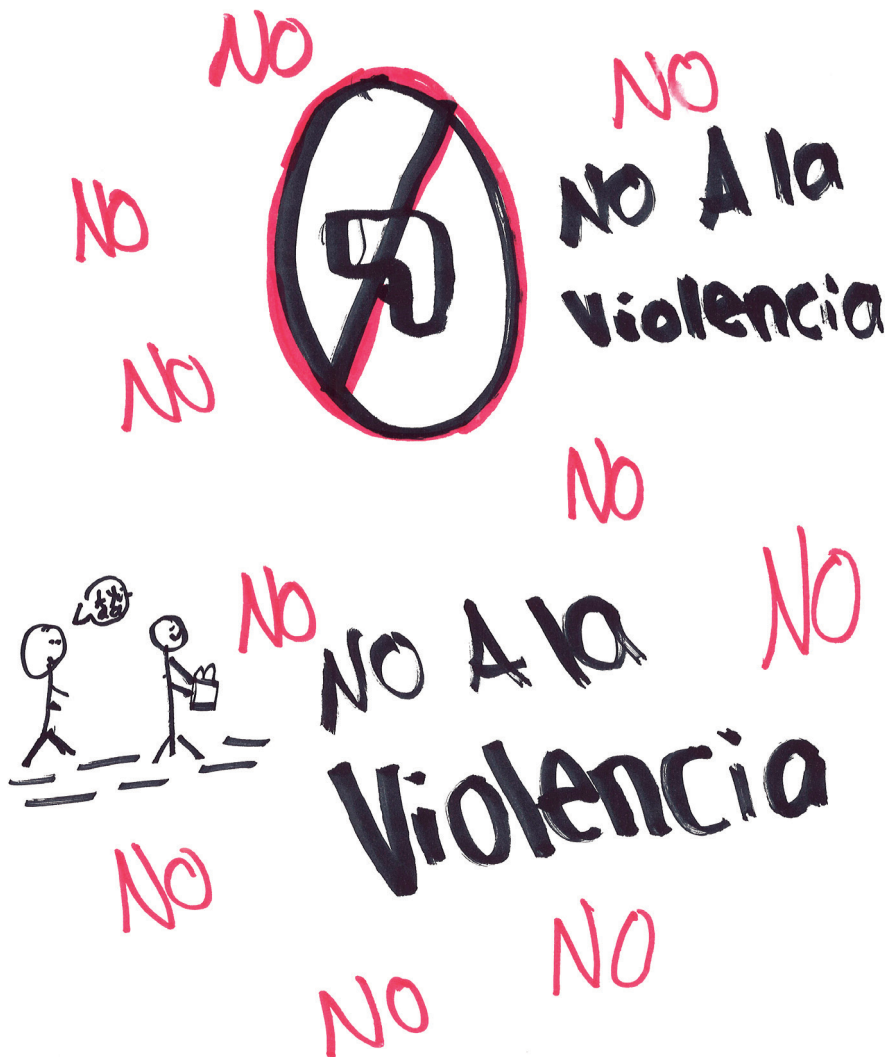




Living with Armed Violence

A Community Level Study Into Armed Violence and The Misuse of Small Arms and Light Weapons In The Northern Triangle Of Central America



A drawing by a young participant from Guatemala representing a community free from violence.



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All hand drawn images are from workshops held with children as part of this research.

Executive Summary

This HALO Trust report seeks to provide a better understanding of how vulnerable communities, especially women, children and young adults, are affected by the misuse of small arms in Central America's Northern Triangle region (consisting of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador). The main goal of the paper is to better inform a needs and rights based approach for future violence reduction and prevention initiatives in the region, providing evidence of people's needs in communities affected by violence. A team formed by a research consultant and three community liaison officers based in the region, carried out extensive field research in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador between June and August 2019, the results of which are presented in this report.

The research methodology was based on 22 group discussions with 140 participants, mostly women, children, young people and families living in selected communities affected by high levels of violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. The discussion topics were related to armed violence in the community, victimisation, perceptions of insecurity, trust in public institutions and solutions to armed violence. To support the community testimonies, the research team also conducted over 50 semi-structured interviews with relevant actors, including security and community

experts, diplomats, policy-makers, journalists, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), security forces, social workers, community leaders and doctors.

The first section of the report consists of a literature review of violence dynamics and small arms in the region from a political and historical perspective.

The second section presents the most relevant findings from the interviews regarding the challenges of living in high risk areas. This is intended to complement the testimonies from the field based community research discussed in section three.

The research presented in section three found many cross-cutting issues at the regional level but for clarity, the findings from the community discussions are separated by country.

Finally, the fourth section discusses potential solutions to armed violence, both at national and regional levels.

The most relevant findings of this report on small arms and their impact on high risk communities Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are as follows:

- The link between small arms and lethal violence in the Northern Triangle is significant. Between 2013 and 2018, 80% of all violent

killings in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador were committed with a firearm; 89% of the lethal victims were male, of which 42% were aged between 18 and 29 and nearly 10% were children or teenagers; 60% of all survivors of violent incidents were injured with a firearm.

- Despite the link between firearms and murder rates, the region's governments have generally treated arms control as a separate issue from broader security plans. Guatemala does have a dedicated section on firearms in its violence prevention strategy, but Honduras and El Salvador do not.
- This report's literature review demonstrates that ordinary citizens and private security companies own on average 73% of the total number of registered firearms in the region (approximately 1.8 million). According to official figures, 149,030 legal firearms are registered in El Salvador; 585,405 in Guatemala; and 93,706 in Honduras.
- Interviewees who live and work in communities affected by armed violence explained that illegal firearms are widely available in these areas, mainly because of high demand due to perceptions of insecurity; weak gun control mechanisms; and failings in the disarmament processes that followed the countries' civil wars. According to one source, an ille-

gal gun costs as little as \$130 USD on the Guatemalan black market, and a single bullet can cost just \$0.13 USD.

- Criminal groups benefit most from violence in communities. Street gangs, which are widely present in the region's urban areas, exercise tight territorial control in the neighborhoods they occupy, limiting the free movement of citizens. Such control is made possible by their significant firepower which is funded through extortion. According to interviewees, it is common at night to see gang members as young as 12 carrying shotguns in some neighborhoods of El Salvador. They believe the gangs' main aim in carrying firearms is to inflict fear.
- Although at a regional level men are more vulnerable to armed violence than women, the latter often end up being collateral victims. Women who participated in the community research said they were more likely to experience other types of violence that often precede femicide such as physical and sexual abuse, often at the hands of their intimate partners.
- For those working and living in gang-controlled areas, fear is a part of everyday life. This is caused, on the one hand, by gang violence and, on the other, by heavy-handed policing that sometimes targets young people



A student in Guatemala depicts his daily life in his neighbourhood with a drawing of two people fighting; the text reads: “hit me” and “you go first”.

- for alleged gang links. This has triggered severe mental health issues in young populations living in areas with high criminality, as shown in the testimonies of both community participants and experts interviewed.
- Participants in the community research talked openly about the presence of firearms in their neighborhoods, even if they were never asked directly about them. Most children and adolescents in Guatemala and Honduras considered guns to be the most effective tools for self-defence and admitted to having held firearms before. The youngest participants of this research showed extensive knowledge of guns and their calibers, and described types of guns and ammunition in precise detail.
 - Police officers interviewed described a paradoxical phenomenon in some gang-controlled communities whereby citizens view gangs as protectors rather than threats, even if those gangs inflict suffering upon their communities. This sympathy for gangs was acknowledged by discussion participants in all three countries, with some arguing that these groups are more of an authority in the neighbourhood than the police. In general, participants showed a distrust of law enforcement officials and said they felt vulnerable when police and military officers patrolled their communities.

- All of the selected communities suffered from high homicide rates. Participants living in them saw extreme armed violence as part of their daily lives and considered shootings normal. People living in these areas felt stigmatised because of the violence prevalent in their communities but also showed high levels of distrust and stigma towards one another. Participants admitted to confining themselves at home or in their immediate neighbourhoods to avoid danger.
- In all three countries, participants shared stories of other community members who had decided to travel to the United States undocumented because of the violence in their neighbourhoods. In their experience, people sometimes view emmigration as their only choice.



A drawing from a research workshop called "My perspective of daily life in the community" by a teenage participant from Honduras; the text reads: "school" and "local development center".

To reduce armed violence and protect vulnerable groups such as women and children, this report supports the following recommendations:

- In Guatemala, the local government should expand the implementation of the Community Development Councils (COCODES) which promote citizen participation in decision-making on local violence prevention policies and create safe spaces for interaction between communities and public authorities. Donors could support a system that is already in place and which is considered successful both by community research participants and public officials interviewed.
- In Honduras, the national government should continue with current efforts to reform its national police and reinforce a community-focused approach. The social mistrust in the police expressed by participants in Honduras suggests law enforcement officers could benefit greatly from further training and support on human rights and civilian relations. This should not be undermined by parallel heavy-handed government policies.
- In El Salvador, the current administration should find a balance between launching new violence prevention initiatives and maintaining the successful approaches of community policing and violence prevention committees supported by the

former government. More importantly, it should not give up on programmes that offer at-risk youth alternatives to criminal life, such as rehabilitation and prevention projects.

- At the regional level, public institutions in the Northern Triangle should:
 - Increase their investment in development and education in high risk areas, as a lack of opportunities is found to be among the root causes of armed violence in the three countries.
 - Recognise the emergency health issue resulting from armed violence and address the increased spending required to support emergency health services, through first aid equipment, ambulance services and medical personnel.
 - Educate children and adolescents on the dangers of arms misuse through risk awareness campaigns.
 - Promote regional cooperation on arms control and the monitoring of illegal trafficking. This could follow-up on previous projects such as the Central American Programme on Small Arms Control (CA-

SAC), which encourage more participation of civil society groups, and harmonise each country's firearms legislation according to international standards.

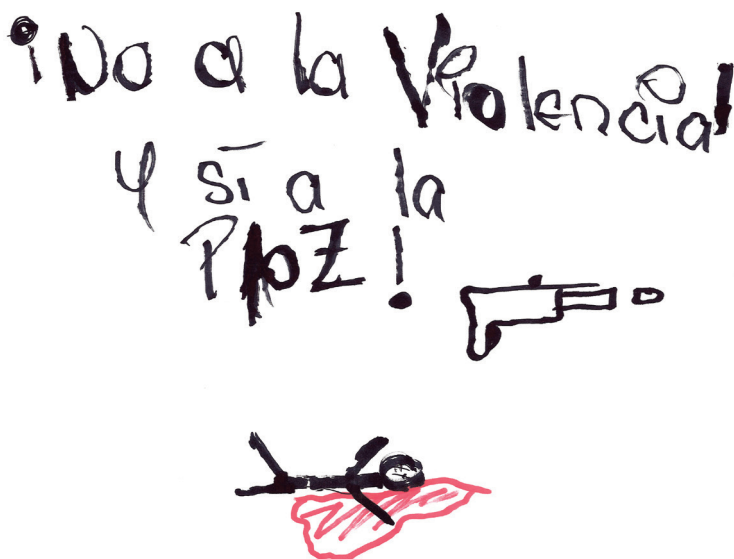
- Improve technical capacities and promote transparency in the registry of firearms; improve the security of arms arsenals to avoid arms diversion; and proceed with the destruction of arms surplus.
- Include a gender approach to arms control initiatives by promoting the participation of women in decision-making bodies related to arms control; generate more sex-aggregated data; and have specialised officials dedicated exclusively to addressing cases of gender-related violence.

Table of Contents

1. Arms and Lethal Violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador	1
1.1 Contextualising Armed Violence	1
1.2 Firearms and Civilians	3
1.3 State Policies for Armed Violence Reduction	6
2. Expert Testimonies on Community-Level Violence	8
2.1 Presence of Arms in the Communities	8
2.2 Arms and Gang Violence	9
2.3 Vulnerable Groups: Lethal Violence against Youth and Women	10
2.4 Isolation, Trauma, and Fear	12
2.5 Relations between the Community and Security Forces	13
2.6 Humanitarian Impact of Armed Violence	15
3. Caught in the Crossfire	16
Fieldwork	16
3.1 Methodology	16
3.2 Living in Communities Affected by Violence	18
3.2.1 Guatemala	18
3.2.2 Honduras	22
3.2.3 El Salvador	25
4. Solutions to Armed Violence	28
4.1 Recommendations from the Community Research	28
4.1.1 Guatemala	28
4.1.2 Honduras	29
4.1.3 El Salvador	30
4.2 Regional Recommendations	31
4.2.1 Small Arms and the Region's Security Agenda	31
4.2.2 Community-Based Violence Prevention	34
4.2.3 Protecting Vulnerable Groups	37
4.2.4 Community Policing	39
Conclusion	41
References	45
Annexes	52

1.

