

An illustration showing two hands, rendered in a textured, orange-brown style, gripping vertical metal bars. The bars are dark and have a slightly weathered appearance. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a prison cell. The overall style is gritty and somber.

# The Inescapable Prison of Barrio 18 in Honduras



**InSight  
Crime**

ANALYSIS AND INVESTIGATION  
OF ORGANIZED CRIME

## **The Inescapable Prison of Barrio 18 in Honduras**

January 2023

***Author:***

Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson

***Editing:***

Chris Dalby y Steven Dudley – Editors

Juan Diego Posada y Laura Ávila – Spanish Editors

Chris Dalby – Translation

***Layout and design:***

Ana Isabel Rico, Juan José Restrepo, María Isabel Gaviria – Graphic Design

Elisa Roldán – Creative Direction



## **Table of Contents**

<b>Falling Into the Trap .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Desafío’s Jailers .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The Birth of Desafío .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Tacoma .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Escape From a Prison Cell.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Related Content .....</b>	<b>19</b>

*Entering Barrio 18, the powerful Central American street gang, can seem like a violent rebirth. Members get a new family, a community, and a sense of belonging and protection. But this comes at a cost.*

*Through the story of Desafío, a boy who grew up on the streets of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, InSight Crime delves into the internal workings that make Barrio 18 tick, the constant state of paranoia that its members are kept under, and the brutal response to anyone who dares to dream of a different life.*

“I didn’t want to be here. I was already tired of being in the middle of all this. I wanted to distance myself from the gang and become a Christian, but they said I couldn’t. I had to stay in the gang until I died,” says Desafío while sitting at an old desk in the workshop section of El Pozo, a maximum-security prison in Honduras.

He had decided to escape, but escaping from prison is never easy. Especially if one prison is hidden inside another.



Desafío, 28, looks strong. He sports a short beard, a wide smile, and a friendly demeanor. But his outward appearance hides internal torment. He speaks like he's constantly on edge, letting loose a torrent of information, telling the story of his life in rapid-fire mode as if his very words might betray him. I told him I couldn't stay for long, and that only turbo-charged his desire to get it all out. He begins.

Desafío, meaning Defiance, had been a part of the [Barrio 18](#) street gang for almost 19 years. But he's now seeking to flee this toxic adopted family and complete his 20-year prison sentence elsewhere, away from the clutches of the gang.

The problem is that El Pozo, like most prisons in Honduras, is under an unofficial power-sharing agreement. On one side sits the Honduran authorities. On the other, the country's two large gangs: Barrio 18 and the [MS13](#).

"Inside those doors, the gangs have their own organization, their own rules, and their own means of punishment. We don't go there," a Honduran army colonel in charge of El Pozo told me in May 2021.

There are no bathrooms in the part of the prison where Desafío lives. And those stuck there cannot go outside for fear of being shot at. Gang members walk around armed in El Pozo, as is the norm in many Honduran prisons.

He used to live in the prison's Sector 5, where the *dieciochos* (the eighteens, as Barrio 18 members are known) are in charge. All members there respond to a select group of leading gangsters who have the power of life or death over inmates. These leaders are in charge of talking and negotiating with security forces, ordering the supplies needed for daily life, and defending Barrio 18 areas against enemy attack.

The deal is simple enough: Authorities make sure the inmates can't get out of the prison, while the gang looks after life inside.

Getting out is not going to be easy.

---



# Falling Into the Trap

Desafío grew up in a poor, Barrio 18-controlled neighborhood of Tegucigalpa, Honduras' capital city. It was there, where at the age of 10, he first grew close to the gang.

“It wasn't that I belonged, but I was doing them favors. I would tell them if a patrol car was coming. But without being a member, [doing favors] was a way to get in good with them,” he explains from behind the rickety desk.



The gang members refer to the youngsters who hang around them as *paisas*, a way of saying they're civilians or outsiders. Many paisas carry out favors like Desafío once did, helping gangs maintain control of neighborhoods by sharing information about the lives of residents or notifying the gang when unfamiliar vehicles enter. This is an entirely one-sided relationship. The paisas give, and the gang takes. It does not reciprocate.

Above paisas, gang members take on a confusing list of roles and positions within Barrio 18. The roles can be broadly grouped into two categories: administration and war activities. A member's role will depend on the skills they offer.

Desafío's role soon grew.

"I did favors until they told me that I was becoming an 'active paisa.' In this position, you receive almost no benefits, [only] three meals a day and cell phone credit so you can stay informed of everything in the sector you are assigned," says Desafío.

