

# Working Group on Violence Free Communities

## «Involvement of Children in Gang Violence»

Presentation

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Q: *Have you already killed anyone?*

A: *Yeah, I've already killed a few.*

Q: *And how do you feel about that? Do you think it's normal?*

A: *I think it's normal. I'm used to it already. Since I was a kid, I've seen people killed. In the war of 94 [1994], I saw a lot of people killed. I got used o it. Now I don't care anymore. [...]*

Q: *[...] How old were you at this time?*

A: *I was 10 years old.*

Teenage drug trafficker in Rio de Janeiro

## Introduction

Over two days we have been discussing the issue of violence against children. And mainly the issue of violence practiced by adults against children. The issue I will address now is that of children who are both victims but also the authors of violence. And in this context I will address the question of gang violence – because the majority of children who are authors of violence and are in conflict with the law are simultaneously gang members. Even those juveniles who commit offences alone are likely to be associated with groups.<sup>2</sup>

As you may know, in Europe the rate of juvenile violence rose sharply in the mid-1980s or early 1990s. In some countries, the official figures increased between 50 and 100 percent. In Germany the growth rate was even higher.

This presentation is divided in 10 parts:

1. What is a gang?
2. What are the risk factor making children join gangs?
3. Examples of some personal stories of children who joined gangs
4. Resilience factors protecting children from joining gangs
5. Subjective reasons for children joining gangs
6. Why have gangs become involved in criminal activities?
7. At what age do children join gangs?
8. How does the State react to problem of youth gangs?
9. Best practices for dealing with youth gangs
10. Recommendations

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<sup>2</sup> World Youth Report 2005: Juvenile Delinquency, para 85.

## 1. What is gang violence?

Although there is no single, accepted definition of gang, a youth gang is commonly thought of as an

«organization of the street composed of either 1. the socially excluded or 2. alienated, demoralized, or bigoted elements of a dominant racial, ethnic, or religious group»<sup>3</sup>

Some authors define a gang as an organised association of peers with «a gang name and recognisable symbols, identifiable leadership, a geographic territory, a regular meeting pattern and collective actions to carry out activities»<sup>4</sup>. This may be the case in many situations, but not in all. For example, in Portugal, the existing youth gangs have extremely informal and volatile characteristics and are formed on a spontaneous basis. Of course this characteristic has an enormous influence on the difficulties public authorities have to deal with them, given the fact that they have an enormous capacity to regenerate themselves. If some important members of a well organised gang are caught, this has a profound influence in its ability to operate. However, if the structures are loose and informal, even if some members of a gang are caught, some hours or days later, that gang has already found new members and is able to operate again.

## 2. Risk Factors

These risk factors are external to the gangs themselves and are common to the emergence and continued existence of youth gangs. These are namely:

**1. Existence of urban enclaves of poverty:** organised armed violence is not a problem that affects urban areas uniformly. Groups dominate specific territories within urban centres, in areas that are considerably poorer than the cities that surround them, are differentiated geographically and socially, and are often referred to locally by a specific name such as *favela*, *comuna*, ghetto, township or *barrio*. These areas have often been victims of a bad urbanisation policy.

Socio-economic inequality of local populations within these areas compared with other sectors of society has been an important factor in the establishment and continued activity of groups. Furthermore, the clear geographical demarcation of these areas has been key to their ability to define and dominate territory. In the those cases where groups find themselves in non urban settings, their territorial lines are set along established ethnic and clan demarcations, as opposed to distinct urban areas. Within these settings poverty has also been an important factor in the establishment and continued existence of local armed groups.

**2. Subsistence of high percentage of youth, disproportionately low levels of education and disproportionately high levels of unemployment:** local populations have a proportionally high percentage of children and youth in many of the areas in which groups are active.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/kbc/Definitions/hagdef.html>.

<sup>4</sup> James C. Howeel, "Youth Gangs", in OJJDP Fact Sheet, December 1997, Nr 2.

Importantly, within these settings young people tend to have both disproportionately low levels of formal education, and are affected by disproportionately high levels of unemployment compared with other age groups within their communities / neighbourhoods / cities.