Arms and Lethal Violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador



A drawing from a research workshop called “Living in my community”; by a young participant from Guatemala, the text reads: “no to violence, yes to peace”.

1.1 Contextualising Armed Violence

Although the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been at peace for more than 25 years, security experts have observed a shift in violence dynamics from war brutality to high levels of criminality (Cruz, 2011; Pearce et. al., 2016). Between 2013 and 2018, a total of 83,734 citizens from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were violently killed (Infosegura, 2019). The population of the Northern Triangle represents 0.44% of the global population, yet in 2017, these countries accounted for 2.63% of worldwide murders (UNODC, 2019a; World Bank Open Data, 2019). In 2019, the countries’ homicide rates (which measure the number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants) were 22.4 in Guatemala; 40 in Honduras; and 51 in El Salvador, (Dalby and Carranza, 2018; InSight Crime, 2019).¹

Economic inequality is one of the main root causes of violence in the Northern Triangle, as it is in Latin America more broadly (UNODC, 2019b). As

¹ Homicide rates per capita are the standard measurement tool by governments in the region to monitor progress in violence reduction. Historically, homicide rates in the Northern Triangle have been significantly above the World Health Organization standards, which considers rates above 10 per 10,000 as “epidemic” (The World Bank, 2016).

of December 2019, the World Bank considered Guatemala's poverty and maternal-child mortality rates to be among the highest in the Americas (The World Bank, 2019a). This institution found that 20% of Hondurans in rural areas live on less than \$2 USD a day (The World Bank, 2019b). The World Bank observed a different dynamic in El Salvador, which has lower poverty and inequality rates than Guatemala and Honduras but which also has much slower economic growth (The World Bank, 2019c). In a 2015 study on citizen security in Latin America, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also identified socio-economic factors as being among the main explanations for the rise of criminality in the region. The report argued that low quality jobs and a lack of social mobility contributed to 'aspirational crimes' in a context of consumer-driven economic growth. According to the UNDP, erosion of the social fabric, an increase in single parent households, and accelerated urban growth also help explain the region's disproportionately high rates of violent killings (UNDP, 2015, p.7).

The UN and numerous local organisations also identify corruption and impunity as being key factors behind criminality. The Guatemalan human rights group Myrna Mack Foundation suggested in a 2017 report that impunity had a direct correlation with violence. According to this organisation, Guatemala has a history of criminal cells operating within state institutions, helping to explain why 94.20% of crimes committed do not result in a prosecution (Fundacion Myrna Mack, 2017, p.6). The former UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which functioned from 2007 to 2019, repeatedly denounced the vulnerability of Guatemalan institutions to organised crime (CICIG, 2019). Renowned corruption expert Sarah Chayes observed similar patterns of endemic corruption and links between political elites and criminal groups in Honduras which allegedly fuel impunity and perpetuate criminal violence (Chayes, 2017).

Since 2015, homicide rates have declined at the regional level, but the reasons behind this drop vary from country to country. Guatemala has seen a more gradual reduction in murder rates from 2011, a phenomenon that the CICIG attributed mostly to successful police and justice reforms (CICIG, 2019). It is unclear whether Honduras's sustained homicide reduction is related to government actions, changes in criminal trends, or both. The country has been in crisis since the 2009 ousting of former President Manuel Zelaya which created a

Peleas callejeras de Pandillas



A student in Guatemala depicts what it is like to live in his neighbourhood with a drawing of a gang fight with knives; the text reads: "gang street fights".

power vacuum that has been exploited by criminal groups, especially drug cartels (International Crisis Group, 2019). Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández has attributed the homicide drop since 2011 to his government's successful policies, particularly the extraditions of kingpins and a police reform process (Risquez, 2017). However, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) considers sudden declines in killings such as that seen in Honduras usually result from changes in criminal dynamics, rather than new government policies (UNODC, 2019c).

In El Salvador, gangs are present in around 80% of the country (Martínez et al., 2016). A controversial plan implemented in 2011 known as 'the truce' promoted a gang ceasefire in exchange for better prison conditions for gang leaders, resulting in an immediate reduction in killings (Whitfield, 2013). The post-2015 decline in homicides, ran parallel to a 'war on gangs' launched by the former left-wing government of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén. However the gangs retaliated to this policy by killing more than 5000 people that year.

Since then, homicides in El Salvador have been notably decreasing and reached record low levels at the beginning of 2020 under the current administration. There is no consensus among experts which explains such a considerable reduction, however some analysts have noted an effort led by gang leaders in this country to send a "goodwill" message to the government (Valencia, 2019).

1.2 Firearms and Civilians

The link between small arms² and lethal violence is especially strong in Latin America. Worldwide, over 50% of violent killings are committed with firearms, but in the Americas this figure is around 75% (UNODC, 2019d). In the Northern Triangle, the proportion is even higher. Between 2013 and 2018, around 80% of all homicide victims in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were killed with small arms;³ 89% of the lethal victims were men, of which 42% were aged between 18 and 29. A smaller percentage – nearly 10% – were children or teenagers. Around 60% of all survivors of violent incidents in the region were injured with a firearm (Infosegura, 2019).

Firearms are not the direct cause of criminality in the Northern Triangle but they play a determinant factor in the exercise of violence (The World Bank, 2011). As gun control advocate Rebecca Peters stated in an interview in El Salvador in 2010:

2 According to the *Programme of Action on Small Arms (PoA)* from 2001, small arms "are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for individual use. They include, inter alia, revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns". "Small Arms and Light Weapons" (SALW) also include "weapons designed for use by two or three persons serving as a crew (...)". Since light weapons are rarely used in armed violence in Central America, this report only refers to small arms, their ammunition and accessories. In order to facilitate reading, this report uses the terms 'small arms', 'firearms', and 'arms' indistinctively on purpose, although their technical definitions are different. "Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms", United Nations General Assembly, A/52/298, 27, August 1997.

3 According to the UNDP-managed portal Infosegura, firearms account for 80.4% of all homicides in Guatemala; 78.9% in Honduras; and 78.3% in El Salvador.

“[...] we know that small arms are not necessarily a cause of violence, but they multiply the probability that a person will be killed; multiply the probability that several people will die instead of one; and reduce the ability to resolve a conflict situation in a non-violent manner” (Martínez, 2010).

The practice of arming civilians, a key characteristic of the civil wars in Guatemala (1960-1996) and El Salvador (1980-1992), helps explain the region's current firearm culture. Nearly a million civilians were armed during the 36-year conflict in Guatemala (De León, 2006a, p. 41) and from 1982, nearly 20% of the country's male population was recruited by the Guatemalan government to form Civil Defense Patrols (PACs) to fight the guerrilla insurgency (De León, 2006b, p. 15). The UN-sponsored Truth Commission in Guatemala found these groups to be responsible for some of the worst human rights violations during the conflict (Rothenberg and Comisión Para El Esclarecimiento Histórico, 2012). In El Salvador, there are historical reports that both the security forces and the guerrilla intimidated civilians who resisted collaboration, forcing them to join the armed struggle (Government of Canada, 1989).

The region did not implement proper disarmament processes in the post-conflict period. According to a 2000 book by the Central American University (UCA) on firearms in El Salvador, “[...] no one knows for sure how many weapons were left in the hands of civilians after the war, and institutional efforts to collect them were unfruitful and totally unsuccessful” (Cruz,



During a workshop in Guatemala participants chose how they would defend themselves in hypothetical dangerous scenarios. A young boy shows his choice: a toy gun.

Beltrán, 2000, p. 23). The scarce weapon handover initiatives undertaken by civilians during the post-conflict period in Guatemala also faced many challenges (De León, 2006b). Both countries launched ‘arms for goods’ and ‘arms for toys’ amnesty campaigns to create incentives for weapons handover but their impact was very limited (Gutiérrez, 1999).

Immediate post-conflict challenges pushed up the demand for firearms among ordinary citizens, whose perceptions of insecurity increased (Cruz and Beltrán, 2000; De León, 2006b). This issue was captured by Nicaraguan historian Alejandro Bendaña:

“[...] the problem is not the weapons, but the desperate perception that they are a solution or a means of physical and economic survival” (Bendaña, 1999, p. 174).

Michelle Melara, from the Costa Rican Arias Foundation, explained that the combination of post-conflict criminality and the transformation of security and justice institutions during the 1990s, created incentives for middle-class citizens to hire private companies to protect their businesses and properties, multiplying the number of firearms in civilian hands (Melara, 2003). The booming industry of private security employed nearly 84,000 people by mid-2019, more than the total number of law-enforcement officials in the three countries put together (approximately 78,300).⁴

Most of the arms circulating in the Northern Triangle today are owned by civilians. A 2019 regional report on small arms by the Salvadoran civil society group Foundation for Applied Legal Studies (FESPAD) cites official figures showing the following number of registered firearms by civilians in each country:

- 149,030 in El Salvador;
- 585,405 in Guatemala; and,
- 93,706 in Honduras (FESPAD, 2019, p. 19, 61,88).⁵

Based on data from the Geneva-based research group the Small Arms Survey, ordinary citizens and private security companies in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador own on average 73% of the total number of registered firearms in the region which, based on the same data, would be around 1.8 million (Karp, 2018a). In contrast, law-enforcement officials and the military would hold respectively 5.5% and 21.5% on average in the three countries (Karp, 2018b, 2018c).⁶

4 Calculations from the following sources: Suchit Chávez, “Los dueños de la seguridad privada en Guatemala”, Plaza Pública, 10 March 2019, <http://bit.ly/2ndrdoq>; “Agencias privadas dirigen un ejército de 100.000 guardias”, La Prensa, 10 June 2018 <http://bit.ly/2nZzVqo>; Jonathan Laguan, “¿Con cuántos policías cuenta la PNC para todo el territorio de El Salvador?”, La Prensa Gráfica, 26 December 2017, <http://bit.ly/2oHEc2g>; Anna-Claire Bevan, “Guatemala renueva la Policía Nacional Civil ante el aumento del delito”, Diálogo Américas, 21 August 2013, <http://bit.ly/2nZAso>; “Policía Nacional espera tener 20.000 agentes en 2019”, Presidency of Honduras, press release, 2 January 2019, <http://bit.ly/2nUTzny>; and J. R. Gómez Hecht, “Las agencias de seguridad privada en El Salvador”, Colegio de Altos Estudios Estratégicos, (San Salvador: 2014), <http://bit.ly/2nSsC3T>.

5 Note the figures from El Salvador and Guatemala include arms licenses of both civilians and security companies.

6 The original data from the Small Arms Survey are three data annexes with global estimates of registered firearms segregated by country and holder type (civilians; law-enforcement officials; and the military). Although not specified, HALO made the assumption based on similar studies that the data on civilian holders for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador also includes licenses owned by private security companies. The figure of 1.8 million total registered firearms in the three countries was calculated by summing up the data from civilian, police, and military data sheets for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, then applying the percentages to obtain regional figures on ownership type. All calculations were based on the following sources:

- Karp, Aaron. “Annex: Civilian Firearms Holdings, 2017”, in “Estimating Global Civilian-held Firearms Numbers”, Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper, June 2018a. <http://bit.ly/2ol7Hqv>.

- Karp, Aaron. “Annex: Law Enforcement Firearms Holdings, 2017”, in “Estimating Global Law Enforcement Firearms Numbers”, Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper, June 2018b. <http://bit.ly/2nzoZjl>.

- Karp, Aaron. “Annex: Military Firearms Holdings, 2017”, in “Estimating Global Military-owned Firearms Numbers”, Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper, June 2018c. <http://bit.ly/2oletN3>.