He became an active paisa at the age of 20, after a decade of helping the gang informally. When a person becomes an active paisa, their tasks become more violent. "You enter the 18 with a bullet," goes one gang motto. And so it was for Desafío.

"The first mission I was given was to kill a girl. She was the wife of a *homeboy* [a full gang member] who was in prison. But she was hanging out in an MS13 neighborhood. Barrio 18 opened a *process* against her," he lays out, referring to the gang's internal trials which determine who lives and dies.

"It was concluded that she was passing on information about us to them. I led her out of the neighborhood with lies, saying that her husband had sent her some money and she had to go to a random house [to pick it up]. There, I shot her when her back was turned," he admits.

This was the blood sacrifice Barrio 18 demanded.

Desafío carried on being an active paisa for almost five years, moving drugs, carrying out extortions, and committing homicides. Then, in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, Desafío was finally given the chance to become a homeboy.

---



# Desafío's Jailers

I am received by nine men in a different wing of El Pozo. These are the chosen leaders and representatives of Barrio 18 in the prison.

We sit at a metal table in a room that once served as a dining area. The atmosphere is cordial, and then our conversation begins.

I ask the bosses gathered whether a member can leave the gang. The answer is a resounding “No.” For them, abandoning the gang is the same as abandoning a family.

“It’s not necessary for a gang member to leave the gang. You tell me, just because you have a good job, will you abandon your children, your wife, and your parents? Well, the same goes for us, because we are a family,” says the oldest leader, who hails from Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital.





This attitude harks back to the social structure these gangs used to have. For almost two decades, the Barrio 18 and MS13, created by Central American immigrants in California who were then deported home, provided a sense of extreme solidarity to its members. Together, they faced poverty, hunger, violence, and the contempt of society at large.

But stories such as that of Desaffio, and thousands of others, show this is no longer the case. They are no longer families. They are corporations with demanding bosses.

The leaders take it in turn to weave a cumbersome tale in which they explain that a gang member does not need to engage in crime or in violence. They say that those seeking to become homeboys do not need to commit murder.

“You don’t need to kill anyone to become a homeboy?” I ask, surprised. Desaffio said he had to kill almost 10 people before joining the gang. And every current and former gang member I have spoken to in Honduras for the last decade could rattle off a list of names of those they had to kill to move up the ranks.

I tell them as much. They don’t like it.

The bosses are growing nervous and their polite demeanor is fading. I ask again whether members can leave the gang. Once again, they’re categorical: leaving the gang is not an option.

I change tack. What is their opinion on children continuing to join the gang?

Stopping children from joining is impossible, they say. They have wars against other gangs in Honduras, and so they must continue adding soldiers to Barrio 18.

They mention the living conditions inside Barrio 18 neighborhoods, describing the gang as protecting the kids from evils such as poverty and hunger.

“We are often approached by youngsters who have no family. How can we deny them access to our family? We can’t, we have to support them. We can’t let them die of hunger,” says the oldest, most vocal of the group.

### **SEE ALSO: MS13 & Co.**

Allowing members to leave would be problematic, they say, because it could lead to information leaks and destabilize the gang.

I ask them if they would be willing to stop killing defectors. I mention evangelical churches -- [becoming a priest](#) has often been the only acceptable way out for a gang member in the rest of Central America.

They remain evasive, look away, and shift in their seats like scolded children.

“We can’t talk about that, you don’t understand us,” says the same one.

I insist again, but they tell me, slightly chastened, that they won’t discuss this further. It is a sensitive topic that must be dealt with by higher powers within the gang. It’s time for me to go.

---

# The Birth of Desafío

After five years of buying cigarettes for homeboys, standing guard for hours in places where nobody passed by, and killing people without knowing why, Desafío was invited to take the next step.

“They asked me if I wanted to be part of the group, if I wanted to be jumped in,” he says.

Being jumped in refers to the ritual kept alive by Barrio 18 and other gangs of Californian origin, where new gang members must be beaten as an initiation. In the case of Barrio 18, three gang members beat applicants for 18 seconds.

“They never force you. They just encourage you, as a way of motivating you to keep moving forward,” said Desafío.

On April 18, 2020, he joined the gang along with a group of other boys from his sector. Despite his desire to leave, Desafío cannot hide flashes of pride when he recalls being jumped in by a large homeboy, someone he was then connected to.

“The one who jumps you, the one who is counting [leading the initiation ritual] is a sort of godfather or father in the gang. He stands up for you, and you obey,” he explains.

