



# Social Control and the Gang: Lessons from the Legalization of Street Gangs in Ecuador

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## Abstract

In 2008, the Ecuadorian Government launched a policy to increase public safety as part of its “Citizens’ Revolution” (*La Revolución Ciudadana*). An innovative aspect of this policy was the legalization of the country’s largest street gangs. During the years 2016–2017, we conducted ethnographic research with these groups focusing on the impact of legalization as a form of social inclusion. We were guided by two research questions: (1) What changed between these groups and society? and (2) What changed within these groups? We completed field observations and sixty qualitative interviews with group members, as well as multiple formal and informal interviews with government advisors, police leaders and state actors related to the initiative. Our data show that the commitment to social citizenship had a major impact on gang-related violence and was a factor in reducing the nation’s homicide rate. The study provides an example of social control where the state is committed to policies of social inclusion while rejecting the dominant model of gang repression and social exclusion practiced throughout the Americas.

## Introduction

In 2011, the Ecuadorian Government launched a country-wide policy to increase public safety for all its citizens, called the “National Plan for Integrated Security” (Ministerio de Coordinación de Seguridad 2011), which was part of the ongoing “Citizens’ Revolution” (*La Revolución Ciudadana*) launched by the administration of Rafael Correa in 2008. This

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focus on security was necessitated by a worrying increase in homicide that had reached 18.9 per 1000 (Kim 2019)<sup>1</sup> as this new government promised the population a future of “good living” as part of its version of socialism for the twenty-first century (National Assembly of Ecuador 2008). This concept of security (Serrano 2019), however, stood in stark contrast to the crime prevention models applied more traditionally in Ecuador and by most other Latin American governments, most of which emphasized the role of the police as a reactive solution to rising crime rates across the continent—an approach often referred to as *mano dura*. The new Ecuadorian approach viewed crime control through the lens of social citizenship, institutional reform and economic development, with efforts to reach higher levels of social control based on policies of social inclusion linked to other major goals in the government’s strategic agenda. In short, security was conceptualized within a development lens with the state making good on its commitment to the citizenry through increased resources in welfare, health and education. In return, citizens would be expected to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities by building community cohesion and mutually reinforcing the relationship between the state and civil society. Under the Citizens’ Revolution, a new social contract was written. A major innovative aspect of this approach was the decision to legalize a certain number of street gangs beginning in 2007.

In effect, the state adopted a traditional Chicago School model of social control (Janowitz 1975) that emphasized policies of social inclusion, while rejecting the contemporary, neoliberal model of gang repression, practiced throughout much of the Americas, which relies on policies of social exclusion. The Ecuadorian approach was successful, producing the most sustained drop in homicide in the world (Igarapé Institute 2016), falling from a peak of 21 per 100,000 in 2008 to 5.6 in 2016, not least because it avoided the problems of coercive social control policies that lead to deviance amplification, i.e., the processes in which state and social agencies are mobilized to eradicate the perceived source of a social problem only to see the targeted behaviors increase (Young 1971). Indeed, years of iron fist policies of gang policing had seen large increases in the prison population and violence across the region, exemplifying its failure to curtail the growth of gangs.<sup>2</sup>

During 2016–2017, we carried out ethnographic research with the three largest street gangs in Ecuador, the Sacred Tribe Atahualpa of Ecuador (STAE), the Asociación Ñetas (Ñetas) and the Masters of the Street, focusing on the impact of legalization as a form of social inclusion. Our research was guided by two primary questions: (1) What changed between these groups and society? and (2) What changed within these groups as a result of the legalization process? Over two years, we completed extensive field observations and sixty qualitative interviews with group members, primarily in three diverse settings: Guayaquil, Quito and Santo Domingo. Our data show that the state’s commitment to social citizenship had a major impact on gang-related violence, particularly inter-gang violence, and was a contributing factor to the reduction in social violence experienced during the previous decade.

<sup>1</sup> While few Western nations have taken note of the success of Ecuador’s public security model, a range of nations in the Global South have started to pay attention, including one of South Korea’s major university programs in public policy.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Ecuador did not experience a rise in its prison population. In fact, its prison population grew from approximately 11,000 in 2010 to 25,000 in 2014 and continued on an upward trend with a rate of roughly 160 per 100,000. This somewhat contradictory penal policy of the administration of Rafael Correa (2007–2017), however, was due largely to the government’s harsh drug policies and efforts to combat organized crime, rather than the anti-gang, anti-delinquency policies adopted as part of neighboring countries’ neoliberal agendas, such as those in Colombia and Peru, where the rate of imprisonment was around 260 per 100,000.

We begin this article by comparing critical and orthodox gang studies before discussing theories of social control and gang transformation, as well as the literature on Ecuadorian gangs and its models of gang social control. Next, we summarize our findings in relation to the research questions listed above, offer several discussion points on this highly unusual public security approach and, finally, draw our conclusion that the Ecuadorian case yields empirical support for a social inclusionary approach to street gangs. We are convinced that such policies have much wider implications especially for those countries continuing to adhere to policies of repression and social exclusion despite little discernible evidence of increased public safety or gang curtailment.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, at the theoretical level, the Ecuador case reaffirms the necessity for a new approach we call *critical gang studies* (see also Hagedorn 2008) based on a critical criminological imagination (Young 2011) in order to understand the gang not only as a sociohistorical phenomenon embedded in systems of oppression and subordination but also as a social group of political possibility and transformation (see Brotherton 2015; Brotherton and Gude 2020).

Before proceeding, a word about terminology is in order. The term, “legalization,” will be used throughout the article and will be explained more fully in the subsequent parts. The term is shorthand, used by Ecuadorian gang members and policy makers alike, for a complex political process whereby gang members left their clandestine lifestyle and formally entered into the political arena. In exchange for leaving violence and criminality behind, the state offered the gangs an opportunity to be recognized formally as socio-political actors. Rafael Correa, the president at the time, explained: “The country needs them and if the Latin Kings want to change into a corporation and integrate back into society, they will have the full backing of the government. Enough violence.”<sup>4</sup> The process of “legalizing” gangs meant that the gangs who entered into this relationship with the government would be recognized by the state and qualify for funds for scholarships, as well as grants for micro-entrepreneurial projects, that would serve as measures to reduce stigma and help substitute entrenched illicit rent-seeking strategies (Rodriguez and Cerbino 2020). In return, the gangs would stop using violence and commit to a long-term process of collective reentry into civil society. In this quid pro quo, the state would reduce violence sustainably by reintegrating gang members, while the gangs would suffer less harassment from the police and receive help remaking their lives. This formal recognition of gangs as “urban youth organizations” and the political support given to them to make this transition viable is referred to as “legalization.”

What is particularly noteworthy and innovative about this approach is that the state not only rejected the language of moral panic often employed by politicians when talking

<sup>3</sup> We argue that the Ecuadorian case study of gang violence reduction is noteworthy in its success, albeit one that is difficult to replicate in other contexts in its entirety. While there are many lessons to draw from the only country to invest seriously in an alternative to *mano dura*, we are understandably cautious about generalizing about its replicability. We are aware that there are many different kinds of criminal ecosystems in the region, where gangs and gang violence take on different forms and levels of intensity, depending on the context. As we argue, the difficulty in replicating this experience has more to do with the political will to resist hegemonic policies of repression to defend the social order than with the gang phenomenon per se.

