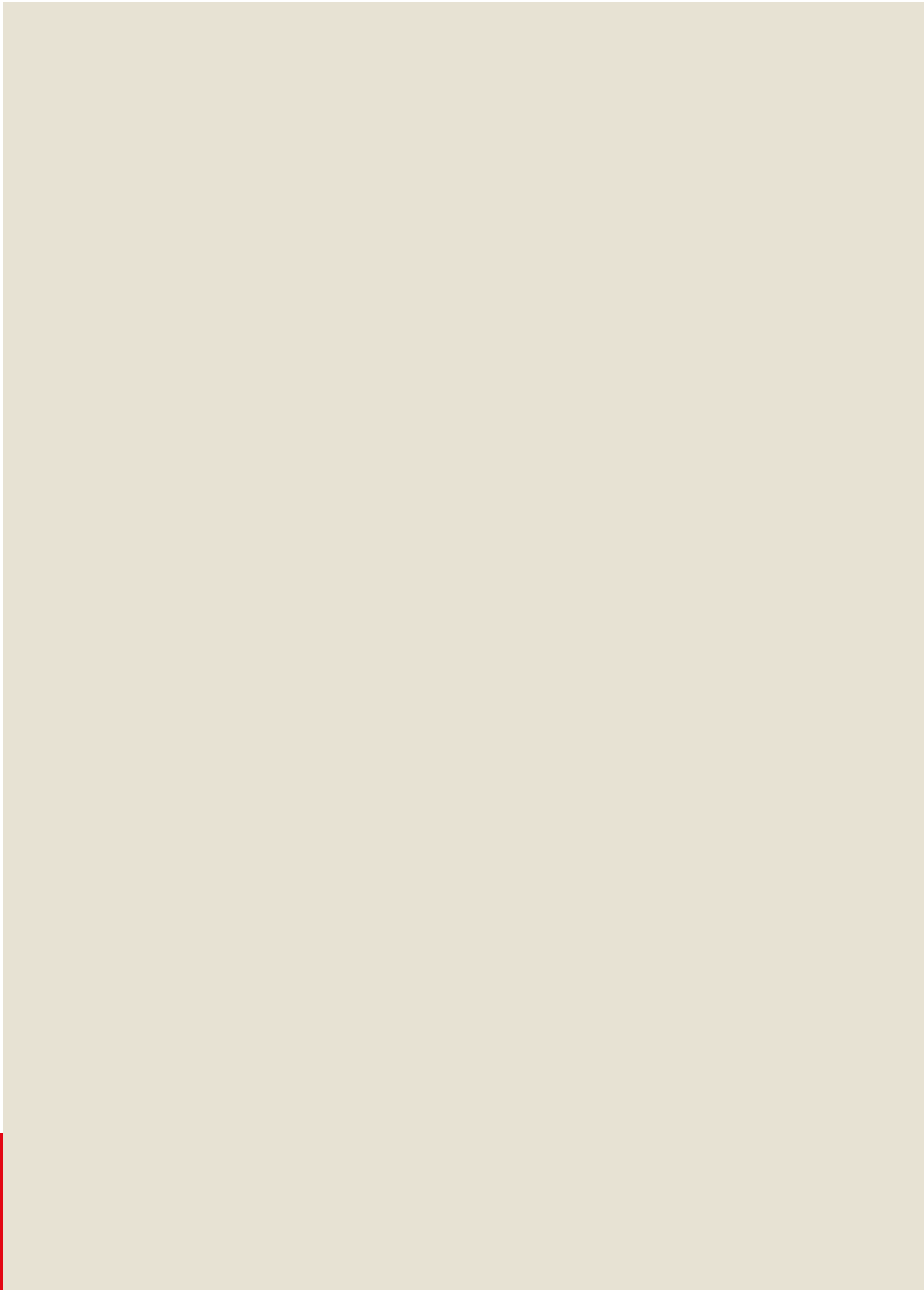# IN THE CROSSFIRE

Save the Children
100 YEARS

The impact of mara and pandilla gang violence on education in the Northern Triangle of Central America

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July_2019

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Methodology

To produce this report, an analysis of primary and secondary sources was conducted, with an extensive documentary review both from studies and documents, and from statistics and reports from official sources and international organisations, as well as a broad range of bibliographic resources. Additionally, an analysis was carried out of the national framework protecting the right to education in the three countries (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), which includes international treaties, national and regional legislation, programmes and strategies, together with an identification of key social stakeholders, organisations and other entities.