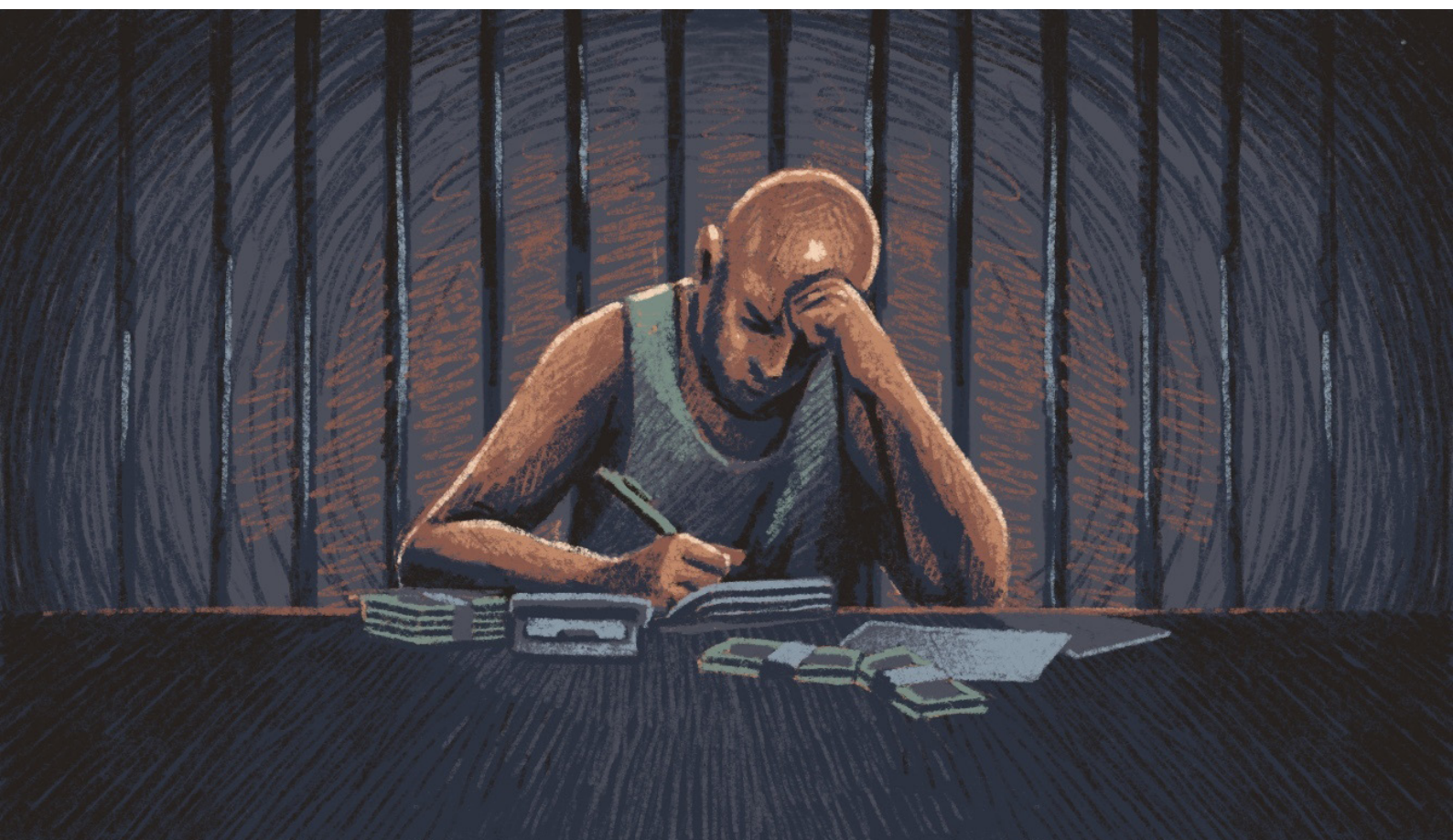
Desafío’s godfather was not a particularly high-ranking member in Barrio 18 overall. But in Desafío’s small world, he was the most powerful man he had ever known.

Before the beating, the leader told him: “Look, you are going to be the first one I’m personally going to jump. I want to meet you because you’re going to be the first,” he recalls.

That same man then baptized the new gang member with a name that would come to fit him so well: Desafío.

“I felt good. But at the same time, I vowed not to be like others who, just because they are homeboys, go around disrespecting those below them. No, I was going to have a different mentality. Now that I was a homeboy, I was going to establish order and control,” he tells me.