As a result, local armed groups offering access to employment, money, social ascension, status and power have a willing pool of recruits, deeming forced recruitment an unnecessary tactic. I WILL COME BACK TO THIS ASPECT LATER ON.

**3. Limited or differentiated State presence:** In some areas where gangs are to be found, research shows that the State is almost totally absent. Limited or absent security forces and other public services lead to a break down of the social contract between local residents and the State. As the State becomes ever more distant, armed groups will inevitably become a stronger presence; dominion of territory, resources and local populations is made easier as local residents are alienated from governments that fail to protect and serve them.

As these groups become ever more entrenched due to a limited state presence, they may in turn inhibit the entrance of State forces through their relationship with the local population and by becoming a more ostensibly and openly armed force.

**4. State corruption:** in addition to a limited presence, the State is frequently directly or indirectly involved with armed groups. This may be through direct financial or military support, or more typically through corrupt State representatives, primarily the police. It is questionable that these armed groups would have such a high level of access to weapons, illicit economies or an ability to dominate the territories in which they are active if this was not the case.

**5. Violent state apparatus:** in some situations, the armed groups do not begin as criminal organisations, but tend to become so over time, often concurrently with a process of state repression against them. In many situations States are responsible for attempting to deal with armed groups primarily via reactive and repressive policing and legislative policy. At worst, this includes arbitrary imprisonment, torture and summary executions. States cannot be held responsible for the violence which armed groups perpetrate. However, their focus on repression has failed in most cases to reduce either the presence of the groups or the levels of violence in which they are involved. In some cases repressive tactics have considerably worsened the problem as some groups have reacted by becoming increasingly organised, armed and willing to directly confront state forces.

**6. Access to illicit economies:** Armed groups fund themselves completely or in part through illicit or criminal activities, primarily drug dealing. This has been a defining feature for many groups in their increasing territorialisation, use of violence and in some cases exertion of control over local populations. If access to illicit economies was denied to these groups, through the legalisation of banned drugs for example, their financial self-sustainability would be greatly diminished. This would decrease their ability to offer local youths an alternative to poverty and unemployment, as well as their ability buy firearms and corrupt state representatives, especially street-based police officers.

**7. Access to small arms:** firearms are tools that can be used for the domination of territory, local populations and resources, especially illicit ones. Armed groups have easy access to sophisticated firearms, including those designed for warfare, due to: low levels of state gun control within the countries in question; high levels of small arms proliferation within the regions in question and/or groups being active in areas that are on illicit small arms transit routes.

### 3. Personal stories of children who join youth gangs

There are some common trends in the personal histories of child and youth members of armed groups, namely in relation to their family, educational and economic backgrounds.

#### 1. Family background

The following commonalities were identified:

**1.1. Single parent families:** The most striking similarity relating to the family backgrounds of children and youths, namely among those children interviewed for studies undertaken on the subject of youth gangs and armed violence by children, was that for those who still lived at home, many lived with only one parent, invariably their mother. For example, in Ecuador, 80% of under 18 year-old *pandilleros* interviewed after being detained in halfway houses (*Hogar de Transito*) lived with only one parent, usually their mother. In some cases parents had split up, in others fathers had simply abandoned the family or had been killed.

**1.2. Violence in the home and poor relations with the family:** many of the children also report violence in the home. For example, in interviews done to children in Ecuador interviewees commented that poor communication with parents was their worst problem at home and all said they preferred their *pandilla* or *nacion* to their family.

In Portugal, for example, the existence of poor relations within the family and destructured families, also leads to a situations where the children/ juveniles live their lives literally during the night. They avoid their families by sleeping during the day, wake up in the afternoon (for example at 2 or 3 p.m.) and live their lives during the night. And during the night they meet with other juveniles who are in the same situation, consume alcohol and then engage in gang activity.

**2.3. Overcrowded housing:** Another element consists in the fact that children live in overcrowded housing, often with extended families. Therefore, the time spent in the street and away from the house- hold is a contributing factor for some children and youths joining the types of armed groups investigated here.

