal armed groups tend to come from rural areas and become permanently involved with the group, thus breaking social and familial ties. Recruited children become part of a closed military regiment, have significant military training, may handle large weaponry, and may have direct combat experience. Although recruited children may have greater participation in registry

and control activities, they have a complete loss of the exercise of their rights, individuality, and agency. On the other hand, children who are used by illegal armed groups tend to come from urban areas and are only involved with groups on a part-time basis, thus potentially maintaining their social and familial ties. Used children are part of an open regiment, have less military training, may or may not manage firearms, and have only indirect involvement with combat, if any. Children used by illegal armed groups have lesser participation in registry and control activities, and experience a partial loss of the exercise of their rights, individuality, and agency.¹ While these are not hard and fast distinctions, do offer a useful frame of reference.

Following is an analysis of five international case studies of criminal gangs and organized crime syndicates. Among other commonalities, the included groups all use minors in their day-to-day operations and/or revenue-generating strategies. While street gangs, organized criminals, rebel insurgents, and extremist groups might differ in their structure, size, goals, and relationships with their contexts, they all must maintain and grow their membership: children are an important aspect of these efforts.

FEATURED GANGS AND CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS

MARA SALVATRUCHA (MSI3)

Founded in Los Angeles in the 1980s, US immigration policies and the El Salvadorian Civil War helped to give rise to one of the largest and most ruthless gangs in the world. They have a robust transnational network throughout the Northern Triangle, Mexico, and Canada, and generate revenue primarily through drug and human trafficking. MSI3 also operate on a barrio-level cell model, recruiting minors from neighborhoods where there is an existing gang presence; recruitment can begin around 8-10 years of age.

ROMANIAN MAFIA

The Romanian Mafia, among other activities, targets marginalized families for loan sharking and, when they are unable to repay the loan and interest, the families are forced to hand over their children for labor purposes with the mafia. Common uses include trafficking, organized begging, and sale to other gangs in the European Union. When handed over along with their parents (typically mothers), use can begin in infancy (e.g., begging in other major cities in the European Union).

LOS ZETAS

The Gulf Cartel began recruiting Mexican Special Forces in 1999; eventually Los Zetas broke away to form their own criminal organization. The organization deployed a specific strategy targeting American-born children of Mexican descent to train them as assassins in Mexico and release them on the US side of the border to conduct operations for the organization. Recruitment and use of minors typically begins around 10 years of age.

CAPE FLATS GANGS

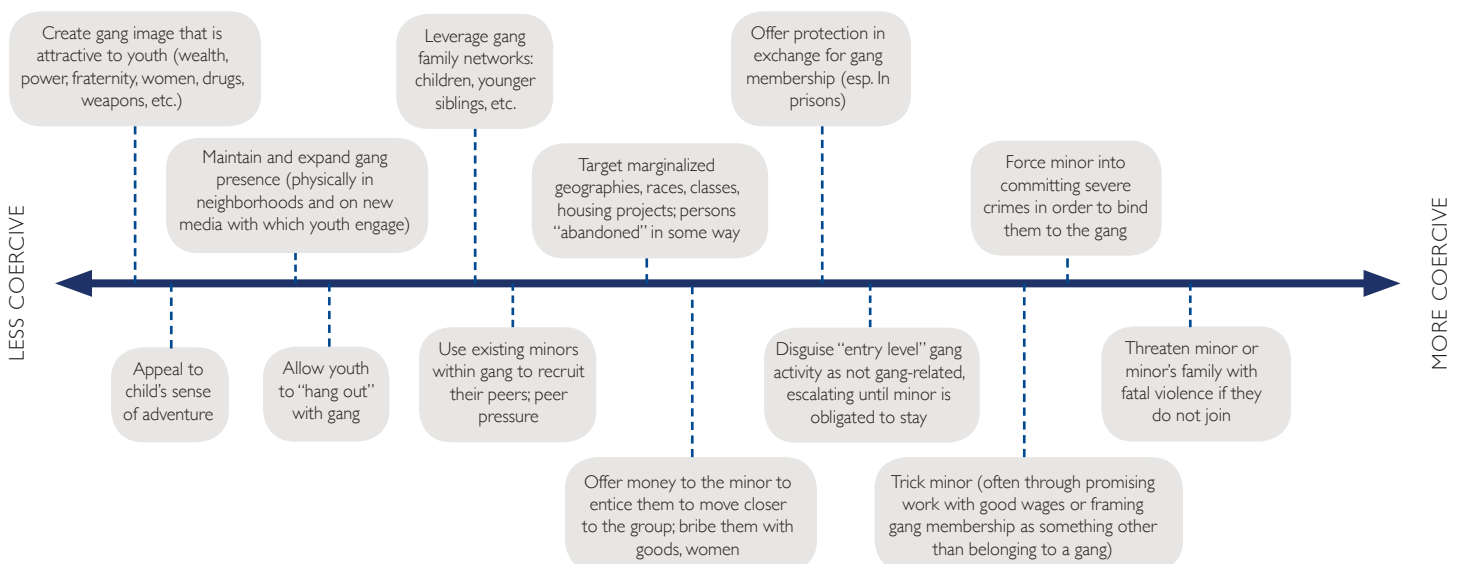
With origins in apartheid policies, West Cape, South Africa has decades-old entrenched gang structures. Discriminatory apartheid practices led to geographic segregation along racial and economic lines and, through a variety of related dynamics, effectively destroyed traditional family networks of young persons. Twelve recognized street gangs and three notorious prison gangs operate in the Western Cape. Gangs largely participate in the drug economy and in maintaining their turf. Recruitment often begins at 12 years old.

