



GANGS Project Policy Brief

A BETTER WAY TO TACKLE GANGS

This brief presents policy suggestions derived from global research on gangs, gangsters, and ganglands, and argues for the need to move away from repression towards more a holistic approach that sees gangs as relational phenomena embedded within local social contexts.





INTRODUCTION

“Gangs, Gangsters, and Ganglands: Towards a Global Comparative Ethnography” (GANGS) is a research project funded by a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced grant[1], that ran between January 2019 and June 2024. Gangs are a global phenomenon, found in almost every society, and are consequently revealing “bellwether” institutions. At the same time, while there have been many insightful studies of gangs, the majority have focused on a single group or location, and as a result, we still lack a proper sense of what kinds of gang dynamics might be general, and which ones are specific to particular times and places. Adopting a tripartite focus on “Gangs”, “Gangsters”, and “Ganglands”, to explore the interplay between group, individual, and contextual factors, the GANGS project carried out primary research in 5 different locations across the Global North and South, as well as collecting the life histories of 31 individual gang members from 23 different countries. The aim was to develop a comparative perspective on why gangs emerge, how they evolve over time, whether they are associated with particular urban configurations, what they do to urban spaces, how and why individuals join gangs, and what impact this has on their long-term futures.

METHODS

The GANGS project is built around three primary case studies, Managua in Nicaragua, Cape Town in South Africa, and Marseille in France, with two secondary case studies in Naples, Italy and Algeciras, Spain. A core team of 6 researchers carried out a total of 59 months of qualitative research in these five cities, both individually and collaboratively, in 2021-23. A further 40 researchers also collected the individual life histories of 31 gang members with whom they had a prior relationship in 23 countries around the world. Research adopted a “disjunctive” comparative approach[2], the aim of which was not to measure the extent to which phenomena in different contexts might be similar or different, but rather to set different instances alongside each other to see what might come out from an examination of their similarities and differences. The logic of this approach was to “ask questions from elsewhere” in different contexts, in order to stimulate doubts and open up new avenues for investigation. The ambition of the research was thus to raise conceptual questions, and generate insights that lent themselves to innovative theorization and practice.

FINDINGS

Gangs are highly variable social phenomena that exist on a wide-ranging institutional spectrum and take many forms. A cross-cutting insight of GANGS project research, however, is that representations and analyses of gangs commonly tend to disconnect them from their wider social environment. They are portrayed as disembedded and autonomous organisations, which legitimises repressive interventions by state and non-state actors, as these are seen to affect only the gangs that are their targets and not the communities within which the gangs emerge and operate. Our research however demonstrates how **gangs are fundamentally embedded within, and shaped by, broader social, economic and political processes**, both intrinsically and in relation to the consequences of their violence, and need to be understood as such.

A key example of this is the **frequent importance of intimate social relations for the organisation of gang activities**, whether concerning recruitment, the selling of drugs, or controlling local communities, for example[3]. The latter, in particular, can occur through forms of individual intimacy, due to gang members being related to particular people or groups within their local community, as well as broader forms of cultural intimacy, notably the existence of collective norms and expectations shared by gang members and non-gang members, as the research in Naples, Managua, Cape Town, and Marseille highlighted.

FINDINGS

The research in the latter three contexts also brought to light how the **organisational evolution of gangs and the nature of their violence frequently changes as a result of both endogenous and exogenous factors**. Research in Managua and Cape Town showed how exogenous factors – such as the introduction of drugs, other violent actors, repressive policing, or the local emergence of new territories and markets – often lead to cycles and patterns of violence that are more intense and predatory than those resulting from endogenous institutional transformations – such as gang demographic overflow or inter-generational turnover – which often consolidate gang behaviour aiming to control violence and protect local communities.

The way that certain urban areas become labelled as “ganglands” due to the presence of gangs obscures the fact that those living in such areas often also suffer non-criminal forms of brutality, including structural, infrastructural, environmental, or bureaucratic violence, as was evident across all the contexts studied by the GANGS project. This prevents an understanding of **the fundamentally systemic nature of urban violence**, and the way that different forms of violence interrelate and feed off each other. Focusing on one form of violence to the detriment of others therefore risks both underestimating and misinterpreting local dynamics of social suffering.

Research in Marseille, Naples, and Cape Town also emphasized how repressive policing in ganglands **leads to local inhabitants becoming caught between the police and gangs**, as arbitrary police interventions and demands for information lead to a climate of constant insecurity, which in turns leads to gangs seeking to strengthen their domination over the local community through heightened surveillance and territorial control, and local inhabitants withdrawing from public space.

Particular discursive constructions of urban areas as “ganglands” downplay local histories, identities, and attachments, which not only facilitates generically repressive policing initiatives, but also the implementation of *tabula rasa* urban development initiatives that can have highly iniquitous local outcomes. Such initiatives are often counter-productive in relation to tackling crime, and when executed in an opaque and non-transparent manner, create significant uncertainty, mistrust, and tensions among local communities, both within them and vis-à-vis the authorities, as the research in Algeciras, Marseille, and Naples demonstrated.