Field work was carried out, interviewing more than 50 stakeholders in the three countries, through face-to-face personal interviews, as well as through focus groups and interviews held by video conference. The individuals interviewed include leaders of civil society organisations, school directors and teachers, academic supervisors, schoolchildren and young people. We also counted with the direct experience of workers from Save the Children, other international organisations and United Nations agencies.

Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the Ministries of Education, Health and Justice, the National Council of Childhood and Adolescence, the Office of the Ombudsman for the Defence of the Rights of the Child in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Institute for Development in Childhood and Adolescence, and with representatives from the Childhood Unit of the Judiciary of Guatemala.

The identities of the individuals interviewed have been withheld to protect their personal safety.

Introduction

THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA, ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACES FOR CHILDREN

The Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) is considered one of the most violent and unsafe regions in the world. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are among the ten countries in the world with the highest rates of deaths by homicide per 100,000 inhabitants, with levels that even exceed those of countries affected by armed conflicts.

Over the past decade, urban violence, criminal violence and drug-related violence –also known as other situations of violence (OSV)[1]– have been gaining in visibility and impact, and in some forms have become the most serious forms of violence in Central America and Mexico. The conventional distinction between violence caused by a traditional armed conflict and criminal violence has lost relevance with regard to the humanitarian consequences for the civilian population.[2]

In the report "Atrapados", Save the Children reported that the NTCA is facing a humanitarian crisis in which violence occurs in territorialised and organised ways, and has consequences for children that are equivalent to those of an armed conflict. This violence affects a range of fundamental rights, including the right to education.

Marginal, poor neighbourhoods, with a limited access to basic services and a weak presence of the State are the most affected by violence and lack of security. In these areas lives the most vulnerable population, whose rights are not guaranteed and who in many cases have traditionally been excluded and discriminated against.

The low levels of development, the lack of opportunities and the weak institutional presence have all contributed to the rise and spread of violent groups. The actions of these groups make the situation even more precarious for the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods, and exposes them to continual breaches of their rights. This structural situation of exclusion results in many children and adolescents facing a real lack of opportunities to develop an independent life.[3]

With this report, Save the Children has sought to investigate in depth how violence in the NTCA has a particularly devastating impact on the lives of children and adolescents, affecting their right to education, which is fundamental for them to develop and prosper outside the vicious circle of violence.

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1   The ICRC uses the term other situations of violence (OSV) to define civil disorders, disturbances, state repression, post-electoral violence, gang violence or protests. They are situations in which the authorities often resort to extensive use of military or police force to uphold or restore law and order. Although these situations are not catalogued as armed conflict, the humanitarian consequences can be as serious as those of a conflict (ICRC 2011).

2   ACAPS (2014). Other Situations of Violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Humanitarian Impact.

3   Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2015). Report on Violence, Children and Organised Crime.

MARA AND PANDILLA GANGS

Maras and pandillas are criminal structures, formed by young people who join together under a regime and lifestyle characterised by violence, extortion and drug trafficking, with the aim of controlling a particular territory. These groups have a code of conduct, their own language and strong hierarchical structures, and are organised into clicas, which are the cells operating in specific territories. Young mareros are identified by the tattoos of gothic letters and numbers covering much of their bodies.