1.3 State Policies for Armed Violence Reduction

Over the last 20 years, both conservative and left-wing governments in the Northern Triangle have based their strategies for armed violence reduction on iron-fist or ‘mano dura’ policies, known for their heavy-handed approaches to criminality (Wolf, 2017). According to a 2017 report by the conflict prevention non-profit International Crisis Group, *mano dura* plans are marked by increased spending on law-enforcement, tougher legislation, mass incarcerations and the predominant role of the military in public security roles (International Crisis Group, 2017). In an analysis of *mano dura* strategies in El Salvador, security expert Jeannette Aguilar stated that their origin was rooted more in electoral interests than violence reduction. According to Aguilar:

“[...] this strategy also sought to create a climate of social alarm in the population, so that fear of crime and insecurity would favour public support for all kind of authoritarian measures, and therefore for the official party who was leading the *mano dura* policy” (Aguilar, 2019, p. 11).

Research on security policies in Central America suggests that law-enforcement plans alone not only fail to reduce criminality, but that they may, in the long-term, increase armed violence (Muggah, et. Al, 2018; Guitérrez Rivera, 2010). Academic Sonja Wolf, who authored a book on *mano dura*, argued that among the most damaging consequences of these strategies were the mass captures of suspected gang members, which contributed to jail overcrowding and an overburdening of justice institutions. In her book, Wolf explained that mass incarcerations of suspects in the early 2000s led to a cohesion among the largest gangs, helping them to establish a solid and hierarchical structure inside the jails (Wolf, 2017). In the long-term, this approach can also damage the public perception of public authorities (The World Bank, 2011).

In recent years, governments in the region have acknowledged the importance of more holistic, prevention-based strategies as part of their overall violence reduction plans. With international support, government officials in Guatemala and El Salvador have developed in-depth diagnoses of the social and economic roots of their armed violence problems. While the plans and the institutions are in place however, the funding for violence prevention has been minimal compared to public spending on law-enforcement and is very dependent on donor support (International Crisis Group, 2017). As a result, ordinary citizens have barely seen the positive effects of friendlier security strategies, reducing the incentives for governments to further implement them or increase funding.

Despite the significant link between firearms and the region's murder rates, public institutions in the Northern Triangle have kept arms control initiatives as a separate issue from their broader security plans. In Guatemala, arms are regulated by the 'Law on Arms and Ammunition', approved in 2009 and considered to be one of the most comprehensive arms regulation laws in the region. El Salvador's 'Law on Control and Regulation of Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Similar Items' is the oldest in the Northern Triangle (1999), although it has been updated periodically to close some of its legal gaps. The most recent arms legislation in the region was approved in Honduras in May 2019 and follows international standards on arms control (FESPAD, 2019).⁷



A student in Guatemala depicts his daily life in his neighbourhood with a drawing of two people fighting; the text reads: "hit me" and "you go first".

⁷ For more on each country's arms legislation and their limitations, see the previously mentioned 2019 report by FESPAD titled "Impact of small arms and light weapons on public security, culture of peace and sustainable development in the northern region of Central America", particularly chapter 5.

2.

Expert Testimonies on Community-Level Violence

The research team conducted over 50 semi-structured interviews with experts based in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to put the findings from the community interviews into perspective. The profile of the interviewees included academics, security experts, social workers, doctors, community leaders, police officers and diplomats who discussed how small arms affect the daily lives of people living in areas of high criminality. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, most interviewees decided to remain anonymous. Whenever possible, expert testimonies were backed by reliable data.

2.1 Presence of Arms in the Communities

According to experts in the three countries, most of the arms circulating throughout the Northern Triangle are illegal, especially in areas that register high crime rates. Reports by the UNODC and the Small Arms Survey put the number of illegal firearms in the three countries at between 2.6 and 3 million, compared to 1.8 million legal arms (UNODC, 2012; Karp, 2017). Interviewees who live and work in communities affected by armed violence identified three main factors behind the wide availability of illegal firearms in these areas:

- people's perceptions of insecurity;
- weak gun control mechanisms; and,
- failings in the disarmament processes that followed the region's wars.

The director of a grassroots NGO in Guatemala with projects in gang-controlled zones explained that people usually turn to the black market to purchase arms because they are cheaper there. In July 2019, this interviewee said the price of a gun on the Guatemalan black market was around \$130 USD, while in stores it was \$650-\$1,000 USD. Single bullets can cost as little as \$0.13 USD. A Guatemalan official interviewed backed up this statement:

"Bullets are so affordable that criminals use them indiscriminately when they kill someone".

Public perceptions of firearms and the reasons for acquiring them vary from country to country. In Honduras, a nation-wide survey carried out by the Autonomous University of Honduras showed that 54% of respondents considered a gun necessary for protection (IUDPAS-UNAH, 2019, p. 11). Surprisingly, the tendency to own guns in Honduras is higher in rural areas than in cities where crime rates are higher. This phenomenon was mentioned in

an interview with a Honduran security expert who related it to a “culture of arms”. In Guatemala, guns are registered as a constitutional right. However, according to a survey cited in a regional report by the Salvadoran civil society group FESPAD on firearms in the Northern Triangle, 80% of population rejects their use (FESPAD, 2019, p. 65).

A 2015 survey funded by the UN Development Program (UNDP) on firearms in El Salvador found that 55% of the population did not have a gun and would reject buying one (UNDP, 2015, p. 128).

According to those interviewed, having firearms available in the community comes at a great social cost. A Salvadoran priest noted that guns had become the ordinary mechanism by which to solve inter-personal disputes, simply because they are at hand: “[...] almost all problems are solved using firearms”.

According to a social worker from El Salvador, “weapons have [...] replaced words.” She argued that the use of firearms was one of many forms of violence in Salvadoran society. The director of an NGO in Guatemala considered the presence of guns to be a visible symptom of social mistrust at local level, which he considered the real illness:

“[...] you don’t need to see guns to feel insecure, it’s the ‘big brother’ feeling in the communities that makes everyone so scared...[the] weapon is a complement to the exercise of authority of criminal groups, it is an accessory.”

2.2 Arms and Gang Violence

Among the Northern Triangle’s many criminal challenges, several sources agreed that gangs were, by far, the most relevant actor in community-level violence, particularly in urban areas.⁸

The region’s largest gangs are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang, both of which were originally formed in the suburbs of Los Angeles by Central American migrants (International Crisis Group, 2017). Today, gangs represent a serious threat to the region’s security. In a 2016 New York Times article, a group of journalists reported that gangs accounted for about 50% of all homicides in El Salvador, and that they challenged state authorities throughout the country (Martinez et. al., op. cit). Interviewees working in vulnerable communities in El Salvador and Guatemala explained that gangs use arms to exercise their power. The director of a children’s centre in San

⁸ North Central America is a key transit point for the trafficking of drugs, people, and arms, which has become a highly profitable business for drug cartels. Although not directly involved in community violence, drug traffickers are among the main reasons behind the region’s high impunity and corruption rates, and are considered a structural factor that fuels criminality (UNODC, 2012; CICIG, 2019). Because gangs have a much stronger role in communities, this report will focus specifically on armed violence committed by gangs in communities.

Salvador mentioned that gang members were usually heavily armed, and that he had become accustomed to seeing “young people between 12 and 20 years old who are armed”, acting as custodians of the neighbourhood. A Guatemalan NGO worker claimed to have observed senior gang members carrying their gun at all times. “It is like part of their membership kit”, he said. In his experience, younger gang members only carry a weapon when they are on a mission, such as collecting extortion money.

A gang’s main purpose in having firearms in a specific neighbourhood is for control and persuasion, according to an NGO worker who manages violence prevention projects in Guatemala.

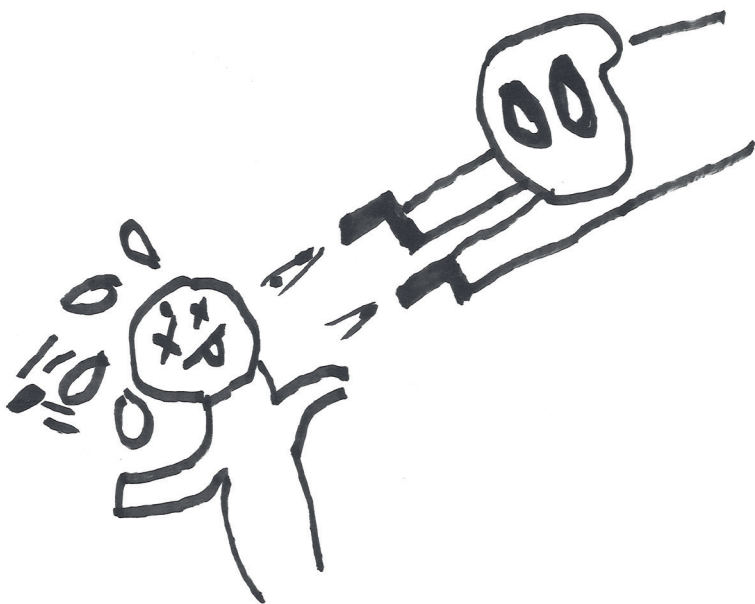
“The weapons are used in that first moment [before a murder] to intimidate the person and take him from point a to point b. The weapons are presented in situations in which there is not much control of the territory, when they are going to attack rivals or when they are surprised by the police and they really have nothing else to react [with]”, he explained.

According to El Salvador-based journalist Roberto Valencia, the failed gang truce (2011-2012) provided relevant insights into the gangs’ armed capacity in the country. During a public handover that formed part of confidence-building measures, gangs handed over shotguns, carbines, revolvers and pistols such as M-16, AK-47, and FAL assault rifles; M3-A1 and Steyr MP-34 subrifles; Ingram M-10 and Intratec AB-10 submachineguns; grenades; abundant munition; and one LAW rocket launcher (Valencia, 2016).

2.3 Vulnerable Groups: Lethal Violence against Youth and Women

Most of the lethal victims of armed violence in the Northern Triangle are young. In Honduras, 68.3% of homicide victims in 2018 were aged between 15 and 34 (IUDPAS-UNAH, 2019, p.2). In Guatemala and El Salvador, 42% of those killed in violent incidents between 2013 and 2018 were 18-29 years old (Infosegura, last accessed 20/12/2019). A paper by the University of Florida published in 2017 noted that, in the case of El Salvador, the most vulnerable age group for violent killings (15–29) correlates with the estimated average age of gang members, indicating a strong link between murders of young people and gang violence (Cruz et. Al., 2017).

A Salvadoran NGO worker interviewed highlighted the 14-17 age group as the most vulnerable to gang violence. A social worker from Honduras noted that gangs target young boys around the same age as themselves in the areas where they are active. Many young boys get involved because they sympathise with the leaders or simply because they see gang activity as a source of easy money. In the first case, he explained, leaders do not necessarily force the person to become a gang member but ask them for support



A drawing by a young participant from Guatemala representing what is it like to live in their community.

with specific tasks. Another social worker interviewed in Honduras who mentors families in gang-controlled neighbourhoods explained that gangs take advantage of the children's needs:

"[...] they offer them status, affection, money, recognition and many things they don't have in their homes".

A Guatemalan doctor who has treated the children of gang members lamented that children who are born into criminal families are trapped in a generational cycle of violence. She had witnessed how such children, after suffering losses of relatives during their childhoods, had later joined gangs to seek revenge. This familiarity with armed violence among children was also noticed by a doctor interviewed in Honduras. In his own words:

"I was astonished when I heard a little girl saying that her dad's job was to kill, and she said it in such a dry way because for her, that was completely normal".

Although at the regional level, men are more vulnerable to armed violence than women, research shows that the latter are vulnerable to other types of abuse that often precede homicidal violence. According to the Infosegura database, for every woman murdered between 2013 and 2018, eight men were killed (Infosegura, last accessed 20/12/2019). However, a report by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (Heinrich Böll Foundation) citing figures from

the Geneva Declaration Secretariat highlighted that the Northern Triangle countries registered the highest femicide rates (per 100,000 inhabitants) in the world between 2007 and 2012:

- 14.4 in El Salvador;
- 10.9 in Honduras; and,
- 9.3 in Guatemala (Montti, et. al, 2019, p. 15).

A 2017 survey by El Salvador's Ministry of Economy found that 67% of women interviewed, had experienced sexual, physical or psychological violence in their lifetime (El Salvador Ministry of Economy, 2018, p. 25).

Experts interviewed, raised the issue that women are usually victims of non-lethal violence. A Guatemalan doctor stressed that even if men are violently killed in communities, in her experience women more often need emergency care following armed disputes. She said that most female patients she had treated for bullet wounds were between 13 and 36 years old and that many were allegedly linked to criminal organisations.

"Women end up being collateral victims of violence", said a security expert from Guatemala who had also noted this trend.