<sup>4</sup> The entire statement from Correa (quoted El Diario 2007) is as follows: “The Latin Kings remind me a lot of Boy Scouts. With their principles, their laws and their brotherhood. They have those principles of honorability... Once recognized as a corporation, this group could obtain credit to enable them to become businesses.” In addition, Correa invited other similar groups to formalize their integration into mainstream society and affirmed that they could count on the government’s support: “The country needs them and if the Latin Kings want to change into a corporation and integrate back into society, they will have the full backing of the government. Enough violence.”

about gangs, but it also understood that the traditional concept of desistance from crime would be more effective if applied to the *whole gang* instead of simply to *individual members*. Legalization ultimately begs the question: What happens to gangs if we engage with them meaningfully and collectively? Essentially, legalization opened a political space for entire gangs to transform their organizations and themselves. In addition, it afforded the gangs and its members a new political agency with which the group could reinvent itself. The gang eventually became rebranded as a vehicle of social improvement, but for that to happen, they required a formal political process, providing them the platform, the tools and the legitimacy to demonstrate the possibilities of self-transformation and self-organization.

## Gangs, Social Control and the Ecuador Model

The review of the literature is broken down into four areas: (1) critical versus orthodox gang studies; (2) theories of social control and gang transformation; (3) Ecuadorian gangs and violence; and (4) the Ecuadorian model of gang social control.

### Critical Versus Orthodox Gang Studies

Various authors in the emerging field of critical gang studies (e.g., Brotherton 2015; Brotherton and Gude 2020) approach the gang with quite different domain assumptions (Gouldner 1970) to that of orthodox criminology. Essentially, the critical gang criminologist sees the gang as: (1) an historical subject with agency; (2) a contradictory social group capable of many different organizational forms, ideologies, norms and practices; (3) a political sub-culture that engages power at various levels of society; (4) a site of cultural creativity and meaning-making (see Conquergood 1993); and (5) a group that occupies space sometimes territorially and defensively but may also be active in expansive cross-border domains on local, national or transnational scales. Such a definitional approach is best demonstrated in Brotherton and Barrios's (2004) description of a "street organization."<sup>5</sup>

In direct contrast, a host of orthodox treatments of the gang see the gang as primarily criminogenic and pathological because the group, by definition, is tied to a life of crime and delinquency in which the "soft skills" needed to access the legitimate opportunity structure of the formal economy "conflict with the values of life in the gang" (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). Such domain assumptions are derived from the highly influential work of Miller (1958), who concluded that "lower-class gangs" had a habitus that consisted of certain "focal concerns" emphasizing antisocial traits, such as autonomy, excitement, respect, street smarts, toughness and trouble, as well as Klein's (1971) criminogenic definition of the gang, which includes delinquency as a primary characteristic. In a recent article in United States (US) criminology's flagship journal, several orthodox scholars of the gang sum up this position as follows: "our hypothesis is that being in a gang should have a direct, negative relationship with legal earning, as well as an indirect relationship through

<sup>5</sup> Brotherton and Barrios (2004: 23) define a street organization as: "A group formed largely by youth and adults of a marginalized social class which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity, an opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture, a refuge from the stresses and strains of barrio or ghetto life and a spiritual enclave within which its own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced."

delinquent peers, routine activities consisting of antisocial or criminal behavior and incarceration experiences” (Augustyn et al. 2019).

Methodologically, there is also a deep chasm between the two approaches, with most orthodox treatments of the gang employing a strong preference for positivistic data collection and analysis, which is understood to be more “scientific” and testable, whereas most critical studies utilize a mix of methodologies with a preference for qualitative investigations and the adoption of a reflexive positionality vis-à-vis the subject/object of the research (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For the critical student of the gang, the social and structural context in which the gang operates is imperative to take into account and thus the importance placed on generalizability, a key tenet of most orthodox practitioners, is given less weight. This allows the gang to be seen in its contingent, contradictory state with certain properties that change across time and levels of agency that make for possibility and transformation. We might understand this research in its theoretical frames and methodological principles to be a prime example of critical gangs studies.

### Theories of Social Control and Gang Transformation

According to Janowitz (1975), the effectiveness of social control, which is necessary for a society to achieve social harmony, is predicated on its ability to reduce social coercion, eliminate human misery and increase the role of rationality in social organization and interaction. Janowitz (1975) saw that social control was related to civic engagement through which social actors gained a finite sense of citizenship and the production of shared norms. It is through such civic engagement (precisely the kind promoted in Ecuador’s “Citizens’ Revolution”) that communities achieve self-regulation and this, in turn, produces a desired level of social control through consensus-building. Importantly, Janowitz (1975) saw any resorting to social coercion as a sign of failure, not of success in society’s management. But how does such social control come about and how can consensus be reached in contemporary societies riven with deep social and economic inequality and systems of asymmetrical power?

In his study of the phenomenon of late modern social exclusion, Young (1999) coined the term, “social bulimia,” to describe the dialectical processes of cultural inclusion and socioeconomic exclusion that many societies experience. Young (1999) theorized that in societies with profound structural inequalities but high expectations of social mobility, the contradictions that resulted manifested themselves in the social constructions of crime and deviance and the “othering” of the marginalized. It is in the societal reaction to these so-called deviant populations that much is revealed about the true levels of power and its distribution. At the same time, Young (1999) also argued that progressive governments have to address the realities (what he termed “left realism”) of crime and social stress in poor communities (Lea and Young 1984) through effective policies that safeguard their progressive ideals (e.g., strengthening the social safety net and widening opportunity structures) without unleashing institutionalized forces of coercion. The situation facing Ecuador very much mirrored these conflicting forces theorized by Young.

Thus, the goals and mechanisms of social control, predicated on promoting systems of social inclusion, often have to overcome social and institutional forces committed to contrary systems of control that promote the opposite, i.e., social exclusion (see Foucault 1977). There is no greater symbol of a vilified and socially-excluded group that embodies all the properties of race, class and gendered pathologies fit for social exclusion than the gang in contemporary society.

Dealing with the age-old problem of street gangs, which always reflect society's fundamental contradictions in the distribution of economic and social resources, is a test of how progressive states can engage such forms of lower-class "deviance" through both structural economic change and sociopolitical mobilization. Brotherton (2015) argues that historically, there are numerous examples of social control policies not based on the pathologization of deviant youth groups and their communities, which today, under many repressive regimes of justice, leads to their spatial control and hyper-segregation. In other epochs, such groups have demonstrated different levels of social engagement with the specific goal of integration if not empowerment. Hagedorn (2008), for example, asks what happened to all the white gangs cited in the Chicago research of Thrasher (1927) some eighty years previously; the answer is they were incorporated into the racialized structures of the political economy. In other words, they were included socially. But what happens, then, to those non-white groups that are subject to social exclusion across generations?<sup>6</sup>

Some researchers argue that gangs adapt to their structured, multi-marginalization by becoming quasi-institutions (Hagedorn 2008; Moore 1991; Vigil 2007). There are, however, those groups that under certain conditions harness their modes of socio-cultural resistance to new forms of empowerment politics, influenced by an enabling environment of social radicalism, as seen with the Young Lords and the Black Panthers in the US during the 1960s or by a specific conjuncture of internal (new prophetic leaderships) and external (the introduction of "zero tolerance") conditions as witnessed with the street organizations of New York in the late 1990s (Brotherton and Barrios 2004).