**2. Educational background:** Children who join gangs have usually dropped out of school either immediately before or after joining their respective group. This is due to the fact that families do not have enough money to pay school fees or because school is not seen as worthwhile as in the child's view it was unlikely to lead to a job. In other cases, children have been expelled from school due to their poor behaviour, which had on its turn a link to the fact that those children had already joined gangs or other armed groups whilst at school and this had affected their behaviour within school grounds.

**Having enemies at school:** upon joining a group, especially street gangs, *pandillas* and *naciones*, drug factions and *bandas delincuentes*, some children reported having to curtail their studies due to encountering rivals from other groups whilst at school or on their way to school.

**A cyclical problem:** many respondents' parents were also uneducated or had low levels of education. This had often led to them leaving school in order to help support their family as their parents' lack of education meant low wages often from manual labour.

In fact, for example in Portugal, the school is a mere place where gang members gather in order to socialize with and meet youngsters of their age groups.

**3. Economic background:** The areas which the gangs dominate, whether urban or rural, are invariably poor. When asked to describe their family's economic status, nearly all the children and youth interviewed said they were from poor or relatively poor backgrounds.

In a study done in Portugal about this issue, the conclusions show that in these cases, children do not find a «success model» at home. The parents are unemployed or work in under qualified jobs, work for long hours and are underpaid. The reaction by those children is to look for a better, different and easier life – and the solution for them is to join a gang.

Although there are undoubtedly more differences than commonalities in personal backgrounds, in general terms we can see some common themes. A significant number of those children reported having some difficulties at home (single parent families, poor relations with parents, domestic violence), almost all had failed to complete basic education and most came from poor, or relatively poor backgrounds.

#### 4. Resilience factors

It is interesting to note that not all children who are exposed to the above mentioned risk factors join gangs. What are the reasons for them not joining them? A study made in a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro points at the following factors:

1. Although these children also came from **destructured family structures** or single-parent families, they all had a reference person present, i.e. a person who children could turn to in case of problems (for example a mother, a substitutive mother, grandparents, a sports coach, etc).
2. Even if some children who managed not to join gangs had experienced a situation of **unemployment**, at the moment they were interviewed they had full time jobs or another form of paid job.
3. All those children who were interviewed were studying or undergoing some type of professional training.
4. These children had all suffered some forms of **violence** which could have led them to join a gang. However, some events hindered them from doing so. For example the wish to remain alive in order to be able to take care of a younger family member – a brother or sister. Or the fact that he/she had witnessed a friend or a relative being killed by the police for the fact of being a gang member.

#### 5. What are the subjective causes leading to youngsters joining gangs?

Gang membership offers kids status, acceptance, and self-esteem they haven't found elsewhere. In poorer communities, a breakdown of family and community structures may leave kids more receptive to gang recruitment. However, gangs can also form in affluent areas among kids who feel alienated from friends and families.

**1. Identity:** many of the gang members feel strong links of identity with their fellow members. This tended to be stronger amongst respondents from youth *maras*, *pandillas* and

street gangs where identity is defined by specific music, dress and culture. Members of groups that have a clearly defined ethnic, clan or racial identity also spoke of strong feelings of identity with the group. Public displays of identity by members of armed groups through dress, music or propagating ethnicity or clan allegiance can encourage feelings of wanting to 'belong' amongst children and youth growing up in settings where armed groups are a strong presence.

**2. Protection:** Joining an armed group for protection, whether real or perceived, was a common reason given by interviewees when asked why they joined. Children and youth may be associated with an armed group just by growing up in an area where that group is active. As a result, some children run the risk of physical harm or even death if they stray into the 'wrong' area or encounter members of a rival group outside of their community. Such risks often push children and young people to join local armed groups in an attempt at pre-emptive protection. Although the reality is that children are at far more risk having joined an armed group, the notion that they will be protected is often incentive enough to join. Threat of attack can encourage children to identify with the armed groups in their community, often seen as protectors, and lead to joining a gang for protection.

**3. Revenge:** Revenge is cited as a reason for joining an armed group. In some cases interviewees want revenge due to having lost a family member.

Other interviewees spoke of joining an armed group as a means of getting revenge for the way their community was treated by the police or their ethnic group was treated by state forces.

