

Gangster lifestyles of young people may be altered through dialogue and education, research suggests

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

On 28 October 2003, Barcelona became the backdrop for a tragic incident that would reverberate across the Spanish port city and beyond.

Leaving his school that Tuesday afternoon, 15-year-old Ronny Tapias was shot dead by a Barcelona gang that mistakenly identified him as a member of a rival clan.

Warring factions

The murder of Tapias, who was originally from Colombia, sparked a [public outcry](#). Concerns grew about threats posed by the city's gangs and the impact of immigration from Latin America, where both clans involved in the Barcelona feud originated.

"It created a real moral panic fueled by extensive media coverage," said Carles Feixa, a professor of social anthropology at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.

Feixa was instrumental in shaping the city's response to the incident through a pioneering program to tackle [gang violence](#) by pursuing mediation rather than a crackdown.

The program—known as the "Barcelona Model"—became the basis of a research project that received EU funding to examine the international dimension of gangs in the 21st century and the role of mediation in tackling violence.

Feixa led the project, which ran for five and a half years until mid-2023 and was called [TRANSGANG](#).

Musical touch

Barcelona's response to the murder included bringing together the city government, the police and—crucially—factions from the two warring gangs.

Music was the means to an initial dialogue between both clans: a joint rap festival, according to Feixa.

Then came the establishment of youth associations that gave the young people involved a space of their own and opportunities for general training in matters such as life skills and conflict resolution.

"It opened doors and we got to know each other," said a former Barcelona-based gang leader named "King Manaba," who became involved in the mediation process that followed the death of Tapias.

Before long, violence between the two feuding gangs had declined.

Manaba went on to work with Feixa under TRANSGANG, seeking lessons from Barcelona as well as from the Moroccan city of Rabat and Medellin in Colombia where gang mediations had also proved successful.

Young people who enter gangs usually do so to escape from social-economic troubles and to win peer recognition, according to Feixa, who said these factors make mediation a more effective approach than repression.

"Through mediation they consider themselves as people with something to contribute," he said. "It is possible to redirect gangs in a more prosocial way. Mediations are critical for promoting a more positive and inclusive future for young people across the globe."

Gangs have been a growing phenomenon for more than a century, are now present in most societies around the world and often operate across national borders. As public awareness of the prevalence of gangs has grown, so too has the need to refine policy approaches.

Lessons learned

TRANSGANG examined the evolution of transnational gangs and compared the Barcelona, Rabat and Medellin approaches with more punitive responses to gangs elsewhere in Europe, Africa and the Americas.

The project found that heavy-handed and exclusionary policies created negative public perceptions of gangs and could compound socio-economic troubles.

"When the only way to approach gangs is through the police or prison, this not only suppresses gangs but transforms gangs into criminal organizations," said Feixa. "When we attack gangs, the outcome is that gangs become a problem with no solution."

The project found that, in cases where mediation was pursued, public opinion was more nuanced, social cohesion was stronger and crime was reduced.

Insights from the project are now informing approaches to gangs in other cities in Spain, in urban centers in Italy and Sweden and internationally through the United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF.

Feixa himself is preparing a book of gang members' life stories called "Young Lives Matter."

Gang guest

Dennis Rodgers, a professor of anthropology at the Center on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding of the Geneva Graduate Institute in Switzerland, also believes a fresh attitude is needed for dealing with

gangs.

And like Feixa, Rodgers has taken a hands-on approach to the challenge.

Rodgers has researched gangs since he was assaulted by one while in Nicaragua during the 1990s. Embracing the principle that "if you can't beat them, join them" as well as the possibility for unique research access, he then embedded himself in a Nicaraguan gang.

Initially he was embedded in it for a full year. In the ensuing years until 2020, he returned to Nicaragua numerous times for stays of up to three months with the gang.

Rodgers said these experiences have focused his attention on an important worldwide phenomenon that can take on different local guises.

"Gangs are global," he said. "At the same time, they are highly variable and volatile and there is a unique social dynamism to them."

Gangs can peter out after months or years, evolve into criminal entities or even transform themselves into more cultural or economic organizations, according to Rodgers. But he said little is known about the reasons that one path is taken over another.

Rodgers leads a separate project into gangs. Called [GANGS](#), the project runs for five and a half years until mid-2024 and has been examining the ways that gangs emerge, operate and develop.

The researchers have investigated gangs in cities including Marseille in France, Naples in Italy and Algeciras in Spain—as well as urban centers in Nicaragua and South Africa—where gang violence has mushroomed since the 1990s.

Unconventional wisdom

One of the project's overall conclusions so far is that gangs are fundamentally embedded social institutions.

Another conclusion is that gang membership can lead to a range of long-term outcomes, not all of which are negative, both for individuals and for local communities. These reflect broader social factors in that much of the violence associated with gangs springs from the impact on them of external perceptions and interventions, according to Rodgers.

In this respect, the team is challenging some traditional public perceptions of gangs and their effects on society.

For example in Marseille, which is widely regarded as the epicenter of gang violence in France, the researchers discovered from a survey they conducted that most local households had more immediate concerns including about housing, health, education and employment.

Rodgers cautioned against 'stereotypical representations' of gangs and their supposed violent ways, saying oversimplified views increase the risk of a counterproductive policy response.

"They can lead to the authorities acting on the city in a particular way and not seeing the real problem," he said.

Rodgers said that, in Marseille, the stigmatization of gang-affected neighborhoods has led to heavy-handed forms of policing, exclusive urban development and a reduction in public investment, particularly in education infrastructure.

Gangster turned poet

For Rodgers, the complex nature of gangs and the ability of their members to change course is epitomized by a Sierra Leonean former gang leader named Yusuf Kamara.

During the decade-long Sierra Leone civil war that lasted until 2002, Kamara left his rural village at 16 to try his luck in the country's capital, Freetown. That's where he joined a feared local gang and became its boss.

Then one day in 2017, after overhearing a conversation between friends enrolled in a poetry course, Kamara discovered a new passion. He began writing poetry on his mobile phone and sharing the verses online via YouTube.

Supported by local arts groups, Kamara has since gone on to make a name for himself, even entering prestigious international poetry competitions. He calls himself "[Gaz the Paper Poet](#)".

Kamara has also founded an organization—Slums to Career—that helps young people surviving on the street in Sierra Leone change their lives.

His story was collected by a GANGS team member named Dr. Kieran Mitton from King's College London and, along with those of 31 other current and former gang members from around the world, will be part of a forthcoming book from the project aimed at both the general public and an academic audience.

"I was eager to set out my story," Kamara said for the planned book. "If I change 10 people, I know I've changed a generation."

More information:

- [TRANSGANG](#)

- [GANGS](#)

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