Violence against women in Guatemala is, according to a prosecutor, deeply linked to the abusive dynamics of intimate relationships based on power and domination by their partners. These are, in her view, "implicit in the [Guatemalan social] system in which we live". An NGO worker believed this problem to be very common at the community level in Honduras where girls, who join a gang or date one of its members, are especially exposed to armed violence and abuse. Citing a particular case she had witnessed in a community where she works, this interviewee noted that while girlfriends of gang members were helpless, they became untouchable when they married:

"[...] girlfriends of gang members run the risk of being abused and killed, but when they become wives they are respected forever".

2.4 Isolation, Trauma, and Fear

Invisible borders – the boundaries between rival gang areas that citizens can't cross – are a common phenomenon in the Northern Triangle, especially in El Salvador. According to a report by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC):

"[...] as control of territory in the neighbourhood changes between gangs, borders, invisible to outsiders but heavily enforced on residents, are drawn" (NRC, 2016, p. 3).

A former gang member in Honduras, interviewed for this report, explained that when she was active, her role as ‘bandera’ (flag) was to watch over the gang’s territorial boundaries and make sure no strangers came in. A Salvadorian priest admitted that this level of gang territoriality had left him no choice but to celebrate different religious services in neighbouring areas so that everyone could attend. This interviewee explained that anyone finding themselves in a neighbourhood run by a different gang to the one that runs their own neighbourhood would be warned to leave, if not killed straight away.

A Salvadoran NGO worker complained that repression and heavy-handed policing by state authorities had exacerbated the invisible borders phenomenon by making criminal groups more alert to movements in their areas of operation:

“[...] the [Salvadoran] state has turned communities into ghettos. There are kids who have not left their house in a year. That is why when they go to jail they see no difference””, he said.

Across the region, those interviewed have witnessed a rise in severe mental health issues in young populations living in areas with high criminality. A Guatemalan doctor regretted seeing more suicide attempts by young people in the communities where she worked, and considered some of these cases to be related to gang violence. An NGO worker who leads humanitarian projects in gang-affected areas in Honduras described how armed violence, mostly by gangs, fosters psychological disorders and very low self-esteem in young people. In his experience, both victims and perpetrators suffer:

“[...] there is this myth that the gangs rape and kill, but if you look beneath that you will see a group of frustrated and depressed young people who feel completely hopeless”.

For those working and living in gang-controlled areas, fear marks the everyday relations between community members. Two sources from El Salvador, an NGO worker and a priest, had noticed that people living in areas with heavy gang presence had become “passive” to violent acts – they did not denounce armed incidents, for fear of retaliation by these groups. A Honduran police officer explained that gangs in many neighbourhoods had such levels of control that people were too scared to collaborate with authorities investigating homicides. This phenomenon was captured by human rights advocate Jeanne Ridders in a 2016 report on local violence in El Salvador:

“[...] fear is so present [in the communities] that sometimes it is hard to get to the precise information about incidents and facts that need to be taken into account, in order to understand the processes of community development, promotion of human rights or even peacebuilding”.

2.5 Relations between the Community and Security Forces

In an interview with Juan Estrada, the head of citizen security in the Guatemalan municipality of Villa Nueva (near the capital Guatemala City), he spoke of the difficulties faced by the police when approaching community members in gang-controlled areas. According to Estrada, populations tend to perceive gangs as a “necessary evil”, based on the logic that when these groups are in control of a specific community, new criminals do not get in. When violent incidents decline as a gang establishes control over a neighbourhood, the local population associates the lower criminality with the gang’s capacity to control violence. In Estrada’s opinion, this is a common strategy that gangs use to increase their social support:

“Criminal violence has been normalised to a point that people actually think that gangs protect the community just because they operate within that territory, but gangs are the ones extorting the businesses that are, mostly, owned by community members” he said.

Police officers interviewed in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador were concerned that an increasing army presence in public security tasks – a key component of *mano dura* – was creating public confusion about the different roles performed by the police and the military. A Honduran police officer believed that repressive actions by military police during demonstrations had given a negative perception of the institution as a whole. A Tegucigalpa-based diplomat also criticised the numerous hybrid police-military bodies, created by the Honduran government which, he felt, were confusing citizens about the role of each institution and limiting the impact of community policing projects.

When asked about the relationship between communities and the police, an NGO worker in Honduras said that most citizens, “don’t know



An depiction of daily life in a community by a teenage participant from Honduras.

how to relate to the police – they are afraid of them”.

A social worker, also from Honduras, believed *mano dura* contributed to building a negative perception of the state in general, not just the police. He argued that since, in his experience, public institutions were completely absent in most gang-controlled areas, police operatives were among the few – generally negative – interactions citizens had with the state. A similar concern was raised by the director of a human rights NGO in El Salvador:

“[The police] do not distinguish between gang members and non-gang members, this means that in the end the community is doubly affected by violence”.

2.6 Humanitarian Impact of Armed Violence

By the end of 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had registered 349,900 refugees and asylum-seekers globally from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador (UNHCR, 2019, p. 1). This institution also registered 350,000 Internally Displaced People in Honduras and El Salvador by the end of 2019 (UNHCR, 2019, p.7).

The director of an NGO interviewed in El Salvador expressed concern about the phenomenon of internal displacement in this country which in his experience is a multi-causal problem that goes beyond gang violence:

“We have families of police officers displaced by gang members, families of gang members displaced by the police, and families of gang members who, for having a problem with their gang or with the police, also have to leave”.

Those who flee can be exposed to even more violence on their trips north than in their hometowns. A former gang member from Honduras interviewed for this report shared a testimony about the unexpected dangers she encountered on her journey:

“I fled Honduras because I needed to escape from this situation, but what I found when I left was much worse than gang violence in Honduras”

To cross Mexico, she took the infamous train called known as ‘La Bestia’ (The Beast), which crosses Mexico to the U.S. border. One night, she was ambushed on the train by local members of the MS-13 in the train and witnessed a massacre:

“I saw how one of my friends who was travelling with me was beheaded in front of me. I am only here today telling you this story because, for some reason, the guy who was attacking us, knew that I was part of the MS-13 in Honduras”.

3.

Caught in the Crossfire



A drawing by a teenage girl from Honduras titled “My perspective of daily life in the community”; the text reads: “bye, ambulance”.

Fieldwork

The research methodology for this report was based on 22 group discussions and in-person interviews with community members living in areas with high rates of armed violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. A total of 140 participants, most of them children, young adults and women, participated voluntarily and anonymously in these activities. The goal of the discussions was to understand how victims are affected by the problem of small arms in their communities and to discuss solutions to reduce and prevent armed violence.

3.1 Methodology

The criteria for selecting the communities⁹ to research in each country was based on their accessibility by the research team; the representativeness of

⁹ The names of the specific communities selected in each country are undisclosed in this report for security reasons.

their homicide rates and violence dynamics in relation to the rest of their country; and their relevance for comparison phenomenon concentrated in the Northern Triangle's largest cities, the research team selected areas near the capitals in each country. In Guatemala, the selected community was a small neighbourhood in Villa Nueva near Guatemala City. The team led a total of eight activities with two groups, one consisting of women and the other of high school students. This municipality has a high presence of criminal groups such as the MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang and in mid-2018 it registered a homicide rate of 48.6 killings per 100,000 inhabitants, according to police figures mentioned in a report by the research group Diálogos (Diálogos, 2018, p. 11).

In Honduras, the research team carried out six discussions with young community members in a neighbourhood in Comayagüegla, near Tegucigalpa. The area was controlled by the MS-13. The team was able to conduct two more group interviews with children in another high-risk community in Tegucigalpa. According to the observatory of violence from the Autonomous University of Honduras, the 2018 homicide rate in the larger department of Francisco Morazán, where these two communities are located, was 39.9 (IUDPAS-UNAH, 2019a, p. 4).

Participants in El Salvador were from three different neighborhoods in Quezaltepeque, Soyapango, and Apopa, in Northern and Western El Salvador respectively, which are also gang-controlled areas. According to Infosegura, the number of violent killings in these municipalities during 2018 were as follows: 38 in Quezaltepeque; 96 in Soyapango; and 92 in Apopa (Infosegura, last accessed 26-01-2020).

Local organisations offered support to facilitate the research and establish connections in the selected communities. The Guatemalan civil society group the Teaching Institute for Sustainable Development (IEPADES) and the Villa Nueva Community Council for Development (COCODE) supported the research team in arranging interviews with local authorities and advised on how to frame the discussions. The NGO Buenas Acciones Honduras helped the research team to access high-risk areas in Tegucigalpa, and actively supported one activity with children in Comayagüegla. In El Salvador, the human rights NGO Tutela Legal arranged meetings between the research team and groups of young people and families living in gang-controlled areas in Apopa, Quezaltepeque, and Soyapango. In all three countries, the team requested consent from the relevant people and institutions prior to interviewing minors.

The following section summarises the main findings of the community research, conducted between July and August 2019, by country. The testimonies reflect the vulnerability of participants in cases of violence, and the challenges of bringing armed violence reduction and prevention policies

to the community-level. The research team noted that, even if the topic of arms was never on the agenda due to its sensitivity, it was mentioned on several occasions by participants, evidencing a great familiarity with firearms among civilians, especially children and young adults.

The discussions focused on the personal experiences of participants living in vulnerable communities, and their preferred strategies for reducing violence.¹⁰ All participants described the realities of their own neighbourhoods – realities which may or not correspond with those of other communities. Because of the wide range of participants' profiles and locations, their testimonies should not be viewed as descriptions of community life in areas with high criminal rates generally, but rather as summaries of personal experiences that can help explain some of the main challenges facing ordinary citizens in these areas.

3.2 Living in Communities Affected by Violence

3.2.1 Guatemala

In Guatemala, there were two discussion groups from the same community in Villa Nueva. The first group consisted of women between the ages of 30 and 50 who play an active role in their neighbourhood. The second group consisted of around a dozen high school students, both boys and girls. The research team carried out eight activities in total, four with each group.¹¹

The group of high school students from Villa Nueva talked openly about the presence of arms in their neighbourhood, even if they were never asked directly about it. In one activity in which participants from this group had to choose from different weapons to defend themselves in a hypothetical dangerous scenario, 10 out of 13 said they would avoid using firearms because they considered them dangerous. Nonetheless, every single participant from this group acknowledged they had held a gun before. According to most participants, small arms usage is a recurrent self-defence mechanism in the community and gangs use guns to exercise territorial control. Firearms were also seen by some participants as an expression of masculinity, with some arguing that women are not supposed to use them.

"In real [gang] meetings there are no women, because they are very sentimental, and they don't have the strength to use a gun", said one student.

Women interviewed in Villa Nueva also acknowledged the familiarity with guns in the neighbourhood, especially among young people:

¹⁰ See tables 1-3 in Annex 1 for a detail breakdown of each discussion session including dates and location, participants' profiles, and discussion topics in each country.

¹¹ See table 1 in Annex 1 for more on the research methodology in Guatemala.

“Down the road I talked to some patojos [children], and they told me that a bullet costs 0.50 GTQ [\$0.07 USD], so our life is worth very little”, said one woman, lamenting the fact that children knew this information.

One participant from the high school group exemplified this level of knowledge about arms after being asked to draw something representative of his community. He explained his artwork as follows:

“I wanted to draw a gang member who is wanted by the police because he has killed someone and as you can see, the gun has a silencer”.

Participants from the women’s group were divided about the use of guns. Some were in favour of using them for self-defence:

“The gun is not just for gangs – people here have it to protect themselves [...] in this neighbourhood, the person who has the gun also has the power”, stated one woman.

Others rejected their use, arguing that guns led to collateral victims of violence, using the example of stray bullets:

“No more guns, please. There are already too many in the hands of the mareros [gang members] and if they would steal mine, it would be another one out there that could cause more harm”, argued one participant.

Both the group of women and the high school students identified gangs as being among the main factors behind armed violence in their community, particularly because of extortion.

“There’s rivalry [between gangs] to dominate the territory [...] because everyone wants to collect the extortion money”, explained a woman while discussing the link between criminality and the gangs’ turf wars.

Participants noted that extortion had become a normal experience for business owners, although private households could also be asked to pay a tax for ‘protection’ against rival groups. The group of high school students also commented on the consequences of not paying the extortion which according to some, could cost people their lives.

At the same time, some of the women believed the presence of gang members in the neighbourhood to be not always a bad thing. The problem, from the perspective of some participants, came from people outside the community.