But the life of a homeboy was not what Desafío had imagined. His new tasks were not those of a powerful bandit or vigilante. They were mostly administrative.



His most important job was to bring in money. He was given a weekly quota and a series of administrative jobs to complete.

In the small sector of the Honduran capital assigned to him, Desafío had to find 80,000 lempiras (around \$3,300) per week. That money would then go towards paying for expenses from that same sector: medical bills, lawyer fees, and burials. It also had to pay for weapons and ammunition for 16 gang members, as well as pay for food and clothing for their families.

In addition to the 80,000 lempiras, Desafío had to give an extra 100,000 lempiras (around \$4,100) to gang leaders. He never knew what it was used for. It was his responsibility as sector manager, that was all he needed to know. Failure to meet these quotas would not be met with dismissal but a series of beatings and even death.

But collecting that amount of money was never easy. Hitting the weekly targets was a constant battle, and he often made it by the skin of his teeth. In times of despair, Desafío broke the Barrio 18 rule forbidding theft in one's own neighborhood.



“There were times when we had nothing left to give to Barrio 18, so we had to go out and scavenge for ourselves. I would tell the members to steal some weapons. With them, we would go out and steal in the street,” he continues.

His idea of life as an outlaw, living without rules had been pure fiction. That may have been the lifestyle of some old-school homeboys, those who were deported from California back home in the 1990s. But for Desafío’s generation, gang life was not glamorous.

His disappointment with Barrio 18 had no time to fester. In 2021, he was arrested and charged with extortion and aggravated robbery. He ended up in El Pozo.

**SEE ALSO: [How the MS13 Became Lords of the Trash Dump in Honduras](#)**

---

# Tacoma

It is May 2022, and I am standing inside the maximum-security wing of Támara prison in Tegucigalpa. It has been a week since I sat with Desafío and the Barrio 18 bosses in El Pozo, and they've told me the gang's higher power is willing to see me. He is the leader of Barrio 18 in Honduras, and his name is Nahum Medina, alias "Tacoma."

If Barrio 18 is a prison within a prison, Tacoma is Desafío's chief jailer.

About 20 armed guards surround me and guide me to see Tacoma. They lead me to an enclosure with a concrete floor and cells on both sides. Two identical floors are connected by solid metal stairs. The cells have no bars, only thick steel doors with nothing but a small window slit to pass the food tray. Some inmates can stick their heads and arms through the gap, provided they're skinny enough.

The guards lead me to the second floor. I am watched by dozens of sad eyes that follow me in silence. Most inmates have been at Támara for more than a decade. Some carry sentences of up to 300 years.



Another group of eight guards, all hooded, led Tacoma out of his cell. He looks 10 years older than the last time I interviewed him, in 2019. His hands and feet are cuffed, but the platoon of guards twitch as they watch him leave. He still has the air of an old, arrogant gangster. He wears a gold chain around his neck, a ring engraved with the number 18 hanging from it.

The room becomes so quiet that I can hear the squeaking of the guards' boots against the smooth concrete floor. Tacoma recognizes me. I might be the only journalist to ever visit him here.

He remembers our last conversation with terrifying precision and tells me: "We're not going to talk about internal gang stuff this time."

I ask him about maybe allowing members to leave and he transforms. He threatens me with his cuffed hands. "Hey, Juan! I told you we're not going to talk about that. What's wrong with you?" he says, shaking his finger in my face.

The guards' hands stray toward their truncheons. The prisoners looking on seem surprised, but their gazes are still violent.

"That will never happen. Never. The gang is for life. We will never allow that," Tacoma shouts as loudly as he can. Every gang member in here can hear him.

Slowly, the situation dawns on me. Watching him scream at the top of his lungs, while cuffed, I understand that Tacoma will never let members go free. He is also trapped inside Barrio 18.

---

# Escape From a Prison Cell

Any romantic notions Desafío may have once held about the gang were long gone by the time he was behind bars. Barrio 18 was his real prison.

Every day, he had to follow certain rules and walk a certain way. A long list of words and even certain colors were prohibited. When I spoke to him in May 2022, he lived under the constant scrutiny of the nine leaders I had met in El Pozo.

The Barrio 18 leadership seeks to keep their troops in a constant state of paranoia. They each need to see their homeboys as potential traitors or informants. They must prove their loyalty every day and any mistake carries the potential penalty of death.