Drawing on social movements, subcultural and resistance theories, Brotherton (2015) argues that under certain circumstances, street gangs can produce high levels of socio-cultural agency which they use innovatively and strategically to resolve societal power differentials through the transformation of their own self-organizations and practices. Such groups, while they reflect the cultural contradictions of the mainstream society and are the direct products of that society, are often cast as its outsiders and in opposition to it. In the case of Ecuador, the government actively created these new conditions for gang transformation through launching far-reaching policies of social inclusion, rejecting the politics of social exclusion and achieving the most enlightened form of gang social control in either hemisphere.

## Ecuadorian Gangs and Violence

Ecuadorian street gangs saw their emergence in the 1980s with the country's two major cities, Quito and Guayaquil, featuring predominantly as their main sites of operation (Rodgers and Baird 2015). In 2008, the National Police found that more than 400 street gangs

<sup>6</sup> The issue of integration is obviously very complex and not at all a straightforward policy of changing the racialized nature of the opportunity structure within a capitalist political economy. It is important to draw the distinction between street gangs, which might have some entrepreneurial characteristic, and organized crime, which necessarily does, to understand better the pitfalls of working with the latter (see Cockayne 2017).

were active in the province of Guayas and that approximately 178 were present in the province of Pichincha; groups were included in the gang database only if they were considered “delinquent” (Santillán and Soledad 2008). These groups were divided into two organizational types, *pandillas* and *naciones*, with *pandillas* operating as locally-based, territorial group formations and *naciones* functioning more as street organizations with stricter socio-cultural norms, hierarchies and broader spatial and ideological aspirations (Brotherton and Barrios 2004). *Pandillas* were local barrio youth gangs, while *naciones* had a national presence and could be found in all major cities. According to Cerbino (2010), the Latin Kings and Queens (i.e., STAE) and the *Ñetas*<sup>7</sup> developed as transnational organizations in Ecuador primarily in the early 1990s when deported US gang members found willing recruits among marginalized youth in the poorest urban neighborhoods, while the Masters of the Street and the Crazy Souls emerged indigenously, mimicking some of the same cultural and organizational features as those practiced by their US-inspired counterparts.

According to one report, the Latin Kings were said to be of special concern and responsible for 27% of all the homicides in Guayaquil at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Santillán and Soledad 2008). Such fears of the growing youth gang threat are reflected in the change in national youth arrest rates between 1999 and 2005, showing a doubling in apprehensions to almost 8000 (Torres 2006).

## The Ecuadorian Model of Gang Social Control

The Ecuadorian approach to the issue of security viewed economic, national, personal and political security concerns as linked to the provision of social citizenship and human rights. The idea was that increasing public security and internal social control, i.e., effective self-regulation, should come from a community’s shared cultural norms and practices of mutual respect, reciprocity and effective self-organization that together enhance ties of social solidarity.

To reach the goals of heightened and combined personal and collective security, the government invested in the social obligations, provisions and services of the state, such as housing, national health care, public education and public space. This holistic view of law enforcement reconceived the police as community problem solvers. Hence, in 2011, large sectors of the national police were reconstituted as a community police force with a revised mission and training curriculum (Bachelet and Mejia 2015). The Ecuadorian police were considered the best paid police force on the continent until the current economic and political crisis that has plagued the present government since its inception.

As part of this social inclusionary approach to the security question, the Ecuadorian government reached out to several large street subcultures, such as the STAE, the *Ñetas* and the Masters of the Street, encouraging these groups to form pro-social associations through which activities, such as sports competitions, music events and job training opportunities, were co-organized with public/private agencies. In this way, the government sought to achieve its goals of community empowerment and peaceful coexistence (Brotherton 2015; Brotherton and Gude 2018; Cerbino 2012). There are three main reasons why the government adopted such policies.

<sup>7</sup> The STAE and La Asociación Latin Kings are two separate groups. The STAE legalized first while the latter group legalized afterward. La Asociación Latin King was originally formed as a break-off group that did not agree with legalization, but later saw the benefits of the process and formed its own legal entity.

First, the government recognized that the success of its “Citizens’ Revolution” rested on the level of engagement it could ensure with all sectors of society, including those in the most marginalized subpopulations. Second, the government saw that the repressive model of gang control was leading to increased rates of violence in various Latin American theaters, such as the Northern Triangle. One result of such increased violence was to destabilize government–community relations and undermine the legitimate power of the state to regulate society (Cockayne 2014). Third, the government was anxious to avoid the implementation of policies that could encourage the establishment and spread of organized crime (Brotherton and Gude 2018), and reasoned that reaching out to street gangs could head off their corporatization and potential recruitment.

## Methodology

Adopting a critical ethnographic approach to the research (Brotherton 2015; Conquergood 2002; Willis 2004), we combined archival and qualitative research methods best suited to explore historical change and the perspectives of hard-to-reach subjects living in marginalized communities. These data allowed us access to the insider knowledge, interpretations, meanings, perspectives and rituals of the groups’ members, providing us with their political and cultural histories and the contexts in which changes in these groups emerged and decisions were made regarding the governmental initiatives. The sub-areas of our research focused on: (1) the evolution of government policy based on the principles of social inclusion vis-à-vis street gangs; (2) the changing nature of street subcultures across time; (3) changes in the social composition of the groups; (4) issues of gender and the family; and (5) how all these changes have affected the identities of gang members and what might be considered their construction of self.

## Data Collection

We constructed a life history questionnaire focusing on: (1) members’ socialization; (2) the conceptual and substantive roles of citizenship; (3) views and experiences of the government’s social inclusionary policies; (4) experiences of gang-related violence; (5) participation in pro-social activities of the group; (6) methods of resolving inter-group and inter-personal conflict; (7) existing local opportunity structures; (8) examples of neighborhood pro- and antisocial cultures; (9) challenges facing the groups pro-social practices; and (10) collective and individual future plans and perspectives. All the interviews were recorded and included both experienced members who could speak to issues of change across time and the importance of leadership, as well as new young recruits who provided insights into the attraction of these groups and the perspectives of this current generation on societal violence after the legalization process. In addition, qualitative interviews were carried out with government agents, police leaders, former political figures and leading members of the STAE, the Ñetas and the Masters of the Street related to the central issue of this project, i.e., the impact of these groups on the reduction in violence.

Utilizing our contacts, we carried out sixty total face-to-face interviews in Ambato, Cuenca, Esmeraldas, Guayaquil, Quito and Santo Domingo with the STAE (forty-eight

interviews), the Ñetas (six interviews) and the Masters of the Street and the Crazy Souls (six interviews). Forty-nine of our interviewees were male and eleven were female.

In addition, we conducted multiple informal interviews with members of all three groups, plus interviews with family members of the STAE, as well as ten interviews with government officials of different ministries (formerly with el Ministerio de Inclusión Económica y Social [MIES]) and one interview with an ex-national police chief. Most of the interviews with the gang members took place at members' homes, community centers, at the second author's apartment in Quito, or at government offices.

We also carried out field observations in various locations, including: large group meetings (hosted monthly, in the case of the STAE, as well as regional meetings, which provided ample opportunities for interviews and observation<sup>8</sup>), small group chapter meetings, leadership meetings, "backstage interactions,"<sup>9</sup> public meetings with group presentations, such as the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (PUCE) book fair, public holiday celebrations, and recreational barbecues, in addition to meetings between gang leaders and state bureaucrats held in ministry offices.

All the interviews were transcribed, coded and stored in separate files for each group. We used coded data to answer our two leading research questions, mapping the development of the state's social inclusionary policies and the impact of their interventions on the evolution of the groups, while tracing the links of these policies and group changes to homicide reduction.

