



Guatemala Human Rights Commission / USA

Fact Sheet

Gangs in Guatemala

Generally believed to have first been organized among Central American immigrants in Los Angeles, gangs were exported to Central America as gang members returned to their countries of origin after the armed conflicts of the 1980s ended, or as they were deported by US immigration officials. Today, gangs, especially *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18*, have found fertile ground among poor, urban youth in Guatemala, and have prospered due, in part, to the lack of employment and educational opportunities, as well as an ineffective police force and justice system.

Why Guatemala?

- ◆ The armed conflict and a lack of jobs in rural areas have driven thousands of Guatemalans into the urban areas. In the cities, youths encounter few opportunities for employment and education. In addition, the state is largely absent and provides few, if any, social services.
- ◆ 73% of the population in Guatemala is under 30 years of age; 30% of the population is between 14 and 30. On average, gang members are initiated between 14 and 15 years of age. A poll conducted by the Salvadoran University Institute for Public Opinion found that the average age of imprisoned male gang members was 23. For women, who represent less than 5% of jailed gang members, the average age was 21.

SOURCES:

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WOLA. *Gangs in Guatemala: a resource guide*. May 2008.
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Founded in 1982, the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA (GHRC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, humanitarian organization that monitors, documents, and reports on the human rights situation in Guatemala, advocates for survivors of human rights abuses in Guatemala, and works toward positive, systemic change.

Key Facts on Youth Gangs in Guatemala:

- ◆ There are an estimated 8,000-14,000 gang members in Guatemala. Additionally, the National Civil Police estimate that there are 30,000 sympathizers.
- ◆ The two largest gangs in Guatemala are *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS- 13) and the *Barrio 18* (18th Street gang). Together their members make up 95% of the total number of gang members in the country. The remaining 5% belong to "copycat" gangs.
- ◆ **18th Street Gang:** An estimated 15% of all gang members in Guatemala belong to the 18th Street Gang. The 18th Street Gang was originally organized in Los Angeles in the 1960s.
- ◆ **Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13):** An estimated 80% of gang members in Guatemala belong to MS-13. MS-13 was founded by Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles in the 1980s who organized to protect themselves from the 18th Street and other gangs that had already been formed.
- ◆ The National Police report that Zones 6, 7, 12, 18, and 21 in Guatemala City, and Villa Nueva, Mixco, and Amatitlan (located in the periphery of the capital) are the areas most affected by gangs and gang violence.
- ◆ Both gangs are made up of *clikas*, or cliques. Each *clika* has a leader who is in contact with other *clikas*, but there is much debate about whether there is one leader for the gang as a whole, either on a national or international level.
- ◆ Gang members are involved in robbery, extortion, drug dealing, human trafficking, and turf wars with rival gangs. Recently, gang members have also hired themselves out as "hitmen" to Mexican cartels.
- ◆ 166 bus drivers and their assistants were killed as of October 15, 2009, the majority by gang members, for not paying extortion costs. In 2008, 229 bus drivers, assistants, and taxi drivers were murdered.
- ◆ Due to Mexico's war on its own drug cartels, many Mexican gangs have crossed into Guatemala in search of safer grounds.



Villa Nueva: Crime Prevention Laboratory



Villa Nueva has the third largest population (of municipalities) in Guatemala; City Hall estimated in 2009 that there were one million inhabitants. 70% of the inhabitants are under 30.

The US government has funded a series of crime prevention programs since 2002. The three most significant are: the Consortium for Crime Prevention (APREDE), Local Crime Prevention Projects, and the Model Police Station and "Tell it to Waldemar."

APREDE conducted roundtables with gang members, civil society and State authorities, organized discussions at schools, created local crime prevention plans, and worked at generating positive juvenile leadership.

The program fell apart in 2004 amid accusations that the police were bribing gang members and selling weapons, drugs, and protection to them.

In 2004, Local Crime Prevention Projects began. The initial Projects included improved street lighting, surveillance and police patrols in high risk areas, facilitating citizen complaints, meeting with gang leaders to ease their reinsertion into society, and educational and cultural programs for at risk youth. Later projects were more focused on one crime, pedestrian robbery. USAID stopped funding the projects in 2007.

Finally, in 2004 American and Guatemalan diplomats decided to create a pilot crime prevention program in Villa Nueva, which would then be put in place in other parts of the country. The Model Police Station and "Tell it to Waldemar" are the key elements of this pilot program.

The Model Police Station, organized by the US Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Section, seeks to improve prosecution of extortion and family violence cases (the crimes identified by residents as causing the most violent deaths).

They seek to accomplish this by: creating a corruption free police force, creating a special investigations team, creating a permanent crime information system, and making patrols more effective—especially focusing attention on gang targeted school areas.

The final aspect of the plan included the creation of an anonymous system for crime reporting without fear of retaliation (one of the main reasons for underreporting). To this end, the "Tell it to Waldemar" hotline was established. The hotline was extended to the national level in 2008.

Villa Nueva:

2004 vs. 2009

2004: 740 police officers assigned to Villa Nueva. Each had his own firearm, but had to purchase his own ammunition.

143 vehicles assigned to Villa Nueva, but 67% were out of circulation.

The district prosecutor's had a team of 11 people.

799 crimes were registered; 141 were homicides (3% of the national total).

2009: 537 police agents assigned to Villa Nueva. They no longer have to buy their own ammunition.

78 vehicles assigned to Villa Nueva.

The district prosecutor's had a team of 80 people.

From 2006 to 2008, there were a total of 681 homicides (3.79% of the national total).

More criminal complaints are received, indicating a higher level of violence.