**4. Financial gain** is a powerful motive for gang involvement, especially for impoverished youths with poor education and lack of access to decent jobs. The vast sums of money available through the drug trade have increased the size of gangs, both by recruitment and by longer retention of members. Usually only a few adult gang members make large sums of money. Aware that courts treat juveniles far more leniently than adults, they shield themselves by using juvenile gang members as everything from lookouts to gang hitmen. Drug trafficking makes traditional turf battles bloodier by providing the money for sophisticated weaponry, and it creates new sources of conflict as rival gangs fight over lucrative drug territories.

## 6. Why have gangs become involved in criminal activities?

Not all gangs were devoted, from the moment of their creation, to crime or illegal activities. But almost all have become involved in criminal activity, armed violence and extra-judicial killings. For many, this transformation came as a result of the following external factors:

**Illicit drugs** – A great percentage of the gangs are involved in the illicit retail drug market within the areas they dominate. Some of them were not originally involved in drug dealing. The sale of illicit drugs however, gives many groups the chance to become self-financing. Furthermore, as the young people that make up the rank and file of street gangs, *maras*, factions, *bandas delinquentes* and *area* gangs are typically poorly educated and socio-economically marginalised, they are a ready labour force for such a business venture.

The involvement in dealing with illicit drugs has produced the following effects on the gangs: 1) they become increasingly territorial and organised, often establishing a hierarchical command structure; 2) they increasingly use violence as a tool for control and domination; 3) they come into

contact with criminal organisations and become more competitive with other groups; and 4) they often become internally fragmented and internal violent disputes become increasingly common.

**Access to firearms** – Gangs have easy access to licit or illicit firearms. Although individuals in the groups may privately own firearms, without exception, all groups maintain control over communally used weapons. As a result of their increasing accessibility to firearms, and in many cases due to the territorial related violence that was exacerbated by involvement in the drug trade, most of the groups have made concerted efforts to become better armed.

**Repression** – Repression by State forces has often the unintended effect of making armed groups more organised, more involved in illicit and informal economies, more heavily armed and often more violent.

In some cases, rather than making them more organised, increased government repression has caused some groups to fragment when key figures are imprisoned. This has led to more inter-group rivalries that, in turn, generate more violence on the street. This tendency will, however, depend on the level of communication between imprisoned group members and their associates outside of prison. If communication is good, leaders will often continue to control the group from behind bars. If communication is bad, gangs tend to fragment internally unless an accepted new

## 7. When do children get involved in armed groups?

**Age of recruitment:** The exact age that children join armed groups varies slightly by country and group.

However, the period at which children join armed groups is remarkably similar: between 11 and 17 years. In Brazil the average age is 13 years. In Jamaica between 11 and 13 years. In Ecuador and El Salvador approximately 13 years. The age at which girls join armed groups is a higher one than boys. In Portugal the average risk ages for the participation in gangs is 13 to 19 years.

It is interesting to note that in many groups the age of child and youth members is decreasing.

Interviews with elder residents from *favela* communities in Rio de Janeiro reveal that it was not common for drug factions to utilise child labour before the end of the 1980s or, if children were used as look-outs before this period, they would rarely be armed. Today, however, an estimated 50% to 60% of the drug factions' work force is made up of under eighteen year-olds.

*Previously adolescents and children were aviãozinhos. They weren't so involved [...] not now, now they're really armed.*

Elder *favela* resident, Rio de Janeiro<sup>5</sup>

## 8. How have the authorities dealt with gang violence?

**Some public policies to deal with children involved in armed violence**

**Repressive legislation:** Anti-gang legislation (*Legislacion antimaras*) in El Salvador in 2003 and 2004. These legislation increase the penalties applicable to anyone who is a *mara* member from the age of 12 years on. Other countries, like Honduras, Guatemala and the USA have adopted

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<sup>5</sup> Neither War nor Peace, page 70.

specific anti-gang legislation. For example in Honduras the government adopted a new law which includes condemnations to 12 years imprisonment for the *jefes de maras*.

Repressive and reactive policing: in many countries the police is trying to combat gang violence through the use of repressive, reactive and militarised policing tactics in the areas affected by this problem. For example in the *favelas*, policemen are encouraged to use violent tactics and shoot first. In the USA the FBI has declared that gangs are a question of national terrorism.