## Social Inclusion of the Gang in Practice

In this part, we discuss some of the major findings from our study, highlighting the range of factors that have contributed to the social inclusionary project of the Ecuadorian model of gang social control. The variegated impacts and processes we outline demonstrate the holistic nature of the forces and mechanisms unleashed by the social inclusionary model indicating both qualitative and quantitative changes at all levels of society, i.e., the micro, meso and macro. These sub-areas relate to the broader research concerns outlined above and a more detailed and exhaustive treatment of our data and investigation will be presented in a future book manuscript.

## Changed Social Relations Between the Gang and the State

Respondents described the early years of the Correa government as providing a new political narrative (i.e., the government was calling on all its citizens to play a meaningful role in the new modernized Ecuador, one in which human rights would be respected and the goals of equality, national dignity and socialism could be achieved) wherein their own transformation had traction. These years of the "Citizens' Revolution" provided a unique political moment and opening where gang leaders saw an opportunity to insert themselves into

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<sup>8</sup> "The universal" is a meeting held once a year in either Guayaquil or Quito. The day starts with long meetings and speeches; sacred beads are also given-out to deserving members. In the morning, agendas are created for the year and decisions are made, but there is also time for leisure. This was the ideal occasion to see hundreds of gang members in the same place, conduct interviews and observe shared behaviors.

<sup>9</sup> "Backstage interactions" refers to group-related planning meetings and informal discussions and consultations between group members, the two authors, and members of the government and/or university faculty.

larger debates around political inclusion. They believed that they would be accepted and taken seriously and that they would be given a chance to transform both individually and collectively. The political will was finally there to permit them short- and long-term opportunities to bring themselves out of the margins and claim their place as full-fledged citizens and as active players in the making of a more democratic and humanistic society. For example, when youth organizations were asked to include feedback for the writing of the new constitution, recently legalized gang leaders were included in these grassroots consultations. In the eyes of groups' members, they had fulfilled their half of the bargain by helping to decrease violence. But what describes their changed relationship with state agents and institutions? In the following subsections, we unpack the major agents with whom the groups interacted across time: the police and the government.

## The Police

For many of the gang members, this relationship was tied intimately to their reclaiming of public space. Before legalization, if the STAE held a meeting in a park or in other public spaces, the police would inevitably arrive to arrest and physically abuse the participants. Legalization was primarily a reinstatement of the right to the city (Harvey 2008). During the period of the research, all of the groups had their meetings in public, while wearing their colors openly became a source of intense pride. The new relationship with the police in effect epitomized a return to full citizenship rights, as they were no longer stopped and frisked or targeted for wearing their gang colors in public spaces, with many noting that this was perhaps the single biggest victory of the legalization. Indeed, public acceptance and the widening definition of citizenship rights to include non-violent gang members was the lynchpin that convinced the gangs that a watershed moment had come and that leaving a clandestine existence was possible under the current government. Not coincidentally, the state police force also underwent serious changes, which worked in tandem with gang legalization to make street level drops in violence sustainable.

Respondents also noted that the newly founded respect afforded them by the police increased the legitimacy of the state in their eyes and that working with a government that had successfully reigned-in a brutal and aggressive police force demonstrated that gangs and gang members could and should be taken seriously. Security policy makers often forget that state power works best when citizens consent to it. Through legalization, gangs were obliged to change their ways, but comprehensive police reform contributed greatly to the gangs achieving new levels of self-discipline. This reduced incidences of gang-related conflict with the police, who were no longer perceived as a one-dimensional enemy. Hence, the gangs felt a tangible change in the quality of their treatment in their daily interactions with state security actors. As one member of STAE explained, "Being legalized, you become a public figure, and that makes the [gang] leadership use different strategies for working and organizing; it's not like it was before when everything was resolved with punches, through wars."

Police reform was also important in that a more professional police force filled the vacuum left by gangs that had decided to leave behind a clandestine life. Legalized gangs were no longer able or felt compelled to enforce territorial sovereignty through violence, and a professionally-trained community police force was key to ensuring that threats from other groups would be investigated thoroughly. Increased police presence also helped to ensure that gang members who had left criminality behind were safe from other criminal elements who might perceive their legalization as a sign of weakness. The street credibility of major

gangs was able to continue without engaging in violence because the state had ensured their marginal neighborhoods would also be secure and receive the benefits afforded to more affluent neighborhoods. This *dual process* of gang legalization and police reform addressed two major concerns of the gangs: (1) how to save face when negotiating with the state; and (2) how to incorporate notions of respect culture entrenched in street culture. Gangs that legalized did not lose their street credibility in historically gang-controlled neighborhoods because the police now showed them respect while ensuring non-legalized rivals were not threatening them. At the same time, notions of *respect culture* were incorporated into government policy and strategy as well as in interactions with gangs, e.g., the respect for gang colors, consulting with gangs on how they wanted to be recognized.

## The Government

Never again will you be excluded from the small and large decisions that we take. We want to go forward together with you, with your organizations. We will make history with this great effort, and [bridge] the disconnect from centers of power in territories where there used to be violence and now will be sites of true social conversion. (José Serrano, Ecuador Minister of the Interior 2016).

As José Serrano, the then-Minister of the Interior, intoned above, the relationship with the government had clearly been transformed. For the group's members, this relationship during the past ten years had been an education in how to interact "formally" with the state and civil society. A lifetime on the margins meant that gang leaders had to be taught how institutions worked. In many ways, the legalization of gangs was a process of "bureaucratizing" the relationship between formerly clandestine cultures and formal state institutions. Luckily, the ranks of the new government of Alianza Pais, like many leftwing governments that came to power during the "pink tide" (i.e., the turn to the left) in Latin America, consisted of members who came from marginalized communities themselves and who were not unfamiliar with gang culture. Unlike traditional party machines that had held on to power previously, the new government brought in members of NGOs that had first-hand knowledge of the reality in these neighborhoods.

These state bureaucrats had an easier time working with street organizations and, with their help, gang members learned to write proposals, interacted with state ministries, were encouraged to collaborate with (other) youth organizations, and were groomed in how to transmit and project their goals beyond the street level. Ministries with bureaucrats from similar socioeconomic backgrounds to the gangs helped build bridges to convince gang members that their organization could be elevated from the politics of the street to that of the mainstream civil society. This promoted a change on other levels, not only discursively, but also in how members interacted with other gangs and how they trained new recruits. This new relationship between the government and the gang created a sea of change in how the leadership could perceive and plan its future as a legitimate collective with access to state resources. Much of this relationship with the state now hinged on the groups' abilities to gain access to funds for social projects, with the state seen as a desirable and powerful interlocutor. The government became viewed as a trusted partner that kept its promises and was both willing and committed to meeting the needs of the group and its members. As one member described the relationship, "Having a photo taken of the Latin Kings alongside the president breaks barriers and stigmas, not only in Ecuador but also worldwide."

To maintain and sustain this relationship, street organizations were willing to engage with the government and its agents to enact deep changes. For the groups, this enabled them to be “taken seriously”—an indispensable goal of each group, which translates into being given respect—a form of status prized by street cultures but also essential to reducing the stigma of the gang. How a culture of respect in gangs could be upheld and enhanced through working with the government was important for maintaining a functional relationship and convincing other gangs to follow suit. The groups then saw positive outcomes from their collaboration with state agencies who, in turn, began to regard them as formal actors in civil society, deserving of state largesse and various levels of support. The groups’ subsequent “bureaucratization” in their relationship with the burgeoning state apparatus consisted of (1) designating representatives; and (2) deepening their ties with non-state third parties who helped them with proposals to obtain funds as well as lend them legitimacy. The groups and their members thus underwent a steep learning curve in how to interact in the more formal settings of society. This had a dialectical impact as it demonstrated a serious commitment to the reform process while it also required agents from state ministries to be willing to work with groups unfamiliar with the inner operations of the state.

