

THE HAITIAN TIMES

BRIDGING THE GAP

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Taking back control: Legalize Haiti's gangs, some say



A gang member patrols in Cité Soleil slum of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Sunday July 12, 2015. (Photo/Dieu Nalio Chery)

Overview:

As the violence on Haiti's streets attributable to "gangs" reaches unprecedented levels, The Haitian Times digs into four answers to the question so many Haitians ask — "How do we get rid of these gangs?" This installment explores the idea of recognizing and legalizing gangs as groups serving legitimate purposes in their communities to reduce clashes.

This story is part of a special investigation into Haiti's gang crisis and potential solutions. To view the full series visit our special section, [Gangs in Haiti: A deeper look](#).

In 2007, Ecuador legalized gangs in a major shift called "[The Citizens' Revolution](#)" that aimed to turn the country around. Gangs remade themselves as cultural associations, registered with the government and, thereby, qualified for grants and social programming benefits. By 2017, the homicide rate went from 22 murders per 100,000 to five per 100,000 people, [according to David Brotherton](#), a sociologist and criminologist at [John Jay College](#) of Criminal Justice.

"[Governments] want quick solutions — the 'magic-bullet-as-a-band-aid' solution, because the problem becomes highly politicized," Brotherton said, [speaking on the nonprofit news podcast, Who What Why](#), in 2019. "But the problem is a social problem, also an economic problem, a cultural problem, and so on and so forth. Therefore, it's a very complex problem."

"It's not a "one-size-fits-all approach," said Brotherton, whose research helped change policy in Ecuador.

Could a similar approach to addressing gangs in Haiti work? Some, including Brotherton, say perhaps and point to disarmament, demobilization and

reintegration (DDR) programs of the past. Others insist that Haiti's gangs are too entwined with Haitian politicians for changing them to work.

Ecuador as a model for Haiti

In Ecuador, officials developed a national security policy that broadened the notion of "security" to encompass various social ills — hunger, unemployment, ill health. Authorities worked with large groups as organizations, a concept from Brotherton's work. One group received a \$1 million contract to train residents of their neighborhood.

Brotherton, in an interview with *The Haitian Times*, said the first step in Haiti should be making contact with the groups. He said officials should figure out how they organize, their perspectives and goals, their histories and origins, and how they view themselves and their role in the community. He also encouraged reaching out to community stakeholders or people in contact with the gang members — such as family, police, health workers, social workers, teachers — to get a holistic perspective.

"When you're shining the light on different aspects of the group, finally, you have a sense of how this phenomenon evolved, where it's moving to, and what might be a series of community interventions in order to help mitigate its impact," Brotherton said. "One of which should always be about the possibility of this group transforming itself into something else."

The process would roll out step by step, gaining trust along the way.

“When you start that building, you humanize each other,” Brotherton said. “And then you have investments, hopefully somebody wishes to put something in place – schools, healthcare, job opportunities.

“This reality will make it really difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the Ecuador experiment in Haiti.”

JEAN RENEL SISTANNIS, [OHDH](#)

Gangs as community caretakers... of sorts

Research suggests that the methods used in Ecuador and other countries, including Spain, could have a basis in Haiti, given the gangs’ informal role as community leaders – sanctioned or not.

Athena Kolbe, a [long-time researcher](#) currently with Barry University in Florida, has [compared the impact](#) of three different intervention programs in Haiti. One, a [United Nations](#)-led DDR campaign, was modeled on traditional programs in Northern Uganda, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Kolbe found that interventions comprising education, leadership skills, informal options such as group sports, or opportunities for meaningful future careers, were the most effective. She also determined that changes to Haitian gangs

corresponded to such pivotal events as the [2004 coup d'etat](#), [the 2010 earthquake](#), and [the departure of MINUSTAH](#).

At other periods of time, gangs became the main social service or municipal service providers in Haiti's highly populated, low-income neighborhoods, Kolbe explained. Gangs provided electricity, water — sometimes they even paid for funerals. They protected local vendors, who paid something to the gang members in rackets, almost like a local tax.

No one wants to legitimize the gang leaders as actual leaders in the community, said Kolbe.

“The fact is that these men are leaders of their community,” Kolbe said. “They are what we would call a key informant — an important actor that you would need to speak to.”

Haiti's gangs too political, critics say

Others say legalizing gangs with the “humanistic approach” wouldn't work, mainly because of the political ties.

Jean Renel Sistannis, general coordinator of [OHDH](#), a Haitian human rights watchdog group, explains that ahead of elections, politicians control each armed group, give them weapons and ammunition, and finance them. These gangs' ties to people in political positions of power makes it difficult for the police, he said.

“For us, the issue is just all political,” he said. “I really don’t see how we can achieve Ecuador’s experience in Haiti by transforming gang leaders into community leaders.”

Plus, Sistannis added, kidnapping has become an industry that yields thousands of U.S. dollars to the gangs. How could the government create opportunities for the gangs that would be as lucrative, he wondered.

Also, armed gangs work toward gaining more territories, which means more political space, Sistannis said. If the leader of the “Ti Lapli” gang, for example, gains popularity in Grand Ravine, that area’s residents will support the politician backing the leader. It’s the same with the other areas’ gang leaders and the politicians backing them.

“This reality will make it really difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the Ecuador experiment in Haiti,” Sistannis concluded.



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