Detention and Imprisonment: the detention and imprisonment of children, sometimes without a prior trial, in the same facilities as the adult population constitute a common trend in some countries which deal with the problem of juvenile crime. In different Latin American countries, juveniles who are suspect of being *mareros* due to their clothes, haircut or tattoos are detained by the police.

In addition to detention and imprisonment, in some countries those children involved in organised armed groups are sometimes judged in adult courts – instead of being presented before a juvenile court. In some countries affected by youth armed violence the representatives of the Government as well as of judicial professions are requesting the end of the juvenile justice system for certain groups of children, namely those who are members of armed groups. In 2004 the Congress Chairman of Honduras declared to the press that he wanted to introduce death penalty for young *pandilleros*. In other countries, including in European countries, there have been some movements – at least from certain elements of civil society – in order to decrease the minimum age for criminal responsibility.

Death and Summary Executions: There are significant cases of children being murdered by the State police forces. For example in Honduras, 59 children and youngsters under the age of 23 years have been murdered in detention centres between May 2002 and March 2004.

If we go through the Compilation of the Concluding Observations Adopted by the UN CRC (document prepared by the OHCHR) we see that many of the concerns expressed and recommendations addressed by the CRC to States Parties dealt precisely with the issue of repressive attitudes of States towards children in conflict with the law and also with the need to respect and apply domestically articles 27 and 40 of the CRC as well as other international instruments adopted on this issue.

*We know that, these repressive policies are ineffective on the long run, given the fact that they do not address the root causes of the problem nor the risk factors that have been previously identified.*

*The idea of decreasing the minimum age of criminal responsibility and other measures taken in the domain of juvenile justice, may be contrary to the UN CRC.*

*Repressive tactics may even increase violence*

## 9. Some Best Practices

**Antibullying Programs.** Bullying may be a contributor to joining The purpose of this presentation is to understand why we are witnessing growing numbers of youth violence in Europe, what the risk factors for joining a youth gang and being the author of youth violence are and also to highlight some of the possible solutions to combat it.

gangs. The need for protection is a major reason gang members cite for joining a gang. Students who report the presence of gangs and weapons in school are about twice as likely to report having been victims of a violent crime (e.g. physical attack, robbery or bullying). Antibullying school programs may have the added benefit of preventing gang victimization. A school antibullying program was conducted in Bergen (in Norway) which consisted of four components:

1. Distribution of a booklet for school personnel with the description of bully/victim problems, provided suggestions about what teachers and the school could do;
2. Distribution of an information pocket to all families with school-age children with information and advice on bullying and how to address it.
3. A videocassette depicting the images of two adolescents who were bullying victims was made available at a subsidized price, and
4. A questionnaire on bullying was administered to students in school.<sup>6</sup>

An evaluation of the Bergen program showed a substantial decrease of bullying.

**The GREAT (Gang Resistance Education and Training) Program:** consists of a school based program created in 1991 in Phoenix (USA) aimed at proving students with tools to resist the trap of gangs. It consists of a 9 week program that introduces students to conflict resolution skills, cultural sensitivity and the negative aspects of gang life. Today the programme has been incorporated in school curricula in all 650 USA states. These courses are also given to law enforcement officers, who receive a more detailed lesson.

**Fighting for Peace in Rio:** The project aims at offering children and youngsters alternatives to crime and to dealing in drugs, through sports, education and training in different skills, the promotion of a culture of peace and the access to the formal employment market. Besides preventive actions, the project also rehabilitates youngsters who have abandoned their jobs in order to join gangs, and has contributed to their reinsertion in the labour market.

#### **PIEF: (Education and Training Integrated Program)**

Aims: allow all children who have prematurely dropped out of school and have been found in a situation of exploitation of child labour or in a situation of exploitation to complete compulsory education or getting a professional certificate.

There are mobile teams who detect those cases and identify these children. These teams are composed of psychologists, teachers and social workers. After identifying the child, the team makes a personal and individual evaluation of the child. Then, a specific program is designed for him/her.

The training programme is composed of  
Formal schooling and/ or  
Professional training

Sometimes, namely in cases of neighbourhoods with a high percentage of migrants, neighbourhood mediators are appointed.