The gangster life histories collected for the GANGS project all showcase **the non-deterministic nature of individual trajectories and generally finite nature of gang membership**. Recruitment into, membership of, and exit from the gang is variably conditioned by both idiosyncratic and contextual factors that are extremely contingent and situational. Mass incarceration, long-term sentencing, and the rise of prison gangs in South Africa and El Salvador mean that incarcerated individuals often have to (re)join a gang in order to survive in prison, for example, while the absence of these factors in Nicaragua and France means that imprisonment often leads to individuals leaving the gang.



At the same time, **particular situational dynamics can also lead to individuals slipping back into criminal habits after leaving the gang**. Nicaragua’s authoritarian government uses early prison release as leverage to recruit former gang members into paramilitary forces to repress political dissent. In Marseille, many youths stay involved in the local gang over the long term after experiencing a difficult transition from primary to secondary school, largely due to the latter lacking the resources the former receive from French state subsidy programmes.

Conversely, research in the UK, the US, Sierra Leone, and Russia, highlighted how sustained involvement in business and employment often led to individuals leaving gangs. Research in the Netherlands, the US, China (Hong Kong), and Bangladesh showed **how gangster experiences were directly related to sustainable post-gang opportunities**, as former gang members in these contexts become social workers focused on preventing youth violence, a “Gang Ministry” pastor for former gang members, or a human rights activist.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

On the basis of the above findings, the GANGS project has formulated four key policy suggestions. These all speak to reformulating existing forms of intervention in relation to gangs, gangsters, and ganglands away from repressive approaches, while at the same time recognizing that states will continue to seek to tackle gangs, and that gangs will not disappear



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Changing the focus from repression to a relational approach

The social embeddedness of gangs, and the systematicity of violence in ganglands, makes it clear that there is a need to change the focus of gang interventions from repression to more relational approaches that holistically support local families and communities. This means recognizing the key importance of social workers, and the work they carry out to mitigate the impact of non-criminal forms of structural, environmental, bureaucratic, and psychological violence on families and communities, as well as promoting collaboration between them and the Police to jointly develop non-repressive means of reducing the impact of both gang- and non-gang-related risk factors. The need for this was particularly evident in Marseille, where the bifurcated nature of the French state meant that social and security policies were only coordinated at a local level in an informal and inefficient manner[4], in stark contrast to the more effective institutionalised joined up thinking that exists in Denmark, for example[5].

2. Working with families and local communities

Gangs and gang members are not easy to access, but their social embeddedness means that a potential channel through which to reach them is by creating connections with families and local communities, who are in effect on the front lines of gang violence, and also often the vectors through which its consequences can spread, including the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Families and communities can however often feel caught between gangs and a repressive state. Pressures and obligations to report both on gangs or state surveillance often put families of gang members – as well as local communities more generally – in a difficult position, and it is important to forge connections in a non-coercive manner, and not to neglect doing so indirectly.

3. Promoting more local management of public urban space

Urban areas denoted as “ganglands” face significant – and contradictory – pressures in relation to the management of their public space, whether from gangs, the Police, or big urban development and infrastructural projects. Local inhabitants end up being caught between these different actors, and often seek to protect themselves by withdrawing from public space. Local inhabitants need to be made more central in decision-making processes about the management and organisation of the public space they live in. A more inclusive and nuanced approach is needed that recognises local histories, identities, and attachments, as well as local priorities. This must distinguish between what is locally perceived as situationally problematic and non-problematic about gangs, the Police, and urban development initiatives, as well as provide resources through which to encourage and harness the more positive elements of each.

4. Managing gang membership

Mass incarceration and repressive “wars” on gangs delay individuals naturally leaving a gang, and can also institutionalise more violent gang dynamics. Gang membership tends to be finite, and policies should aim at managing gangs and their illegal activities rather than the chimera of eliminating them. At the same time, it is important to develop coherent programmes and interventions that prevent individuals from falling back into gangs or reengaging with criminal activities through the creation of sustainable opportunities that draw on the comparative advantages of having been a gang member. These are significantly gendered, and need to be designed accordingly.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

[1] Advanced Grant no. 787935, awarded to Dennis Rodgers, Research Professor in Anthropology and Sociology, Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding (CCDP), Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland. See: <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards>.

[2] See Sian Lazar, (2012), “Disjunctive comparison: Citizenship and trade unionism in Bolivia and Argentina”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18(2): 349-368 & Steffen Jensen and Dennis Rodgers, (2024), “Comparison through collaboration: Dilemmas and opportunities of joint ethnographic research on gangs in Nicaragua and South Africa”, *Current Anthropology*, 65(1): 49-71.

[3] See Steffen Jensen and Dennis Rodgers, (2022), “The intimacies of drug dealing: Narcotics, kinship, and embeddedness in Nicaragua and South Africa”, *Third World Quarterly*, 43(11): 2618-2636.

[4] See Dennis Rodgers and Steffen Jensen, (2024), “Marseille: L’État a-t-il vraiment abandonné les cités?”, *The Conversation*, 14 March, <https://theconversation.com/marseille-letat-a-t-il-vraiment-abandonne-les-cites-221195>.

[5] See Mette-Louise Johansen, (2024), “Relational Police Work: How Police Officers Work With, On and Through Personal Relationships in a Danish Gang Exit Programme”, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 64(2): 292-307.