It is important to note that the legalization process was not regarded or implemented as a short-term policy that might be used as a temporary agreement in exchange for votes. Instead, group members recognized that the government was intent on a long-term commitment to working with gangs/street groups and was willing to keep its doors open for more than a decade, through three administrations. This commitment and practice by the state were held in high esteem by group members, not least because of the long experience with other governments that saw youth outreach as purely strategic—a policy priority enacted as a short-term agreement primarily during election cycles. Several key individuals of the state were referred to consistently in this regard, i.e., as high-ranking government officials who time and again reached out to reaffirm their commitment to the policy of social inclusion: The President of Ecuador, the Minister of the Interior and the Chief Advisor to the Minister of the Interior. From the perspective of some government officials, the policy of gang legalization was seen as a form of cooptation—a way to reign-in former criminal elements under the state. Though tempting to see this policy as an extension of time-worn strategies of clientelism, the relationship between the Ecuadorian state and the gangs can be better understood as a form of transformative patronage.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the legalization process also recognized the groups’ memberships as part of the general youth population (defined by the government as a sociological and psychological category including anyone between eighteen- and twenty-nine-years-old—approximately 21% of the population) and made a special effort to reach out to them. For example, in a national consultative process organized by MIES to create a Manifesto for Youth Equality, one ex-member of the Latin Queens remembered how inclusive the government’s efforts were:

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<sup>10</sup> The exchange of favors for votes is a form of clientelism, but the exchange of favors (in this case, lowered homicide rates in return for formal recognition and social investment) that results in the lowering of violence over the long term is better understood as a form of transformational patronage (see Auyero 2008).

We worked really hard on that document, all of the groups. For example, you should know that the Ñetas were very influential in writing the piece on gender violence and equality. N., their leader at the time, was gay-identified and made sure the group really took this area seriously. Most of that piece was a result of N.'s input.<sup>11</sup>

## The Changing Nature of the Street Groups

A crucial aspect of the success of legalization has been the process of transformation of the groups that have been primarily involved and targeted by the government. In the following, we summarize what we have observed as the major factors and characteristics of the groups. As they entered a new stage in their respective evolution, we tease out how they evolved from gangs to street organizations.

### New Models of the Street Organization

The legalization of the STAE in 2007 had a domino effect. Soon after legalization, the second largest gang, the Ñetas, quickly followed suit. Having the main rival of the STAE also legalized meant that the STAE were more at ease as their main threat was included within the same process. The government legalized the country's most notorious and arguably largest gang, the STAE, to set an example to other gangs that legalization was a desirable relationship to have with the state. If they were successful with the STAE, they could replicate the process with other street gangs. This strategy worked and word traveled quickly. As recently as three years ago, different gangs and street groups have opted for legalization, in some cases different groups from the same neighborhood have joined forces, as is the case of "El Bunk" and the Crazy Souls in north Quito. As one leading member of the STAE put it, "after we became legal, legalization became fashionable." This was confirmed during six months of fieldwork with dozens of interviews with previously rival gangs. Ñetas, the Masters of the Street and other smaller gangs all confirmed that the legalization of the STAE set an example that everyone wanted to follow. As one leader put it:

[...] various proposals were generated [by the government] for us to work together with public and private institutions to achieve goals like education, training, and joint ventures in order to involve youth more effectively in public policies. Through this state recognition we're changing the image that people have of these other kinds of youth organizations...all these changes have allowed our organizations to become stronger and to position themselves in civil society as political and social actors who can give answers to youth.

Thus, legalization set the stage for a new way for street organizations to interact and established new norms of behavior with even those members of the STAE who were originally opposed to legalization later changing their position. This was the case with a faction of the STAE that broke away during the legalization process, later forming what is now called the Association of the Latin Kings.

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<sup>11</sup> See "Agenda de igualdad para la Juventud—2012–2013" (Ministerio de Inclusión Económico y Social 2012). Other important state efforts to reach out to youth are included in "Agenda Nacional para la Igualdad Intergeneracional" (Consejo Nacional para la Igualdad Intergeneracional 2014) and the "Agendas Nacional de Igualdad" (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo 2014).

After a decade of fostering formal ties between the state and previously illicit street groups, the way street organizations have evolved shows a dramatic transformation. The largest street organizations had ties to different government ministries and collaborated with each other consistently on initiatives, learning alternative ways of funding their community to create, develop and implement innovative cultural projects. This system of alternative funding opportunities made legalization attractive to many street groups, where increasing cultural outlets for youth in their respective communities was regarded a priority.<sup>12</sup> Thus, while the groups were no longer at war with each other, the legalization process ushered in a period during which they could solidify new forms of coexistence within the same urban setting. One Latin King explained why working with other legalized gangs was very practical:

Of course, it's much easier because they are also legal. I mean, they also know that they can lose their legalized status, because if we act badly on the street and people find out about it, they can take the legal status away from us as well as from them.

Consequently, with reduced inter-group threats and new funding possibilities, along with opportunities for joint projects, group leaders started to befriend their counterparts, further cementing the decline in inter-gang violence. On multiple occasions, we observed previous enemies having lunch, discussing upcoming events and giving advice to each other on how to organize and fund new cultural projects. Today, these leaders continue to meet and maintain regular contact. Constant contact between leaders also made it easier to resolve street conflicts swiftly, severely reducing the possibility of escalation or conflict spirals.

### The “Maturing in” of Members

In the criminological literature, gang desertion or gang desistance from crime is commonly referred to as “maturing out.” In our research, however, we have noticed a completely different phenomenon—that of “maturing in.” What legalization has ultimately meant for these various gangs is group transformation as opposed to individual transformation. This is a radically different approach to violence reduction and has been highly successful. What we have observed is that entire gangs, over the span of several years, have transformed their structures and their street practices as collective bodies. This transformation has manifested itself in two major ways. First, gangs have changed their leadership styles in order to sustain formal relationships and avenues of communication and cooperation with bureaucratic ministries. Second, these gangs have encountered a unique aging experience which has contributed to the gang maturing as a whole. As older members increasingly stayed in the gang instead of leaving, the tipping process of transformation of the whole toward non-violence was further solidified. As one female member put it:

Beyond the formal recognition of being “legal,” it's the maturity of the members who make up the Nation that signifies the real change. In our day, we were young adolescents and pre-adolescents, but our mentality kept developing...Adding all this to the

<sup>12</sup> Paz Urbana comprised a series of important events organized in 2007, 2008 and 2011 that brought members of all the street groups together to perform or attend various hip hop-related cultural activities in Quito. Members of the STAE were leaders in the initiative working with various government ministries.

legalization, which established norms for peace, led to certain adjustments, rules, and accommodations within the system, which ended the threats from other street groups and caused the violence between the groups to end. Of course, the legalization helped us a lot, but the maturity of the members played a significant role. There are very few young members. The Nation is largely made up of older and more mature members. We've been through a lot... We don't want those who come behind us to have to live through the same situations.