There are 115 ongoing projects involving almost 2000 children in Portugal.

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<sup>6</sup>James C. Howell, "Youth Gang Programs and Strategies", JDP, August 2000.

## 10. Some Recommendations

### 1. Acknowledge the problem

2. **Specific and integrated municipal/regional policies based on local diagnosis:** Organised armed groups are distinct entities in different environments. Policies should be based on local diagnosis that identify the local manifestation of organised armed violence, the structural risk factors that are causal to the establishment and continued dominance of local armed groups, the risk group that are most involved; and the risk factors and influences that are causal and/or contributory to children and youth 'choosing' to join local armed groups.

3. **Treatment of structural risk factors:** Structural risk factors that are causal and/or contributory to the establishment and continued dominance of local armed groups must be addressed. These may be different in each setting. However, recommendations follow for the treatment of the structural risk factors that were found to be common in all or most case studies.

a) **Socio-economic inclusion of populations within distinct urban areas:** organised armed groups flourish in geographically distinct urban enclaves of poverty that are often distanced from the state via the provision of differentiated or inadequate public services to the local population. These areas need investment in infrastructure and local residents need health, education and employment programmes for their full socio-economic inclusion. Until these areas are an integrated part of the cities that surround them, armed groups will continue to have geographical and logistical bases.

b) **Fast track educational inclusion and job opportunities for all youth:** a high percentage of youth in the local population with disproportionately low levels of education and disproportionately high levels of unemployment is common to all areas where armed groups are dominant, almost all youth members being unemployed school dropouts. Youths need to know they will have access to jobs in the future if they are to be encouraged to stay in school. Combining education courses with paid part-time work placements is one way of ensuring young people finish their education rather than seek illicit enterprises, including joining an armed group.

c) **Community policing:** in all areas where groups are active the presence of state security forces is of a limited or differentiated nature. A reliance on reactive and repressive policing policies within these areas has led to poor relations between the local community and police. In some areas, security forces are not present at all, which encourages armed groups to become an openly armed presence. Within both such scenarios local residents are more likely to support dominant armed groups in their communities than the police. The police need to be a constant and respected presence within the community if they are to gain the support of local residents and stop armed groups becoming an openly armed fixture.

**d) Deal with corruption and impunity:** most armed groups benefit greatly from corrupt low-level state officials, especially the police. It is fundamental that corruption within such areas of the state apparatus is dealt with in order to lessen the dominion of armed groups within the territories where they are active, and end the impunity exercised by their members. It is also important to stop corrupt police officers being a source of illicit firearms and confiscated drugs. Policing is necessary, illegal violence by state forces is not: reliance solely upon a repressive and violent state apparatus against group members and non-involved residents of the communities in which they are active often serves to turn the community against the state and support or protect local armed groups. Abuse of authority may also lead to armed groups becoming increasingly armed, organised and violent in their response to state action.

**e) Policing is necessary; however, it is fundamental that the police act within the boundaries of the law** both because it is the law, and in order to gain the community's support. Police abuse of power must be publicly dealt with by government. Gun control: extensive access to small arms is common to all groups due to lax state gun control and the illicit arms trade. In Northern Ireland, stringent gun control by the government in the form of arms seizures and prosecutions, and the control exerted by paramilitaries themselves in order to maintain their power base in communities, has effectively kept guns out of the hands of children and youths and meant that firearms-related deaths stayed relatively low during the last few years of the conflict and since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. As this example clearly demonstrates, gun control is crucial to lowering group access to small arms, and consequently the number of gun deaths.

**f) Drug policy reform:** in nine out of ten countries covered by this study, groups make their profit from the illegal drug trade. Access to illicit economies such as drug trafficking makes armed groups financially self-sufficient and provides the necessary funds to buy arms and bribe government/state officials. Governments have been unsuccessful in stopping drugs from entering illicit markets and repression has served to push prices up, greatly increasing violent competition between drug traffickers as well as their profits, and leading to the employment of increasingly militarised tactics by both drug trafficking groups and the police. Furthermore, police abuse of power is often carried out under the aegis of 'drug control', wherein the demonisation of drugs and drug traffickers is such that the use of excessive force by the police, and even the summary executions of drug traffickers, becomes accepted practice. Alternative drug policies could have a major impact on the employment of children and youth in organised armed violence. Cross-country policy comparisons of non-repressive drug policy should be carried out and promising alternatives identified.