MALAYSIAN NUMBERS GANGS

Contemporary Malaysian "Numbers Gangs" have their origins in the Chinese Triads. In the 1980s, the Chinese Triads began to move into legitimate businesses and the Numbers Gangs evolved out of this shift. Some of these gangs have all-female branches who recruit school girls to fill the ranks. Typical revenue generating activities include drug manufacturing, prostitution, loan sharking, extortion, and smuggling. Recruitment tends to start at 13 years old.

RECRUITMENT TACTICS

Gangs and organized crime syndicates deploy a wide range of tactics targeting minors, with some more coercive in nature than others.



Source: IOM analysis based on various studies

¹ <http://www.derechoshumanos.gov.co/observatorio/publicaciones/Documents/150831-definir-utilizacion-tarea-difcil-web.pdf>

SHARED QUALITIES OF RECRUITMENT & USE PROCESSES AND TACTICS

Although each context and group has its own dynamics, certain overarching tendencies mark recruitment and use of minors in the global cases examined for this Spotlight. Recruitment tactics and processes are...

...GENDERED

- Girls may be recruited to serve as “girlfriends” for existing members; sexual exploitation common (MS13, Romanian Mafia).
- Initiation may require gang rape (MS13).
- “Big sisters” in female gang units recruit girls to commit crimes and charge peers with gang protection fees (Malaysian Numbers Gangs).
- Girls may be used to recruit boys and create a sense of obligation to the gang.

...STRATEGIC

- More lenient or even lack of prosecution of minors in many countries makes them attractive to groups for committing the most severe crimes.
- Children are easier to indoctrinate: less likely to confess due to fear, more likely to return to group after incarceration.
- Those incarcerated are useful for recruiting and expanding gang presence in jails.
- Children are more likely to escape detection of authorities.

...RELATIONSHIP-BASED

- Many new recruits join gangs for friendships and recreational purposes (MS13).
- Typically join via an older male figure, often a family member (Cape Flats Gangs, Romanian Mafia).
- Offer a sense of solidarity, protection, and an alternative “family” to entice young persons.

...HETEROGENEOUS & ADAPTIVE

- Groups deploy a variety of tactics within a single context to maximize recruitment numbers.
- Leaders will alter tactics in order to account for contextual changes (Los Zetas).
- Recruitment of minors may spike as a result of policies intended to limit the practice (Cape Flats Gangs, MS13).

THE USES AND ABUSES OF MINORS BY GANGS AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Two analytic distinctions provide a useful starting point for thinking about the role of minors in gangs and organized crime syndicates. The first is whether or not the children form part of the operational membership of the groups (e.g., gang members) or part of the product portfolio (e.g., child prostitute). A second consideration is whether or not the minors are the explicit target of recruitment

activities (e.g., recruited from schools) or end up in the gang or syndicate as a result of other forms of recruitment intended to grow the adult ranks (e.g., child accompanies recruited/trafficked parent). Following, are the mechanisms by which many of these organizations recruit minors, as well as the types of activities minors engage in once they are in the groups.

MECHANISMS FOR RECRUITMENT AND USE OF MINORS

- ▶ **By geography:** schools, neighborhoods, shelters.
- ▶ **By social ties:** peer groups and friendships, older family members, belonging to targeted marginalized groups (e.g., immigrant settlements).
- ▶ **By activity:** increasing new media presence, invite to parties and social gatherings.
- ▶ **By purchase/sale/exchange:** sold and traded between gangs for participation in organized criminal activity and/or trafficking.

ACTIVITIES FOR WHICH MINORS ARE USED

- ▶ **Revenue generation (as group operative):** car theft, burglaries, robbery, begging gangs, shoplifting, mugging, drug mules, sales of drugs and weapons.
- ▶ **Revenue generation (as trafficked person):** sexual exploitation, torture, forced labor.
- ▶ **Operational support:** lookouts, surveillance, guards for shipments, collections, community service tasks.
- ▶ **Direct protagonists:** extortion, assassinations, commit or receive extreme violence.

REMAINING CONCERNS

Some statistics on the recruitment and use in Colombia are promising. For example, over the last ten years, reported cases of minor use by illegal armed groups in Colombia have continually declined year over year: in 2005 there were 590 reported cases (7.4% of all total reported cases in the Victims Unit databases since 1985), while in 2010 there were 241 (3.0%), and in 2015 only 40 (0.5%).² At the same time, after a peak of 775 minors released from illegal armed groups in 2003, the volume of children coming out of these groups and entering ICBF services has also declined over the same time period: in 2005, 526 exited (8.7% of the total number of children who have exited armed groups and entered ICBF since 1998), in 2010 there were 338 (5.6%), and in 2015 there were 229 (3.8%).³

Nonetheless, other sources suggest the scope of the problem remains substantial. In 2010, UNICEF estimated that between 10,000 and 13,000 children in Colombia were currently participating in armed groups.⁴

Another study funded by the Center for Historic Memory in 2012 suggested 18,000 minors belonged to these groups and at least 100,000 more were linked in some way to the illegal economies controlled by them.⁵ Furthermore, some populations groups are more vulnerable to recruitment and use tactics: as of 2012, an indigenous minor was 674 times more likely to be recruited than a non-indigenous minor. Given that these underage targets occupy earlier stages of human development, they are especially vulnerable to the harmful psychological and physical consequences of life in these groups.

² <http://cifras.unidadvictimas.gov.co/Home/Victimizaciones>

³ <http://www.icbf.gov.co/portal/page/portal/Observatorio1/datos/tablero1>

⁴ <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/186712.pdf>

⁵ http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informe_comoCorderosEntreLobos.pdf