“Violence hardly affects us, because the criminals know us. But if someone else who is not from here comes, that is when you have to watch out”, warned a woman who supported the idea that gangs would not target their own neighbours.

Some participants suggested that gangs not only do no harm to their communities, but that they also protect them from other criminal groups.

“Once they stole my cell phone, but this thief got confused and he didn’t recognise me. He must have found out from them [the gang] that I was a member of the COCODE [local citizen council], and at night they gave me my cell phone back and apologised for it”, recalled one participant as she reinforced the argument that gangs are can also be respectful to the community.

Participants from both discussion groups in Guatemala disliked the community’s reputation for violence and the stigma that they faced for living there. Some of the women acknowledged that it was harder for their family members, particularly young men, to find a formal job while living in that area because employers would not hire them, believing them to be criminals.

“People say you’re a criminal just because you live in a red zone, but there are other places that are more dangerous than here. We feel discriminated against”, said one of the high school students.

Although all participants in Guatemala were aware of the violence in their communities, they identified neighbouring areas as more dangerous than their own. Many participants insisted on this, even during an activity in which the research team projected a map of violence hotspots in the Villa Nueva municipality showing the selected community to be as affected as the neighbouring areas.

“It is safe here, but down there [pointing to a different area on the map], there are only gang members and thieves”, advised one of the high school students.

Within this discussion group, most participants confessed they had never visited neighbouring communities in Villa Nueva arguing that it would be too risky. The conclusions in the women’s group during the map activity were that one had to be very cautious when interacting with people outside the community, to avoid danger.

“You have to be careful about what you say or with whom you talk, because someone is always watching, especially when the tax [extortion] is not paid”, said one woman.

Women were also sceptical about the police, an institution that many participants saw as corrupt and inefficient. Some admitted that they never called the police about problems in the community, arguing that they had seen officers shaking hands with criminals. Participants from the group of high school students thought the police avoided patrolling specific areas in their neighbourhood, and sometimes turned a blind eye to crime. According to a discussion in the women’s group, relations between the security forces and

young people in the community are often problematic, because the latter are sometimes misidentified as criminals. For that reason, participants said that all young boys should avoid the streets after turning 15 years old.

Several participants preferred to see the military patrolling the streets, rather than the police, arguing that the levels of violence during the war – when the army played a central role in security – were lower. When comparing the two security forces, the group of high school students described soldiers as “less corrupt” and more able than police officers to impose respect and fear in the population. Out of 18 participants in one of the discussions, 16 were in favour of giving the military a more prominent role in security.

On the issue of gender, female participants said they struggled to obtain recognition and support for their active role in violence prevention in their communities:

“It has been tough to gain respect [...] but now people recognise our work”, said one woman when describing the challenges of having their own voice in their neighbourhood.

Despite having less free time than men in their households, they stressed that they always found time to contribute to the community through volunteering or attending local council meetings. Women also expressed frustration when interacting with men in general and law-enforcement authorities in particular, feeling that they were not taken seriously. That is why, as some explained, they rely on other women or their husbands to keep themselves safe outside the house.

“I feel safe when I’m accompanied, because when I go out alone something can happen to me”, said one woman who said she feels felt anxious when not walking in groups.

Participants from both the women’s groups and the high school students also discussed the humanitarian impact of armed violence. One woman said she once had to leave the community for two years because of the gang violence, and was not able to come back until the people who had threatened her were dead. She recalled her story as follows:

“When I was extorted, they asked me for an amount that I didn’t have. It was a lot of money and I couldn’t pay all that but the gangs followed me and followed my husband and my children. They shot at us once. That’s why we left... we came back [to the community] two years later when they killed those gang members”.

Participants from the women’s group explained that many of the empty houses, left by people who have fled the area, end up being occupied by gang members and used as strategic centres for their operations. One of the

high school students also shared a story of a relative who was sent to a rural area because of the pressure from gangs.

3.2.2 Honduras

In Honduras, the research team organised eight discussion groups. Two of them were in a high-risk neighbourhood in Tegucigalpa and the rest were in two bordering communities in Comayagüela. Most participants were children and young adults and, where possible, participants were separated by gender. Because of their young age, research in Honduras was framed as interactive activities to encourage discussions.¹²

Children in Honduras recalled how their parents and family members carried arms to protect themselves. The youngest participants of this research showed extensive knowledge of guns and their calibres.

“Once, I found a 9mm cap next to a crime scene”, said one 11-year old boy from Comayagüela as he described in detail the types of arms and ammunition he had seen in his neighbourhood. A participant from Tegucigalpa insisted he knew how to identify a fake gun by looking at a specific detail in the front sight.

In three discussion groups, participants were asked to choose one card from many with pictures of different weapons – a knife, a sharp object, a pepper spray, a frying pan, and a gun – with which to defend themselves in a hypothetical dangerous situation. In every activity, nearly all participants, regardless of their gender, opted for the firearm card. All the young women from the Comayagüela group argued they had chosen the gun over the knife because of its usefulness in attacking an opponent from a distance.



A street in Honduras.

¹² See table 2 in Annex 1 for more on the research methodology in Honduras, as well as a brief description of the activities.

“The gun does not fail”, said one of girls.

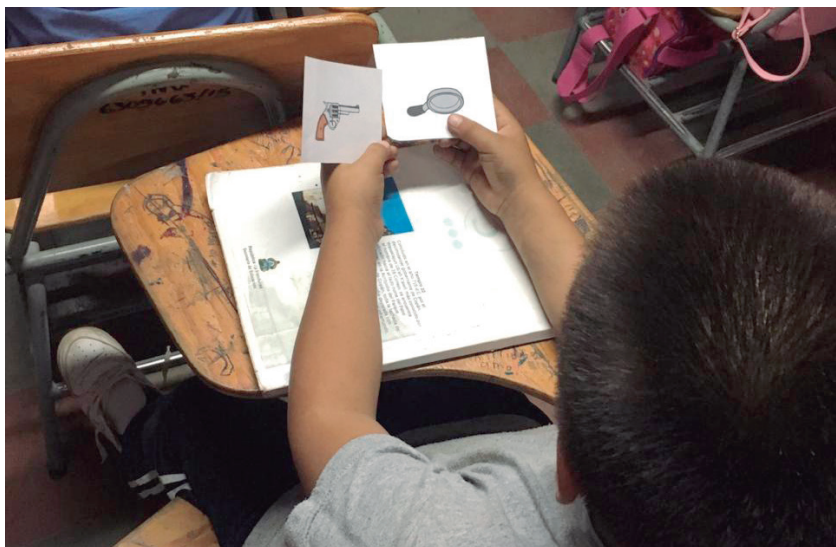
In a similar activity with schoolchildren in Tegucigalpa, every participant chose the gun card, also based on the logic of its effectiveness. Some participants, despite choosing the gun card, acknowledged the risks of using a firearm, including the legal consequences of firearm misuse.

In two activities with school children in Comayagüela and Tegucigalpa, the research team offered ‘superhero’ costumes to participants, and stimulated a discussion around what superpowers they would like to have. Children mentioned skills related to physical strength, resistance and the use of firearms as their preferred capacities for defeating evil.

“I want the power to be bullet-proof”, said some 10-year old children, “so that when someone shoots me, nothing will happen to me”, added one participant from Tegucigalpa, having made a similar reference.

Some participants referred to guns as a source of power and success in the community.

“The bigger the weapon, the greater the chances of winning a war”, stated one school boy, arguing that he would feel safer and more respected by others in his neighbourhood if he owned a gun. For some young men from the Comayagüela group, firearms were also associated with a stronger sense of masculinity and sexual desire.



During a workshop in Honduras participants chose how they would defend themselves in hypothetical dangerous scenarios. Nearly all participants opted for the firearm card.

“Woman like to see us armed [...] they go to bed with you faster [if you have a gun]”, affirmed one of the teenage boys.

Some of the young people from Comayagüela expressed sympathy for gangs because, in their view, gangs bring stability to the community:

“Here they [gang members] do not steal, the only thing they do is sell drugs, but they do not steal”, stressed a young boy.

One of the young girls considered it beneficial to have contacts in the local gang:

“Here the gang members already know us so nothing happens to us”, she said. Other female participants shared that argument.

Similarly, young men felt assured that the gangs “take care of the community”, with some saying that their members “aren’t so bad”.

Despite the high homicide rates registered in the selected communities in Comayagüela, young participants living there saw extreme armed violence as part of their daily life and considered shootings “normal”. All 11 children in a group of 10-years olds interviewed in Comayagüela, had witnessed a homicide next to their homes. As one child recalled:

“[...] once they [gang members] went into a house next door and killed a woman. They shot her three times”.

A girl from the same group shared said that her father had recently been shot in the street by criminals. Young girls from Comayagüela perceived their community as a hostile place for women, claiming to be frequent victims of harassment and abuse. To stay safe, participants said they chose to stay at home after sunset and generally avoided the streets:

“The place where I feel the safest is at my home”, said one of the girls.

Female participants were especially critical of law enforcement officials.

“Sometimes it is better when the police are not here”, said one participant from Comayagüela.

She had seen officers in her neighbourhood targeting young people and accusing them of being gang sympathisers without any evidence. Another participant from the same group recounted that she had been sexually assaulted by a police officer; for that reason she would not trust the police. Young girls condemned the lack of support and understanding of gender-related violence by other members of the community.

“We feel harassed. There may be people watching but they don’t get involved”, said one participant.

Girls from Comayagüela said that people in the neighbourhood had told them that they “deserve to be raped” because of how they dress. When young men from the same community were asked about these issues, one participant said that women “exaggerated”, arguing that gender-related violence was, in his view, not as common as girls said it was. One young boy believed that when an attacker was an intimate partner, gender-related violence should be treated as a private matter, not as a social problem:

“These things happen when there is no trust [in a couple]”.

3.3.3 El Salvador

In El Salvador, the research team held six activities in Quezaltepeque (San Salvador), Soyapango, and Apopa (both in the department of La Libertad) with 48 people. The issue of firearms could not be discussed as freely as in Guatemala and Honduras due to a lack of security. The research findings were therefore mostly related to the participants’ resilience to armed violence. Nonetheless, it was evident that all participants were familiar with firearms, and saw them as a part of everyday life in their neighbourhoods.

“In my community there are people with guns on the street all the time”, said a young adult from Apopa.

The issue of gang violence was latent in all discussions in El Salvador, but it was discussed more openly in the Soyapango group. The eight young men who participated in these discussions mentioned gangs as being among the main sources of armed violence and said that failure to collaborate with these groups could cost people their lives. Participants felt that gangs had been present in the neighbourhood for so long that community members were used to living with violence. Their role as the de facto authorities in the area includes collecting extortion money or acting as mediators in community disputes. With an extensive intelligence network of local informants, the young men from Soyapango agreed that gangs exercised tight control over what happened in their community.

“Even if they are not present all the time, they [gangs] always know what’s going on”, stated one participant.

The Soyapango group was located in a border zone between MS-13 and the 18th Street gang territories, putting the community in constant danger. Participants described how their community had become a buffer zone between these two gangs, where the groups would attack each other. They said the crossfire was even worse when the police arrived, making it unsafe

to walk outside most of the time. As a consequence, community members preferred to walk in groups, or stay at home, to avoid danger.

"Families in this community are terrified of violence", said one young man from this group.

Members of the Soyapango discussions also acknowledged the limitations of free movement in their community and explained they could be killed if they crossed into rival gang's territory.

"Sometimes it's to carry a backpack during an assault, deliver a cell phone, pick up an envelope, or just watch while a [gang] leader does something horrible... it's one of the few ways they are able to obtain money", explained a participant as he made the point that a lack of employment was an incentive for people to turn to gangs.

Testimonies of personal isolation in El Salvador were far more extreme than in Honduras and Guatemala. A group of ten parents from Quezaltepeque attributed this problem to the presence of gangs in their community, but argued that staying at home was a necessary evil to save young people's lives.

"Don't leave home because the danger is in the street", warned a participant.

"Families are always worried about their children because they don't know if they are coming back home at night", said another parent from Quezaltepeque who considered isolation the best way to stay safe in the community. Many families try to protect their children from contact with gang members by paying for private transportation so children do not have to walk back

home from school on their own, explained one participant.



The issue of invisible borders was raised in the discussion group formed by 30 young men and women from Apopa.