#### **4. Build resilience through a network of community based prevention programmes**

**5. Build resilience through a network of community based and institutional rehabilitation programmes:** In addition to prevention, children and young people must be offered ways out of armed groups when they choose to leave or when they are apprehended by the authorities. Rehabilitation programmes at community level for those that choose to leave and within closed institutions should follow a similar methodology to prevention programmes; having sufficient options and supportive influences to respond to prevalent risk factors is as important to build resilience amongst children and youth already involved as it is for those 'choosing' not to join. Similar to prevention projects, community-based rehabilitation projects should be based on local diagnosis of the problem, be coordinated by specially capacitated and existing local organisations (where possible), and co-ordinated strategically via a network of local organisations/government at the municipal/regional level. Projects in the community must also design the correct strategies to safely contact involved children and young people within affected communities, and be

integrated with state rehabilitation programmes within closed facilities in order that young people can continue to be rehabilitated after leaving detention.

**6. Reform the juvenile justice system:** For children and young people that do not opt to leave organised armed groups, the only window of opportunity for prolonged contact with them is their possible apprehension and detention within the juvenile justice system. In many of the countries covered by this study, juvenile detention centres are overcrowded, violent and abusive, and have inadequate facilities to successfully rehabilitate youth offenders. Youth detention facilities are in need of drastic reforms in order to stop the maltreatment of inmates and offer the necessary educational, job training and rehabilitation programmes. Respect for articles 37 and 40 of the CRC, UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Justice and the UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency.

**7. Focus on inclusion rather than just repression:** The application of the law by the police is necessary to deal with organised armed violence. However, government dependence upon solely repressive legislative, military, policing and incarceration policies for the treatment of organised armed violence has failed to treat the root causes of the problem and has been unsuccessful in counteracting the existence of armed groups, their dominion over local territories, populations and resources or the participation of children and youth within them. Furthermore, in areas where such policy has been relied upon, public health statistics do not demonstrate a fall in the firearms-related homicide rates over time; on the contrary, in many cases this has risen considerably within these localities since 1979. Increasingly militarised action from governments has so far only led to an increasingly militarised response from armed groups. Rather than just relying on repressive and military tactics, policing and legislative policies must focus on prevention and rehabilitation in order to offer involved children and youths the necessary support to opt for alternatives to armed group membership.

Need for better and more specific violence-related data: An independent and unified global data bank that records comparable violence-related data is needed if the levels of violence in which armed groups are involved are to be recorded and monitored. This includes public health statistics such as detailed and comparable firearms-related homicide data relevant to the profile of group members within the specific communities in which armed groups are active.

**8. Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration:** the best practices from children in armed conflict situations can be used in the DDR of children involved in urban violence. Therefore organisation working with DDR of children affected by armed conflicts and those organisations demobilising and disarming children who are not in a situation of armed conflict have much to learn from each other.

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The involvement of children and youth in organised armed violence is a growing phenomenon with diverse and distinct manifestations that share a significant number of commonalities. These commonalities are a great help to understanding these groups and their members better, and advancing methodological and practical approaches to treat this increasingly serious problem.

The number and size of organised armed groups, the rise in child and youth participation within them, and the ever growing use of firearms amongst youth as a tool for dispute resolution and economic and social advancement, may lead one to imagine this is a hopeless and intractable situation. **However, small grassroots projects are showing what is possible in terms of**

prevention and rehabilitation; techniques that if applied correctly can be more successful than simply relying on repression to lower firearms-related mortality rates in the long-term, or prevent those previously arrested for involvement in armed groups from re-offending in the short-term.

The challenge for professionals working on this theme is whether the lessons learnt from such successful community-based interventions can be applied on a scale that can affect the problem on a neighbourhood or even citywide level. What is for certain, however, is that to substantially improve the chances of success, governments and the police must be willing to work together with relevant civil society organisations, community representatives and even involved youths themselves.