The leadership of these various gangs has had to adopt very different management styles after legalization took place. In exchange for formal recognition and access to job training and state resources for social projects, these groups left behind old practices of violence and illicit rent-seeking strategies. The risk of losing state funds for projects meant that leaders had the task of sustaining these ministerial relationships and over time became conditioned to think and operate differently. Consequently, new skills and talents were emphasized over others. For example, those who knew how to execute projects or who were good at public speaking or who were more politically astute became valuable assets to a group that was attempting to become a formal social actor in a politically charged environment.

Due to legalization, many members who would have either been killed in conflict, left the gang on their own accord (i.e., "matured out"), or ended up in prison, are still around and active members. Legalization afforded aging gang members status, community, and even a sense of social mobility. This meant that there was a critical mass of older, experienced members, which is rare in most gangs, as younger members tend to swell the ranks. This collective aging process ensured that new norms around non-violence were enforced, making self-regulating mechanisms of non-violence a more effective social control.<sup>13</sup>

In several instances, we noticed that aging gang leaders had decided to make legalization their swan song and their last contribution to the streets. Leaders who would otherwise be dead or in prison used legalization as a vehicle to maintain social status within the gang without the consequences that come with a life of crime. The leaders of these organizations were veritable and venerable "OGs" (original gangsters or first-generation gang members) who had put in work with their gangs but were operating under entirely different circumstances.

In the case of STAE, for example, there was a balance between young and older members in general, but in some cities, the balance was tipped toward older members. What legalization did was allow older members a social space to continue being gang members while still taking part in community life without the fear of going to jail or being denied work because they identify as a member of a street organization. These older members created a critical mass of mature members who were in favor of legalization and reforming the group. The positive example that more experienced members set for neophytes was clear from interviews with those who joined after 2007, pointing to a cultural change within these street organizations. This confirms a growing suspicion among criminologists that only older gang leaders are in a position to change the cultural norms of their gang and that by empowering the leadership, they can capitalize on the gangs' hierarchy to alter old habits and set in motion more pro-social behaviors.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of "aging-in" or "maturing-in" works, in large part, because the gang, especially the Latin Kings, operates as a gerontocracy. Not only are older members revered by younger members but the older members are in a position to change, enforce and uphold the cultural norms of the gang. This has avoided clashes with younger members who might resent a lack of power within the gang. The respect for veterans and tight hierarchy of the gang have made dissent from younger members, for now, unlikely.

Thus, the combination of these two factors—a different leadership style and an aging group—has had a big effect on both initiating and sustaining the changes brought about by legalization. As the leadership aged over the years and was given a space to think politically, they began to learn to leverage their numbers and their social capital in more prosocial ways. One member in Guayaquil put it this way,

It caught a lot of young people's attention, you could say, that the Kings were no longer a criminal organization, that they are now legalized and have clear objectives and a new purpose. You could say that legalization broke many stigmas about us and helped to attract new members to the organization.

### Transformational Types

Regarding gang transformation—and as mentioned earlier—there are typically two types: *radical transformation*, as is the case with the STAE or the Chicago Young Lords, and *gradual historical transformation*, where gangs are absorbed by political and economic processes and virtually disappear. Both seemed to be happening in Ecuador at the same time. The STAE, the Masters of the Street, and the Crazy Souls made the leap from gang to formally recognized social and political youth movements, but they were also being absorbed slowly by local and federal government bodies as leaders were increasingly aligning themselves with politicians for resources.<sup>14</sup>

These street groups strengthened their ties to local governments, established working relationships with the police, aligned themselves with other cultural or youth organizations, and saw their leaders encourage members to become agents capable of making their own futures by becoming entrepreneurs or entering college. In other words, we saw leaders and their messages actively oppose a lifestyle based on stereotypical gangster “focal concerns” (Miller 1958) that promote instant gratification and an emphasis on violent feats or the themes of nihilism and hedonism.

### The Emergence of Professional Strata

As we have seen, as part of legalization, gangs were expected to interact formally with state institutions. This forced a change in cultural practices as members began to view the state differently: “I began to understand how things were done inside formal institutions and how I could help channel support for my brothers.” Naturally, those most fit for these new roles began to emerge, leading to a new stratum of professional members who served as a bridge between the politics of the street and the state. All groups delegated members to serve in these roles, essentially becoming the diplomatic branch of the gang. Some members, for example from the Crazy Souls, rose through the ranks to hold local or municipal posts, serving as both gang member and community representative. In one observed case, local residents were reluctant to have gang leaders hold public positions, but later admitted that they were doing a “good job.” In the case of the STAE, four members were hired by the Interior Ministry and one by the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores. The opportunities provided to these members and their elevation to such important posts were duly

<sup>14</sup> One member of the Ñetas has been elected to the Asamblea and other members of the Masters of the Street have run for local offices in recent elections.

noted by many of the group's members and gave both added legitimacy and sustainability to the overall project of social and political collaboration and cooperation, thus cementing the relationship between certain ministries and the legalization process, while helping to groom a professional class within the groups. Such insider relationships with the government assisted the group in gaining access to funds while giving them increased representation in a range of contacts and relationships with state actors and institutions. One such professional member put it this way:

Before, we were invisible. We suffered a lot of discrimination from various institutions, like the police. We were not allowed to occupy public space, let alone participate in politics. Within this new political moment, new spaces for dialogue were created where we were able to interact with political actors in influential positions.

Several in-depth interviews were conducted with these professional members, from which it was clear that they served important roles as stewards for a group that, after years of legalized status, needed to evolve and re-negotiate their relationship to changing political and ministerial dynamics. As elections reshuffled ministers and their staff, the gang members working closely with ministries had to periodically rebuild the institutional memory of state–gang relations. They served to explain the aims of the gang to the state and vice versa, while guiding the gang as new political circumstances and priorities emerged. These professional strata were self-reflective, trained to think strategically and helped inform gang leaders as to how to proceed.

Thus, the legalized gang provided a collective space of meaning creation, while it also increasingly became a vehicle of social mobility for some. Those who led the gang successfully through legalization were seen as having secured new opportunities for their members and, in time, the street group's new status was perceived as an effective route to self-improvement, with the professional strata seen as the pinnacle. In many of the interviews, particularly with female members, the organization was seen as a tool of self-betterment and community building—with the stigma of the gang as a space of violence replaced by a reimagining of the group through ideas presented by street reformers who have traveled a different path out of their lower-class origins. The members of this stratum have broken through racial, class and gendered boundaries and attained both a status and social position not normally associated with members of street gangs. Such members, therefore, have brought messages of hope and possibility into the organization, demonstrating what was attainable rather than reinforcing messages of futility and fatalism.

One young leader commented to us about his first political conference. His anecdote about representing the Latin Kings at a national public meeting reflects how the group's image has changed, and what this has meant for its members.

I told them, "I represent the Latin Kings." They all stood and looked at me. It's kind of unexpected for society. For us to go from being on the streets, blamed for some of the highest rates of violence in the country, to taking part in a forum where you can speak openly and express yourself as a Latin King, and have everyone pay attention. I think that is one of the proudest aspects of the legalization process, to be able to attend important events and proudly say that you represent the Latin Kings.

These professional members also served the important role of replacing the third-party groups that helped the legalization process in the beginning. In order for the transformation to be ingrained and, as one FLACSO<sup>15</sup> academic put it, “poder caminar solos”—to walk without the help of others—it was necessary to encourage members to study and pursue professional careers. These members later served as bridges between institutions and the street organization, providing technical help, for example, in writing grants as well as attending ministerial meetings, articulating ideas, strategies and long-term goals to the group and to the government alike.