"For young people like us, there are no opportunities. We can only be locked up at home to avoid something bad happening to us" complained another participant.

A drawing from a research workshop called "My perspective of daily life in the community" by a teenage participant from Honduras; the text reads: "school" and "local development center".

Participants from Apopa also

argued that most people in their community suffered stigmatisation for living in that neighbourhood, which is known to be especially violent. Many considered this stigma was one of the reasons why young people had turned to gangs as a source of income. As one participant noted, bad propaganda from the community made people more afraid of their own neighbours:

“I wish people did not speak so badly about my community. It is true that there are gang members, but not all of us who live there are bad”.

In general, Salvadoran participants said they felt vulnerable when police and military officers patrolled their community, especially during anti-gang operations. According to participants from Quezaltepeque, these missions can become very violent as they usually target young people. They noted how, at the same time, some law-enforcement officers would also treat gangs with permissiveness, adding to the frustrations of the neighbourhood. The Soyapango group described their relations with the police as tense, and some acknowledged that seeing a police officer made them anxious. Many said they usually avoided talking to the police for fear of retaliation by gangs, who could target them as whistle-blowers.

In the three discussion groups, participants acknowledged the negative consequences of ‘mano dura’. For the Apopa and the Soyapango groups, the police too often saw young people as suspected gang members, and would target them based on that assumption regardless of evidence of gang involvement. Many participants noted that when the police came to the community to start threatening young people, the local population felt under attack as they witnessed their children being mistreated. Participants from Quezaltepeque agreed that repressive actions turned community members against law enforcement officials.

“Young people are the most at risk, because sometimes the police confuse them [with gang members] and beat them”, complained one participant.

Although not discussed in depth, the Soyapango group spoke about cases of people in their community who had been forced to flee from the tough realities of their neighbourhood. Participants from this group said they had relatives who had travelled to the United States undocumented because of the situation in their communities, relying on the large community of Salvadorans living in the United States. In their experience, the option of leaving El Salvador is one that everyone considers when thinking about ways to escape armed violence.

4.

Solutions to Armed Violence



A depiction of life in his community, by a Honduran participant. From left to right, the text reads: “dead”, “marihuana”, “school”, “gang”, “local development center”, “get out” and “happy”.

4.1 Recommendations from the Community Research

4.1.1 Guatemala

The creation of safe spaces for young people in the community was a major concern for participants of all the Guatemalan discussion groups. Trapped between gang violence and police abuse, the group of high school students were frustrated about the constant stigmatisation and lack of people they could trust in their own community.

“Adults will never give information as it is. They lie and get angry if you say things”, said one student from Villa Nueva.

Generational mistrust was also an anxiety factor in the women’s group, in which all of the participants were mothers. In this regard, some of the women acknowledged their need to better understand their children’s struggles of living in violent contexts and raised the possibility of having a parental group in the secondary school where they could exchange ideas about how to offer better support.

Most participants in Guatemala identified a lack of development and economic opportunities as a structural cause of crime in their community. The group of school students said they wished they had more after-school programmes, recreational spaces and centres such as libraries where they could escape the day-to-day challenges of the community.

“If there were sports or educational programmes, there would be fewer criminals”, stated one of the women.

Participants were keen on having more employment and training opportunities for young people to help prevent gang recruitment.

Women from Villa Nueva acknowledged that they struggled to be economically independent from their partners. This was also true for younger girls in the community who had become pregnant at an early age – a situation they felt had limited their capacity to develop professional skills. In their view, sexual educational programmes would be beneficial for all young people in the community, not just women. A Guatemalan prosecutor interviewed for this report also stressed the need to promote these types of initiatives, which in her experience, are essential in supporting women’s empowerment at the community level.

To reduce sexual harassment in public spaces, participants expressed interest in women-only buses, saying it might make them feel safer on their way to work or to school. To develop more strategies to protect Guatemalan women from the many forms of violence they are exposed to, a 2018 report from the research group Diálogos recommended public authorities gather more data related to gender-based violence. The report also noted that Guatemala’s Attorney General’s Office and the National Civil Police should have specialised officials dedicated exclusively to attending cases of gender-related violence. Indigenous women, who are often overlooked in the analysis of violence in Guatemala, should especially be taken into consideration.

4.1.2 Honduras

Young people living in high-risk communities in Honduras demanded more public recreational areas in their neighbourhoods.

“We need places where we can have fun, to get out of our homes”, said a young girl from Comayagüela in reference to the isolation problem.

Participants from the same neighbourhood asked for mental health support, arguing that many young people struggled with severe anxiety issues as a consequence of armed violence. With only one health centre in the area, tending to five communities, the group of young boys injured in armed confrontations. An international humanitarian worker based in Tegucigalpa,

who implements health care projects in high-risk areas, echoed the participants' demand for more investment in medical provision in neighbourhoods affected by gang violence. In his experience, the ambulance systems in Honduras do not work, meaning that "people arrive at hospitals [when they are] almost dead".

Participants also expressed interest in strengthening local networks of citizen participation. Boys from Comayagüela believed that supporting community organisations such as the 'patronatos' could encourage coexistence among community members. An expert interviewed agreed that the patronatos were an effective way of accessing communities given their track record of community representation, which gives them legitimacy. A Honduran criminologist highlighted the positive impact of a more recent network of local committees of violence prevention in Honduras which, she felt, deserved greater attention from donors for its contribution to violence reduction in the country's main urban areas. This interviewee explained this network had only been tested in pilot projects but encouraged further support for similar regional efforts of violence prevention at a local level.

The harsh testimonies from young people and children in Honduras evidenced the high levels of exposure to arms and criminality in their neighbourhoods, as well as their vulnerability and lack of support. An NGO director interviewed in Tegucigalpa criticised the low public spending on youth in Honduras, given that this group is the one that suffers violence more directly than any other. A study by the Central American Institute of Fiscal Studies found that the Honduran government increased its budgets for education and healthcare by 11% and 38% respectively between 2010 and 2016, while it increased military spending by 161% over the same period (ICEFI, 2015, p. 29).

4.1.3 El Salvador

The community research in El Salvador found conditions of extreme isolation affecting young people and evidence of the invisible borders phenomenon. To tackle these problems, participants from Soyapango asked for more public leisure facilities located strategically in gang-free locations where young people could walk freely without the fear of being targeted by either gangs or the police.

Participants from all discussion groups rejected *mano dura* strategies, arguing that they increased community mistrust in the security forces. Similarly, the director of a human rights NGO in El Salvador also condemned heavy-handed policing for generating a negative perception of the state in general at a local level. Similar to the reasoning of an aforementioned social worker logic was that, since, in his experience, public institutions were absent from many gang-controlled communities, police operations

were among the few interactions citizens had with the state, and that these interactions were often very negative. In his view, the government should aim for friendlier approaches:

“The presence of the state in the territory is not about bringing more police and military into the communities, but about [bringing] the institutions that can generate development within the community”, he summarised.

A Lutheran priest interviewed in San Salvador was also concerned about the state’s abandonment of some areas with a heavy gang presence, and considered it essential not to leave behind those living under extreme violence.

Participants from Soyapango felt there was a need to strengthen community relationships to increase trust among neighbours – something most thought could greatly contribute to armed violence reduction. Some participants from this group, pointed to churches as respected institutions that could promote community-building efforts. The group of eight men identified churches as safe, neutral spaces.

In the Quezaltepeque and the Soyapango groups there were demands for spaces for inter-generational dialogue between family members, with churches again presented as reliable mediators and community peacebuilders. In line with the participants’ demands, the UNODC noted in a 2012 report that family support and employment opportunities were key factors in the reduction of gang-related violence. This report highlighted the possible use of alternatives to imprisonment among potential initiatives that could offer routes out of criminal life (UNODC, 2012). Human rights advocate Jeanne Rikkers argued in a 2016 report on community violence that rehabilitation programmes for gang members face many challenges, including a lack of a legal framework and the precedent of a Supreme Court ruling that labels gang members as “terrorist groups”. This has closed the door to cooperation with many actors on this front (Rikkers, 2016).

4.2 Regional Recommendations

4.2.1 Small Arms and the Region’s Security Agenda

The expert testimonies and the findings from the community research shed some light on the high level of exposure of ordinary people in the Northern Triangle to firearms. Children as young as 8 in Honduras said they were able to identify a gun by its ammunition. In Guatemala, a high school student drew, with surprising precision, a pistol with a silencer. A Honduran arms experts noted that 60% of the surgeries in this country were related to bullet wounds. In many communities in El Salvador, “almost all problems are solved using firearms”, confirmed a priest.

This harsh reality contrasts with the low number of arms control initiatives in the region, as well as the lack of attention to this issue in each country's security strategies. According to a 2019 report by the civil society group FESPAD, Guatemala is the only country that has made armed violence reduction one of the pillars of its national strategy for violence prevention, giving arms control projects more relevance (FESPAD, 2019, p. 76). Neither El Salvador nor Honduras have integrated existing arms legislation within their own security plans, putting arms control initiatives at the bottom of their security agendas and challenging efforts to launch new projects into existing policy frameworks. Despite the extensive evidence mentioned in this report about the impact of small arms on criminality, policy makers interviewed throughout the region continued to question the need to discuss arms in a violence prevention context. This suggests a need for further research to emphasise the link between crime and firearms.

The FESPAD report – which covers the issue of firearm misuse and its social impact in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador – includes several good practices for the prevention of firearm misuse. The paper cites periodic meetings of police forces in the Northern Triangle and a former project, the Central American Programme on Small Arms Control (CASAC) – launched in 2006 by the Organization of American States to monitor and control small arms and light weapons (SALW) – as good models of regional coordination. According to the report's authors, some of the most urgent challenges on this front are:

- promoting the harmonisation of arms legislation in the three countries;
- improving each country's technical capacities; and,
- training justice and police officers in charge of ballistic investigation.

The report echoes the recommendations of experts interviewed for this report, relating to the prevention of arms trafficking and the illegal diversion of guns – the most common ways by which firearms end up in the hands of both civilians and criminals.

Finally, the FESPAD paper makes an urgent call to protect survivors of armed violence, who are often left with severe disabilities and can struggle with rehabilitation after an attack.

The testimonies from the community research suggest risk education campaigns to promote awareness of small arms misuse among children and young adults could have a positive impact. These could include large-scale gun awareness campaigns in the mass media and risk awareness sessions with teachers in schools. A 2018 paper by Diálogos recommended risk awareness initiatives to educate civilians on the dangers of carrying firearms

for protection and on how violent incidents increase when firearms are available.

A 2009 report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlighted the case study of ‘Viva Rio’ in Brazil as a successful model of an arms awareness campaign. This project was developed in Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1990s, and was specifically targeted at young people living in marginalised areas. The project had a broad scope, including legislative and public mobilisation campaigns on arms control. The OECD reports that, by 2003, Viva Rio had contributed to approving a new gun law in Brazil, and was “considered largely responsible for a 12% drop in the number of gun deaths in Brazil between 2004 and 2006” (OECD, 2009, pp.74-77).

While homicide rates in the region affect mostly young men, testimonies gathered in Guatemala and Honduras from women and young girls indicate that they too are victims of firearm misuse. The civil society group, the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) has campaigned for years on the importance of including a gender lens in small arms control policies, given the vulnerability of women. The organisation explained in a June 2018 statement:

“[...] a gender lens can explain the persistence of socially constructed gender stereotypes, linking small arms ownership, use and misuse to specific expressions of masculinity related to control, power, domination and strength” (IANSA, 2018).

IANSA highlights the importance of promoting the participation of women in decision-making bodies related to arms control. Such promotion is still underdeveloped in the Northern Triangle, not least because most arms-re-



Parked buses in a community in Guatemala.

lated institutions are led by the military, whose members are mostly men. Finally, IANSA highlights a need for more sex-aggregated data on small arms ownership to give a clearer idea of how women are affected by small arms misuse. A Salvadoran arms expert highlighted that records of domestic violence are not checked when revising reviewing applications for arms licenses in El Salvador.

Interviewees in the Northern Triangle acknowledged the availability of illegal firearms in vulnerable neighbourhoods fuelled by regional trafficking networks. Many young participants from the community research spoke openly about firearms and ammunition, were familiarised with them, and even said they had seen or handled guns. Arms experts in the three countries recommended an increase in control mechanisms when licensing arms permits, so that future gun owners would be properly screened.