One of the gang's most important rules is that members' responsibilities on the outside do not cease when they're locked up. Desafío was responsible for ensuring that the replacement in his sector of Tegucigalpa kept up with the quotas. He spoke with him daily through cell phones smuggled into the prison.

And the leaders are not naïve, they know many members want to get out. But as that is not an option, Barrio 18 keeps its boot firmly planted on its members' necks. Members are kept constantly busy, and distrust is pervasive. Revolutions are hard to start under these conditions.

"If you are going to go to the infirmary, they handcuff you to one or two people. That means you can't stay in the infirmary and you have to return to Sector 5," Desafío explains. "If you talk on the pay phone, you have to be careful because they always have people listening to hear what you talk about."

Desafío had considered leaving Barrio 18 when he was still on the outside. The gang represented so much of what he hated in life.

From prison, when his mind was made up, he spoke with his family. He told them to leave the neighborhood because he was going to desert. His wife asked him not to.

"No, my love, don't do it. I don't want them to kill me and for our boy to end up on the streets," she told him.

Desafío replied that he couldn't take it anymore. "I'm going to leave, and whatever God wants will happen. I don't want to serve Satan anymore."



A short time later, the nine leaders realized Desafío was having doubts. They sentenced him to death. But another gang member warned Desafío, leaving him no choice but to start planning his escape.

“I asked my wife to speak to the police and explain that they were going to kill me in Sector 5. The policemen did come, but they simply did a headcount and confirmed we were all there. They never even called me by name -- it was impossible to escape,” he said.

He became increasingly desperate.

“One of the times the police came to do a head count, just after they left, I ran out into the courtyard toward them. But four dieciochos grabbed me. I fought [with them] so they couldn’t get a hold of me,” he said.

“If they had got me into Sector 5, they would have killed me right there. They hang you with a rope, roll up your body, and throw you into the garbage bins,” he added.

The police officers noticed the fight and came over. They drew their guns and pointed them at the brawling gang members. Desafío was handcuffed and dragged back towards Sector 5, back towards his death. These events were confirmed by El Pozo’s chief prison guard, who had witnessed the fight from a few meters away.



Inside, Barrio 18 gang members were screaming and slamming their cell doors. They were ready for blood.

“If you are going to throw me in there, you better kill me right here,” Desafío told the police. They didn’t pay any attention until the chief prison guard and the prison director intervened.

“No director wants deaths in his prison. They don’t want to have to explain,” he said.

The police listened to his pleas and led him away from Sector 5. He was handcuffed and bloodied, but he had won a measure of freedom from the gang.

Well, freedom of a sort.

Desafío still lives at El Pozo, in the stinking, messy area known as the “workshop.” Carpentry and metalwork classes are supposed to be taught there. But the jail is overcrowded and no prison director has dared to allow inmates to have access to electric saws and steel bars. Instead, the workshop contains extra cells.

Nine men, all outcasts like Desafío, are housed there. They do not fit into the prison’s daily routines and therefore pose a problem for prison management. They have been marked for death, and protecting them involves extra work that has not been budgeted for.

However, Desafío speaks of this new life as one of unparalleled freedom. It feels strange to hear a man whose hands and feet are cuffed, and who lives in a space of less than three square meters, say that he feels free.

But for the first time since he was ten years old, Desafío is no longer a prisoner of Barrio 18.

---

# Related Content

Don't miss InSight Crime's previous investigations into gangs in Central America. We analyzed the evolution of the MS13 in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. And we told the stories of victims of the gang and former gang members who dared to leave the group to join the Pentecostal Church in El Salvador.



## El Salvador's Attorney General Worked for Top MS13 Ally

EL SALVADOR / 31 OCT 2022

Over a 22-year career in El Salvador's Attorney General's Office, Rodolfo Delgado held some of the most critical positions in the country's judiciary..

[READ HERE >](#)



## Gangsters and Preachers - The Culture of Sexism Inside the MS13

EL SALVADOR / 15 JUN 2022

The MS13 gang and the Pentecostal Church appear to be polar opposites. But some similarities unite them. Both demand rigid discipline and utter devotion.

[READ HERE >](#)



## MS13 & Co.

EL SALVADOR / 25 JAN 2022

From a small band of deportees forcibly returned from Los Angeles, the MS13 has grown into a hydra. It is at once a social circle that provides protection and belonging, an extortion powerhouse shaking down the rich and the poor, a parallel government regulating the daily lives of thousands.

[READ HERE >](#)



InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For more than a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions - as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource - to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

For more information, visit [insightcrime.org](https://insightcrime.org)