As legalization progressed, new competencies were realized by the groups and their members which, in turn, produced increased necessities and demands as they developed and evolved. Those with the professional skills and government-related connections helped to communicate these increased needs and ambitions to those with resources which, in turn, established further the credibility of the street organizations not only in the eyes of the state but also in the eyes of their own members and the community at large. As the priorities of these groups changed, paradoxically, their success depended more and more on these professional members to help guide them and articulate their transformed relationship to society.

Professional gang members who became part of the government not only inspired members of their group, showing how they could succeed beyond the streets, but also helped to formalize and legitimize the legalization process, particularly for government bureaucrats who deal with the day to day of gang outreach. This was of great importance in making decisions regarding the dispensing funds for different projects. Many of these members have since been recognized for their work and professionalism, as well as for the unique experience they have brought to their jobs, helping to convince state agents who have been doubtful of such collaborations. Some of these professional gang members were given college scholarships and, in one case, completed a master's degree in Community Development. The professional gang members were able to vouch for their members and effectively sustain the formalities required in working with the state.

## The Changing Roles of Gender

A major accomplishment in the transformation of these groups was particularly noticeable in the role of females. This was especially important for the STAE, a group that has a separate section known as the Latin Queens, who meet and organize separately from the males but come together at general regional and national meetings. Two of the leading figures of the STAE are female, both of whom hold a high status within the organization and exert a powerful influence over a range of members, both male and female. The presence of these self-organized females functions as a countervailing force to the male-dominated hierarchy that went unchallenged previously. The empowerment of females through these groups has had a pro-social influence on their development as it tends to support a non-violent trajectory of the culture and its norms, resisting the currency of violence that often characterizes the street environment. In addition, the enhanced role of females helps to prioritize the importance of family and children within the overall subculture, again deepening

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<sup>15</sup> FLACSO is a university in Quito and stands for Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales Sede Ecuador.

the group's commitment to a more future-oriented and socially positive evolution. As one Latin Queen described the meaning of her membership:

For me, being a Queen is a show of strength and represents a struggle for survival. We women have often been the guides and counselors in the most difficult of situations and in the face of adversity. For me, being a Queen...not only means family, but it's my identity and it's something I've earned with sacrifice, love, and through many trials over the years. And even though we women are few in the organization, we continue to thrive... it's not the quantity but the quality that matters inside this organization.

### Self-Understandings and Presentation of Self

In the case of the STAE the evolution has been, in their words, a transformation from a street gang to an "urban youth group" and the current challenge is to progress further into a social movement with stronger ties to other civil society actors, particularly youth movements with a political platform. The STAE's public discourse, as we have observed repeatedly at meetings, both public and private, is that they are not a gang any longer. In fact, the STAE and other groups prefer the word "agrupación" to refer to themselves. They perceive the term "gang" as pejorative, causing stigma and belying what the group and its members now represent. Indeed, members of the groups have consistently corrected us when we use the word "gang." As one member of STAE stated, a "gang" is what we *were*, but now, "we're a good gang, a gang with culture."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, a new understanding of the group emerged:

Just try to imagine, there were many enemies back then that could hurt you at any moment, that could kill your brother, and later you'd see them on the street and you'd have to control yourself, learn to do things differently. You couldn't keep thinking like before, so things started to change, and little by little we got used to this new lifestyle. With time, our members began to make the changes that we all expected from them. You could say that we've left the street corners and are now concentrated on building up the Nation that we all want.

These street groups have also learned to project a different image of themselves to the public—one rooted in a new self-understanding. In one interview with a STAE leader, his reinvention was clearly on display. His discourse was extremely professional and polished, but not rehearsed or performed. Rather, it was obvious that he had been stating the same thing for years and saw himself as the living proof of the changes that have been made. After years of talking to government ministers, local politicians, police officers, university professors and other social actors, the groups had developed a discourse of the "reformed gang," becoming confident in presenting themselves to the public.

In addition, they also saw positive aspects of the term "transnational"—a characteristic of groups usually applied negatively to organizations such as these (Lamotte 2017). In the case of the STAE, for example, there is a great degree of shared experiences and

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<sup>16</sup> The word *gang* ("pandilla" in Ecuadorian Spanish) is still sometimes used, but only to refer to the group's beginnings.

institutional collective memory that is exchanged across time and space. Just as negative ideas can spread, so can positive ones. The Latin Kings and Queens underwent profound changes in Barcelona, Genoa and New York before 2007 (Palmas 2017), and these learning experiences were built upon and taken into consideration when Ecuadorian members decided to enter into a formal relationship with the state. A profound exchange of ideas and good practices has been part of a unique global history of the Latin Kings. The involvement, for instance, of Antonio Fernández, the former leader of the New York Latin Kings and Queens is instructive. Fernández visited Ecuador often to speak at STAE national meetings and has consistently brought the positive lessons of the New York experience into the group. This intervention has helped to broaden the perspective of the organization, moving its collective imagination from the local to the global. This reflexive capacity of some of the groups demonstrates an important break with the past and shows their capacity to learn from complex processes and experiences both within and across borders as well as over time.

## Discussion

At this stage, we wish to discuss briefly two issues which have been raised in the previous analysis but that require a little more exploration. The first pertains to the issue of homicide reduction and how the changes in the gang occasioned by the political and cultural spaces provided by legalization played a role. Our argument is that the totality of these changes, brought about by gang legalization, made a major contribution to the homicide drop but that this has been difficult to show in positivistic terms without more precise statistical data in which homicides are categorized as “gang-related.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in a previous report (Brotherton and Gude 2018), we did discuss the concept of “defanging the gang,” which we explained as follows:

To legalize the gang is essentially to defang it: to render it non-violent but intact as a group, both structurally and culturally. To recognize the social and cultural capital of the group, respect its social structure and, in fact, to empower it, is to encourage it to stay and work together, but with different goals. Taking away precisely what gave the group its notoriety does not mean the end of the group. Their metaphorical teeth are gone, but their past still gives them street credibility and they are still culturally very much a gang, but simply without violence or criminal activity...In other words, the need (and ability) to violently enforce their influence on the street is no longer a viable option. Their structure is kept intact, as well as the way they leverage their power as a group, but the use of violence is severely reduced if not eliminated. A gang that does not engage systematically in criminality and that is led by a critical mass of reformed leaders, who in many cases would have left were it not for legalization, has led to a change in attitude as a whole.

The larger story behind the sustained homicide drop in Ecuador has many factors and the legalization of gangs is one that has received the least attention, although it is certainly

<sup>17</sup> Of course, the very notion of “gang-related” is problematic if we retain a social constructionist approach to crime. This is made apparent when we consider that universal definitions of the gang do not exist, especially among police departments, who are often the main determinants of a homicide’s classification as “gang-related.”

not the only reason violence declined. It has been a confluence of many factors and to disentangle the economic progress and the political reforms from the overall drop is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, we focus on the behaviors of gang members and how inter-gang violence was sharply reduced by legalizing the three largest street gangs and how violent habits were replaced over time. Gang legalization would not have worked nearly as smoothly without comprehensive police reform, while the interventions employed to work with gangs would not have been possible without the large strides made to modernize the state, which was only possible through increasing state revenues courtesy of high oil prices. That is to say, there were many structural factors that laid the foundation for gang legalization, as well as discursive changes that have taken place in Ecuadorian politics that made a break from *mano dura* possible as well as the groups' collective desistance from violence.