A 2008 report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) mentioned the positive impact of initiatives that reduce the availability of weapons. Such initiatives include arms bans, when licenses to carry arms are suspended for specific periods of time, frequently at weekends when most violent acts take place. The WHO report highlights the arms ban in Cali (Colombia) as an example of a successful model, arguing that it contributed to a 14% reduction of homicides in that city during the 1990s (WHO, 2008, p. 29). El Salvador has also implemented arms bans since 2006 in specific municipalities which, according to an expert interviewed, have been successful.

In a 2017 report, arms experts Peter Danssaert and Brian Wood highlighted the issue of arms surplus in El Salvador, and recommended the destruction of weapons. The authors raised concerns about the fact that the country's current levels of armed violence are higher than those registered during its armed conflict, stressing the importance of securing military storage arsenals against potential leaks of arms onto the black market. According to the report, "[...] these measures will reduce the likelihood of weapons and ammunition falling into the wrong hands, but only if the military improves its procedures and if the justice and law enforcement systems operate effectively" (Danssaert and Wood, 2017 p.7-8).

A 2012 UNODC report also suggested the number of confiscated arms guarded by the military, was too high in the Northern Triangle and recommended that governments acquire mobile machinery to speed up the destruction of weapons (UNODC, 2012, p.34).

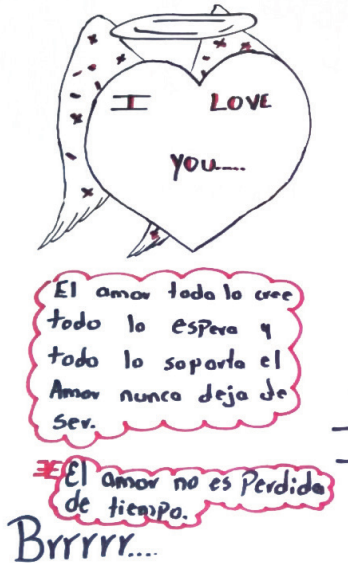
4.2.2 Community-Based Violence Prevention

Iron-fist strategies employed by governments in the Northern Triangle to tackle armed violence have clearly inflicted suffering in vulnerable commu-

nities, as the testimonies gathered for this report show. Participants in the three countries fearfully described law-enforcement operatives who often mistreat young people as suspected gang members. Stories of violent encounters with police were common, with one young girl from Honduras claiming to have been sexually harassed by an officer. Security experts and civil society leaders interviewed acknowledged that, although law-enforcement is necessary, ‘mano dura’ approaches have very negative consequences for people living in gang-controlled areas.

Instead, they advised the prioritisation of projects based on economic and educational opportunities for stigmatised children and adolescents, who are the most affected by both criminal violence and repression.

Alternative mechanisms to ‘mano dura’ can be successful in lowering gang violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. A 2016 study by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on evidenced-based violence prevention projects mentions the Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) programme in Los Angeles (United States) as a go-to model. The report explains that GRYD targeted prevention strategies at both community members and at-risk youth in gang violence hotspots. The result has been, according to the USAID report citing data from the project’s evaluators, a 48% decrease in assaults, a 23% reduction in registered gang-related fights, and a 33% reduction in homicides (USAID, 2016, p. 29).



A participant’s interpretation of a verse from The Bible: 1 Corinthians 13:7. The text reads: Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ceases to be.

The experts interviewed in the three countries recommended community-focused violence prevention programmes as a substitute for ‘mano dura’ plans. Although not fully nor equally developed throughout the region, these types of initiatives are already in place. The Guatemalan model, known by its Spanish acronym ‘COCODES’ (Community Development Councils), is being implemented in the municipality of Villa Nueva, where the community research of this report took place. According to police officers with a leadership role in these councils, the COCODES have transformed former vigilante groups that emerged after the war into community councils that promote peaceful interactions between citizens and the authorities.

Unlike similar initiatives in Honduras and

El Salvador, COCODES has a track-record of successful coordination between community members and local authorities. Civic leaders interviewed who are part of the COCODES in Villa Nueva celebrated the positive outcomes of the system, which they said had created a space for the community's needs and facilitated requests for specific public funds for projects. According to participants, the greater council is sub-divided into thematic sections focusing on issues such as development, security or social needs. The key point of the model is that both citizens and representatives of government institutions (such as the Attorney General's office or the police) actively attend these meetings, creating a link between public officials and ordinary citizens.

According to Juan Estrada, from the Villa Nueva local police, the COCODES have also become a successful policing tool, helping law enforcement to become more community-orientated and giving officers a chance to interact with citizens in a safe space. A representative from an international children's NGO in Guatemala believed the impact of COCODES on rebuilding community networks to be evident.

"If you are not in the COCODES, you can't implement anything", she stated.

In recent years, the Guatemalan civil society group IEPADES has led efforts to support the COCODES model in Guatemalan municipalities that have high risk areas (such as Villa Nueva and Mixco) under the project 'Convivimos' which ended in 2019. Interviewed members of this institution encouraged other organisations to keep supporting the COCODES, as the government's core funding for these kind of initiatives is still very limited.

El Salvador's own model has been implemented slowly since 2009, when the government launched its first attempts at community-based violence prevention. Under the Plan 'Safe El Salvador', authorities, with the support of the UNDP, created local councils similar to the Guatemalan COCODES. However, attendance by both citizens and public institutions was limited and varied between municipalities (International Crisis Group, 2017b).

The current government of El Salvador has put nearly all the prevention-based initiatives of previous administrations on pause, launching instead its own plans such as the creation of a team for the 'reconstruction of the social fabric'. Security experts interviewed in El Salvador were critical of what they saw as the government lack of real support for violence prevention, arguing that, despite his new rhetoric on security, his policy so far has been, in essence, to implement the same 'mano dura' approach as previous administrations.

Community-based violence prevention initiatives are least developed in Honduras. The 'patronatos' model mentioned in the previous section is

the oldest system of citizen participation, although it is mostly focused on development issues rather than security. The more recent local councils for violence prevention, similar to the COCODES, are the most relevant projects in this regard. However, an expert interviewed noted that their implementation had been limited and that they had received minimal attention from the national government, which had shown more interest in demonstrating the results of its ‘mano dura’ plans than it had in investing in prevention.

4.2.3 Protecting Vulnerable Groups

The participants’ demands in Guatemala and El Salvador for family network support as a resilience mechanism against armed violence have proven to be successful, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). A 2010 report by this institution mentioned that the development of safe relationships between victims and their parents or caregivers was a key goal of youth-focused violence prevention. Reinforcing this interaction during the child’s first years is especially important because, according to research evidence mentioned in the WHO report, it has a positive impact on mental and physical health during teenage years and adulthood (WHO, 2010, p.5). A more recent WHO report also identified home visiting programmes, in which nurses make periodic visits to children’s houses, as a successful model for the prevention of child abuse. The report mentions that this type of project has proven successful in the United States, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands (WHO, 2015, pp.22-23).



A drawing depicting gender based violence in the community by a Guatemalan participant. The text reads: “violence” and the dialogue boxes from right-to-left read “why do you hit me” and “because the man rules here”.

A desire for more spending on education and healthcare was a common denominator in community discussions around solutions to armed violence. The 2019 ‘Global Study On Homicide’ by the UNODC found evidence of a decrease in violent killings after the implementation of prevention-based programmes with an educational focus in Latin America:

“[...] this suggests

that such [education] policies may play a more significant role in reducing interpersonal violence than any specific crime prevention or punishment policy” (UNODC, 2019a, p. 30).

The 2015 WHO report also recommended after-school programmes as a violence prevention strategy as these fill young people’s schedules after they finish school, minimising their chances of interaction with criminal groups. This paper highlights the case study of the ‘Abrindo Espaços’ (Open Schools) initiative launched by UNESCO and the Brazilian Ministry of Education in 2004, after which the evaluators registered a 46% drop in violent acts in areas near the schools where the project was implemented (WHO, 2015, pp. 37-38).

Regarding the concerns expressed by both community members and experts interviewed about mental health issues, a 2016 report by USAID highlighted the positive outcomes of psychological therapy with vulnerable young populations in the Northern Triangle. Its authors mentioned that the effects of projects using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – a psychological technique that seeks to alter distorted behaviour – were remarkable:

“[CBT] has been effective in reducing recidivism of juvenile and adult offenders, in institutional or community settings [...] No other intervention in this report can match its reliability and versatility. CBT was associated with a relatively large 25% average decrease in recidivism, but when the most effective types of CBT were used, recidivism declined 52%” (USAID, 2016, p.14).

Women and girls who participated in the community research condemned how common it was to be physically and sexually abused in their neighbourhoods, and criticised a lack of support for victims. In one of the Guatemalan discussions, the women’s group shared stories of friends who did not feel safe at home because they suffered domestic violence by their partners. Women should, according to the 2019 UNODC report on homicides, be at the centre of violence prevention approaches given their extreme vulnerability.

“Killings of women by intimate partners represent the culmination of long-term violence and they can be prevented”, concluded the report as it tried to establish a link between gender-based violence and criminality.

To tackle this problem, this report recommends:

- training law-enforcement officials in how to assist female violence victims more sensitively;
- implementing tougher sentences for perpetrators of domestic violence; and,

- increasing resources for victims, such as shelters or helplines.

A Guatemalan prosecutor interviewed mentioned that a “panic button” mobile app for female victims of domestic violence had been tested, saying she considered it a promising pilot project that could be rolled out further in the country.

4.2.4 Community Policing

Most interviewees from the community research, regardless of age, gender or country of origin, shared negative impressions of the police. The testimonial evidence shows a significant lack of trust in law enforcement officials, who were considered inefficient and corrupt by many participants. Police interviewed in the three countries acknowledged their detachment from communities and identified gangs’ influence in some neighbourhoods as the main challenge in building social support. According to the UNODC, this problem is often caused by the militarisation of public security under ‘mano dura’ approaches. In a 2012 report, it described the difference between militarised and local police as follows:

“[...] militarised police forces around the world live in barracks, patrol in large groups, and are encouraged to see themselves as an arm of the state, independent of the populace. Democratic policing, in contrast, is about moving closer to the people, increasing accountability, contact, and individual interaction with communities” (UNODC, 2012, p. 76).

There is evidence of the positive impact of community policing programmes. In its 2016 report, the USAID mentions research studies in the region that back the effectiveness of hotspot policing, which in the Northern Triangle context would seem a more sensible strategy than massive raids in areas with a heavy gang presence (USAID, 2016, p. 11). A 2014 paper by criminologist Charlotte Gill analysed 25 studies on community policing worldwide and found that these projects had led to more positive public perceptions of the police and lower perceptions of insecurity (Gill, 2014).

The three Northern Triangle countries have integrated community policing programmes into their security strategies. According to police officers interviewed, El Salvador’s system has a strong emphasis on social and situational violence prevention. This model is supposed to be articulated with the aforementioned local violence prevention committees, but officials interviewed admitted it was hard to maintain a community-oriented mindset while also implementing heavy-handed security operations.

In Guatemala, the programme follows the ‘Police Model On Integral Community Security’ (MOPASIC). According to its manual, this system is based

on delegating public security responsibilities to small-scale police teams called ‘sectors’ which are in charge of articulating efforts by other specialised units, depending on community needs (PNC, 2014, p.9). According to a former Guatemalan police officer, the Guatemalan model does not select police officers from within their own community, but rather assigns officers to locations where they have no connection with the local population. This is because, according to his experience, they observed that the local population tended to take the local authority less seriously if they knew them previously.

Honduras has the so-called ‘Modelo catracho’ (Honduran model), which focuses on urban security. In recent years, the Honduran police has gone through an intense reform that has, according to a 2019 Wilson Centre report, transformed the leadership, legal framework, and philosophy of the institution. The Wilson Centre report explores how this institution went from being “the least-trusted police body in the Western Hemisphere” in 2004 to having a confidence rate of 74.7%, registered in 2017 in a survey by the Security Ministry (Dye, 2019, pp. 3-6,37). Its author David R. Dye explains that, although the police reform process has shown important achievements, “[...] much more will have to be done to consolidate the commitment to effective police-community relations and enhance the limited gains made to date in police legitimacy and credibility” (Dye, 2019, p.45).



This study also mentions challenges for the ‘modelo catracho’, including resistance by more military-minded high-ranking police officers who oppose the model; scarce economic resources; and frequent rotation of patrol officers.

A group of teenage girls during a research session in Guatemala discussing solutions for a neighbourhood free from violence.

5.

Conclusion

The first sections of this report contextualised the root causes of the small arms problem in the Northern Triangle. After several decades of violent civil war, during which the arming of civilians was a central aspect of state strategies in El Salvador and Guatemala, public authorities did not fully implement a disarmament process. Patchy disarmament became particularly dangerous in the context of the spike in criminal violence that took place during late 1990s and early 2000s. The expansion of criminal groups, mostly street gangs and drug-traffickers, increased incentives for ordinary citizens to buy arms to keep themselves safe in increasingly violent neighbourhoods. During that time, the security sector boomed and higher demand for arms multiplied the number of legal weapons diverted onto the black market, where both citizens and criminal groups found a cheaper supply of guns.

The literature review explained how, to tackle the high levels of violence registered in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, governments in the three countries implemented ‘mano dura’ strategies based on militarised policing and mass incarcerations of gang members. These groups are, according to public officials, the main sources of violence in the region. Homicide rates have decreased in recent years – a fact governments attribute to their heavy-handed approaches. However, this report found no evidence linking lower homicide rates and ‘mano dura’ policies. In fact, the community research suggested such policies had a negative impact at grassroots level. Participants from the three countries rejected their governments’ approaches to tackling violence in their neighbourhoods, arguing that they had increased social mistrust. Security experts interviewed throughout the region stressed this point saying that ‘mano dura’ policies had turned community members “against the state” and contributed to the stigmatisation of neighbourhoods under gang influence.

The participants’ descriptions of daily life in their communities evidence their extreme vulnerability to armed violence across the region. Many described how gangs are the de-facto authority in their neighbourhoods, exercising rigid territorial control and violently punishing those who cross into rival groups’ territories. Young men from El Salvador are said to live under conditions of total isolation, confined almost permanently to their own neighbourhoods, and sometimes their own homes. Adolescents from Guatemala also complained that, on top of gang violence, they sometimes also suffer police abuse and are accused, without evidence, of gang membership.

Children interviewed in Honduras said they had witnessed homicides next to their houses, or had relatives killed by the gangs. This reality has, according to participants themselves, devastating psychological and physical effects. Experts have observed how people living in vulnerable areas have become passive to violence, and accustomed to fear, social mistrust, and constant stigmatisation.

The burden of women and young girls living in selected communities is no less great than that of the men. Even if men are more often the lethal victims of violent killings, the literature review shows women more often suffer as survivors of armed violence. Women-only groups in Guatemala and Honduras described the numerous forms of gender violence that take place in their neighbourhoods, including physical, sexual and domestic abuse. When asked about their preferred solutions, participants demanded more initiatives to make women feel safer in the community, such as women-only buses or more dedicated public services to help victims of violence. This report has gathered literature evidence of how investment in gender violence prevention has a positive impact on the overall security challenge, given the vital role it plays in de-escalating structural violence in these countries.

The harsh realities of the communities often become unbearable for citizens, many of whom are forced to flee. The formation of migrant caravans, which are among other factors caused by violence at the community level, exemplifies the gravity of the humanitarian situation in the Northern Triangle. This issue has transcended the local sphere, becoming a priority for governments across the region as migration agreements have reached the top of the agenda for political institutions in the United States, Mexico, and Central America (Hackman, 2019).

This report has compiled evidence of the link between small arms and the Northern Triangle's security crisis. The clearest example is that, on average, 8 out of 10 homicides in the region are committed with a firearm. Guns may not directly cause lethal crime, but they play a determinant factor in the exercise of violence. This is especially true in communities with a heavy criminal presence where, according to experts, firearms are the most effective tool for gangs to inflict fear and social control over citizens. The younger participants in this research made a direct association between arms and daily life in their communities and had become accustomed to their presence. The lack of risk awareness of firearm misuse was clear during the activity in which young people and children were asked to choose a weapon with which to defend themselves – the gun was the first option in almost all cases.

Paradoxically, arms control initiatives have been scarce, and usually kept separate from each country's security strategies. Guatemala is the only coun-

try that has a section dedicated to armed violence reduction in its national violence prevention strategy. In El Salvador and Guatemala, arms control is addressed under special legislation, which challenges the integration of new initiatives into existing policy frameworks. However, several sources cited in this report mention the need for important reform in this regard. Possibilities worth exploring include the implementation of firearms risk awareness campaigns in schools, and moves to test the impact of arms bans, which appear to have shown positive results in El Salvador. To avoid the diversion of legal arms onto the black market, this report cited recommendations related to improving regional cooperation in arms trafficking; improving the technical capacities of public officials on ballistics; and destroying the arms surplus. Support for survivors of armed violence remains underdeveloped in the three countries and could be improved. Finally, a gender approach on any future initiatives on arms control could make them more relevant.

The community research pointed to more citizen participation, and employment and education opportunities as solutions to armed violence. The literature review showed how the region's economic inequality, poverty rates, and low school enrolment have a direct impact on levels of armed violence. The strengthening of community networks was a key demand of participants, who requested more spaces for interaction between citizens and public authorities. Greater support for the Guatemalan model of the COCODES and the municipal violence prevention committees in El Salvador and Honduras could have a positive impact in restoring trust within communities, currently at risk as a consequence of gang violence and *mano dura* policies. If sustained over time, security experts are confident such models could provide sustainable solutions, reducing violent killings in the region.

Police mistrust was repeatedly mentioned in community discussions, and on some occasions, participants considered gangs to have more control of their neighbourhoods than law-enforcement officials. Police officers acknowledged the challenges of interacting with ordinary citizens in highly violent contexts and stated that many communities see gangs as protectors, rather than generators of violence. A model of community policing, already being implemented in the Northern Triangle, could provide opportunities to create closer relations between law enforcement and vulnerable communities, and improve public perceptions of the state. Research evidence mentioned in this report has shown the positive effects of community-oriented policing, which could be further promoted in order to give citizens more positive experiences of the state and diminish gang influence in high-risk neighbourhoods.

Despite the historical tendency of governments in the Northern Triangle to tackle lethal violence through iron-fist, cooperation actors and NGOs

willing to support violence prevention efforts in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, should consider the recommendations included in this report to design and implement much-needed armed violence prevention projects at a community level.



A neighbourhood in Guatemala.

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Annexes

Annex 1. Community Research Methodology

Table 1. Community research in Guatemala

	Date	Location	Number and profile of participants	Session topic
Session 1. Group discussion, women	22 July 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	8 participants, middle-age women living in selected Villanueva community	Discussion: "The women's role in the community"
Session 2. Group discussion, high school students	23 July 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	13 participants, 10 boys and 3 girls, all students between 13-18 years-old attending a secondary school in selected Villanueva community	Discussion: "Daily life in the community."
Session 3. Group discussion, women	30 July 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	8 participants, middle-age women living in selected Villanueva community	Discussion: "How safe do I feel in my community?"
Session 4. Group discussion, high school students	30 July 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	14 participants, all students between 13-18 years-old attending a secondary school in selected Villanueva community	Discussion: "Girls vs boy's perception of insecurity"
Session 5. Group discussion, women	6 August 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	5 participants, middle-age women living in selected Villanueva community	Role-playing: "which weapon would you choose to protect yourself?"*
Session 6. Group discussion, high school students	7 August 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	13 participants, all students between 13-18 years-old attending a secondary school in selected Villanueva community	Drawing exercise: "live in the community" and Role playing: "which weapon would you choose to protect yourself?"**

	Date	Location	Number and profile of participants	Session topic
Seesion 7. Group discussion, high school students	14 August 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	18 participants, all students between 13-18 years-old attending a secondary school in selected Villanueva community	Discussion: "Solutions for a violence-free neighbourhood"
Session 8. Group discussion, women	21 August 2019	Villanueva, Guatemala	9 participants, middle-age women living in selected Villanueva community	Discussion: "Solutions for a violence-free neighbourhood"

**In this specific activity, the discussion leader posed hypothetic dangerous scenarios in the community, and ask participants to chose a weapon to defend themselves (including a knife, a gun, a pepper spray, a baseball bat, or none).*

*** In this activity, participants were asked to draw their community, and later they did a similar exercise than in session 5 with the women' discussion group to choose from different weapons to defend themselves in hypothetical scenarios.*

Table 2. Community research in Honduras

	Date	Location	Number and profile of participants	Session topic
Session 1. Group discussion, teenagers*	24 July 2019	Comay-agüela, Central District, Honduras	12 participants, 4 teenage boys and 8 teenage girls, living in selected Comayagüela community	Drawing exercise: "my perspective of daily life in the community"
Session 2. Group discussion, children	26 July 2019	Comay-agüela, Central District, Honduras	11 participants, children (both boys and girls) living in selected Comay-agüela community	Role-play: "My superhero powers"***
Session 3. Group discussion, teenage girls	30 July 2019	Comay-agüela, Central District, Honduras	10 participants, teenage girls living in selected Comay-agüela community	Discussion: "Insecurity from a gender perspective"
Session 4. Group discussion, teenage boys	1 August 2019	Comay-agüela, Central District, Honduras	7 participants, young men girls living in selected Comay-agüela community	Discussion: "which weapon would you choose to protect yourself?"***

	Date	Location	Number and profile of participants	Session topic
Session 5. Group discussion, teenage girls	10 August	Comayagüela, Central District, Honduras	11 participants, young women living in selected Comayagüela community	Role-play: “which weapon would you choose to protect yourself?”***
Session 6. Group discussion, children	14 August 2019	Tegucigalpa, Honduras	14 participants, children (8 boys and 6 girls) living in selected Tegucigalpa community	Role-play: “which weapon would you choose to protect yourself?”***
Session 7. Group discussion, children	14 August 2019	Tegucigalpa, Honduras	10 participants, children (5 boys and 5 girls) living in selected Tegucigalpa community	Discussion: “How safe do I feel in my neighbourhood?”
Session 8. Group discussion, teenage girls	17 August 2019	Comayagüela, Central District, Honduras	13 participants, (11 boys and 2 girls) living in selected Comayagüela community	Discussion: “recommendations to build my ideal community”

* The first session with the teenagers was mixed, but the following ones were separated between boys and girls to facilitate the discussion and encourage girls to talk more openly about violence in their community.

** This activity was an interactive role-playing discussion in which children participants were disguised as “superheroes”, and asked to chose a “superpower” to defend themselves and fight evil. The logic behind the activity was to test the children’s view on guns as a possible “superpower” for protection from dangerous situations in the community and discuss insecurity issues in an indirect way.

*** In this specific activity, the discussion leader posed hypothetical dangerous scenarios in the community, and ask participants to chose a weapon to defend themselves (including a knife, a sharp object, a pepper spray, a frying pan, and a gun).

Table 3. Community research in El Salvador

	Date	Location	Number and profile of participants	Session topic
Session 1. Group discussion, young men	3 August 2019	Soyapango, San Salvador, El Salvador	8 participants, men in their 20s living in selected Soyapango community	Discussion: “daily life in my community”

	Date	Location	Number and profile of participants	Session topic
Session 2. Group discussion, parents	3 August 2019	Quezaltepeque, La Libertad, El Salvador	10 participants, parents living in Quezaltepeque	Discussion (single session)*: "peace and family relationships"
Session 3. Group discussion, teenagers	10 August 2019	Apopa, San Salvador, El Salvador	30 participants, teenagers (both boys and girls) part of a theatre group living in the municipality of Apopa	Discussion (single session)**: "life in my community"
Session 4. Group discussion, young men	11 August 2019	Soyapango, San Salvador, El Salvador	8 participants, men in their 20s living in selected Soyapango community	Discussion: "how safe do I feel in my community?"
Session 5. Group discussion, young men	16 August 2019	Soyapango, San Salvador, El Salvador	8 participants, men in their 20s living in selected Soyapango community	Discussion: "being a victim of violence"
Session 6. Group discussion, young men	19 August 2019	Soyapango, San Salvador, El Salvador	8 participants, men in their 20s living in selected Soyapango community	Discussion: "solutions to reduce armed violence in my community"

*** This was a single session in which participants discussed their perception of the community, security problems, and solutions to armed violence during one session. This was different than the group in Quezaltepeque, where participants had more time to discuss each topic in separate sessions. ** Idem.*

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When asked to draw something representative of his community, a boy from Guatemala drew a gang member carrying a gun with precise detail, he said "I wanted to draw a gang member who is wanted by the police because he had killed someone and, as you can see, the gun had a silencer".



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