The second relates to the state as an enabler of gang transformation versus the agency of the gangs themselves. We often forget that state power works best when it is not based on coercion but is instead rooted in a political project that engages citizens meaningfully. After one of the most serious financial crises in the region and a decade of political instability, Correa came to power and helped restore hope in a possible political future, particularly for the poorest rungs of society. In many interviews, gang members repeatedly stated that they were invested in the citizen's revolution and felt part of the project. Gang members were invited to take part in politics, no longer relegated to the margins. The deep appreciation for having been given an opportunity to participate meant that they cooperated willingly with the government. From the state's perspective, they had successfully "coopted" the gang, but gang leaders saw the relationship as a welcomed change from harsh policing tactics, as well as a space to achieve greater social mobility for their members.

The state certainly employed many clientelist modes when dealing with the gangs over the years, but it would be reductionist and shortsighted to conclude that the gangs were simply "coopted" during legalization. It is more precise to say that the gangs were incorporated into what most resembles a patronage system, which is more than simply transactional, and took place over an extended period of time. Such a system was a transformative accompaniment to gangs. The agency of the gangs was thus enacted in its relationship with the state because it was given a political space to develop into something beyond the gang—a space where they went from social death to citizens with a political voice.

This patronage project, therefore, is rooted in a rejection of desistance as being exclusively an individual process. The Ecuadorian experience of *collective desistance* was and is an example of a long-term commitment to re-signify the gang and harness the cultural and social capital of the entire group by grafting pro-social qualities onto their aesthetic and cultural identity. The following statement, from the second author's field notes, demonstrates this changed relationship between the gang and the state:

During one field site visit, a member of the Latin Kings had been attacked by a member of a non-legalized gang and had his eye gouged with a broken bottle on a street corner. In this particular neighborhood the gang, though legalized, still retains a degree of territorial control, if only symbolically, and younger gangs sometimes try to make a name for themselves by attacking the historical street organization. Our first thought was that the gang would surely react with violence, but instead the gang went to the police and filed a report. The police swiftly arrested the gang member who had committed the crime and further violence was avoided. But what does the event really mean? The gang knew that if it responded by killing the rival, which it could have easily done, it would jeopardize their legal status and state recognition.

The benefits they received for cooperating with the state could be lost. The police, in turn, had they not responded professionally to the grievance would be letting down the gang that was committed to leaving violence behind and was now vulnerable to potential attacks by former rivals looking to hurt them, which would only undermine the incentive for future gangs to legalize or for legalized gangs to backslide into old habits. But at the heart of the story is nothing less than the foundation that makes up the rule of law. When a gang member decides it is more convenient to act within legal norms than to resolve his problems violently, it means he has submitted himself and bought-into a legal framework (Rafael Gude, Quito, October 2017).

## Conclusion

Legalization in 2007 of the STAE was a watershed moment in security policy, but this transformation from notorious street gang to youth organization was possible because their identity was not rooted solely in criminal activity. Gangs are inherently social and can be viewed as collective bodies of meaning creation, where committing crime is not their sole or even their main activity (Brotherton 2015). Replacing criminality with something else, or simply leaving it behind, is commonly believed to be an impossible proposition. Such assertions are domain assumptions (Gouldner 1970) made by policy makers who do not conduct fieldwork with gang members or by academics who accept the pathological imaginary of gang violence. In our study, we found the opposite to be true and, given the right conditions, it is possible that gang transformation might be replicable in other contexts. Legalization provided members with the possibility of embracing their identity as a sub-culture, emerging from a clandestine existence and becoming formally recognized by a society now disposed to accept them, allowing them to take on citizenship responsibilities and obligations like any other social group. By moving the margins and widening the definition of citizenship to include gang members, gangs were able to re-label themselves and become mainstream and accepted. This allowed the gangs to graft a new and pro-social identity onto their old street identity and street aesthetic. Once gangs were given the political space within which to transform themselves, internal group mechanisms of regulating violence proved much more effective than repressive and militarized approaches to security, avoiding the negative consequences of deviance amplification (Cruz 2010). We argue that in order to engage in long-term policy changes with gangs, the state must have a credible message of commitment, and once this is set in motion, gangs respond in kind.

By forgoing the electorally popular idea that gang members deserve their comeuppance, the state opted for a long-term strategy of crime reduction that meant direct engagement. Thus, a heavy-handed approach was shelved for a more holistic one, which entailed job creation and education outreach, as well as cultural activities and the formal recognition of gangs as cultural street organizations. When the state genuinely reached out, and this effort was supported with political will and sufficient resources, the gangs responded positively. The lessons are: (1) to deal with gang violence, states need to have long-term commitments that are not conditioned by four-year election cycles; and (2) effective approaches toward violence reduction require going beyond short-term strategies of repression and prevention in favor of sustained commitments to community building and street group engagement and empowerment.

One of the reasons the process was sustainable is that a whole generation of members grew up and matured within the legalization process, effectively re-defining the moral pathways and life course development of gang members. Legalization, therefore, became the default setting for gang leaders. As a result, the knowledge of how to navigate ministries, apply for funds, build alliances with other gangs and the police, are all skills a gang leader in Ecuador must now have in order to thrive.

In addition, legalization provided a space, both culturally and legally, to transform the social capital of the gang into effective vehicles of behavioral change demonstrated not only in their successful projects with the government but also in the decline in crime rates. Based on our interviews, all gang members agreed that the legalization process helped significantly to reduce street violence and improve the quality of life and security in their communities.

A major lesson of the ten-year experience of gang legalization is that deviance amplification can be avoided but only if we take seriously the hopes and agency of youth who showed that they can build innovative subcultures whether their dreams are denied or granted (cf. Merton 1938). The Ecuadorian experience is an example of an alternative model of gang social control—an approach not based on presumed pathologies of the gang and its members but on their individual and collective possibilities channeled through various mechanisms of empowerment. It will be instructive to see which, if any, governments and policy makers are open to this alternative Ecuadorian approach. Our conclusions above held true until the end of the Correa period, but since the election of Correa's designate successor, Lenin Moreno, in February 2017, the erstwhile gang policies of social inclusion have been modified radically and it is clear that the current regime is showing far more appetite for the law enforcement "imperial project" (Schrader 2019) of the US than the previous government.

During the past three years, there have been many rollbacks in the progressive social policies of the previous administration, as Moreno's government has attempted to reduce Ecuadorian indebtedness and carry out policies long advocated by the nation's business elites. This came to a crisis point in February 2017, when Moreno's cabinet decided to accept the austerity measures prescribed by the International Monetary Fund with a drastic cut in government subsidies for gasoline in order to receive a loan of US\$10.2 billion. The result of such shock therapy (Klein 2008) was predictable, with a national strike being called by trade unions and Indigenous leaders, and for several weeks, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets to voice their dissatisfaction. The response of the rattled and increasingly desperate president (whose approval rating had now fallen to 30% from 70% soon after his election) was to send in the army and militarized police, while accusing Correa, Cuba, Venezuela and the Latin Kings of inciting the chaos and violence. The temptation to resort to moral panic strategies and use the gangs as folk devils after more than a decade of legalization and direct involvement with gangs (even by Moreno himself) was a remarkable about turn and betrayal of his former position. In the current period, the greatest threat to gang legalization has been that it is seen as a Correa-era policy and hence not a policy to be preserved. Indeed, Moreno's rapid move to the right includes blaming many of his country's current problems on the decisions made by his previous mentor. Even if widely successful, gang legalization is severely undermined by a state where tough-on-crime rhetoric becomes once again the default setting. Nonetheless, even under these strained political conditions, the gangs have not resorted to violence.

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