Although the terms mara and pandilla differ linguistically, in practice they are both street gangs that create a great deal of insecurity among citizens. The term mara comes from the word marabunta, a species of large, carnivorous ants that attacks as a group. The word refers specifically to the Mara Salvatrucha gang, which originated in Los Angeles and consisted of immigrants from El Salvador that had fled the Civil War, in response to the so-called Mexican Mafia. The mass deportation –from the United States to their countries of origin– of undocumented immigrants convicted of various crimes facilitated the spread of gangs in the NTCA.

The main gangs operating in the NTCA are the Mara Salvatrucha and the pandilla Barrio 18. The Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS13, has been classed as a transnational criminal organisation, and currently operates from Central American countries through to the United States and Canada, passing through Mexico. In turn, the pandilla Barrio 18 ("la 18") also operates in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States.

Both the maras and the pandillas have links to organised crime outfits that operate in trafficking drugs, weapons and human beings, and to which they provide different services, such as the supply of contract killers.

The highest death by homicide rates in the world

Between January 2014 and December 2018, 71,889 violent deaths or homicides were reported in the NTCA. Although in the past two years there has been a drop in the number of homicides, the rates are still very high, as can be seen in the following table.

The latest report by Insight Crime[4] on homicide rates in Latin America states that El Salvador lies in second place in the region —after Venezuela— with 3,340 homicides in 2018, which equates to a rate of 51 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants and is a considerable drop with regard to the rates from the previous years: 81.2 in 2016 and 60 in 2017. The annual round-up of violent deaths in Honduras dropped by almost 30 per cent between 2016 and 2017, and recorded another slight fall in 2018, with 3,310 homicides, equivalent to a rate of 40 per 100,000 inhabitants. Guatemala, in turn, recorded a total of 3,881 homicides in 2018, which is a rate of 22.4 per cent per 100,000 inhabitants. This figure is a marked drop with regard to the rate of 26.1 in 2017, and is the lowest rate in the past ten-year period. However, failings in the mechanisms for data collection and analysis in the country makes impossible an exact estimate of the effects of this violence.

Rate of violent deaths or homicides[5]

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
Guatemala	5,924	5,718	5,459	4,409	3,881	25,391
Honduras	5,936	5,148	5,150	3,791	3,310	23,335
El Salvador	3,942	6,656	5,278	3,947	3,340	23,163
Total	15,802	17,522	15,887	12,147	10,531	71,889

The context in Honduras

Honduras is a country with high levels of inequality and social exclusion, based on sex, origin, ethnicity and even public opinion, affecting the population's enjoyment of their economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights. Poverty affects more than 60 per cent of its population, and 38 per cent live in conditions of extreme poverty, particularly in rural areas of the country, and especially in the southern and western regions.

In its 2017 report on the human rights situation in Honduras, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights states

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4   InSight Crime's 2018 Homicide Round-Up.
https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/analisis/balance−de−insight−crime−sobre−los−homicidios−en−2018/

5   Source: Author's own, using data from the National Institute of Forensic Sciences and from the National Security Council of Guatemala, UNAH − IUDPAS University Institute of Democracy, Peace and Security in Honduras, the National Civil Police of El Salvador and the UNDP.

that, despite some progress in the past two years, which include the lowering of the homicide rate, insecurity and violence continue to permeate all levels of society.[6] The majority of the population perceives insecurity as the country's most pressing problem, followed by the economy, corruption and bad public management.[7]

The high levels of inequality and social exclusion lie at the heart of the acceptance of violence as a means to resolving conflict, and in this context, many young people consider joining criminal gangs as an opportunity for social and economic mobility.

It should be noted that, according to the Honduras Observatory of Violence, the lowering homicide rates at the national level has not occurred in all regions, and the figures for violent homicide remain very high, being mainly the result of organised crime, the maras and pandillas, drug trafficking and criminal gangs.

On the other hand, many rates have experienced a downtrend due not solely to the fall in the number of cases, but also to other variables related to the lack of reporting, the lack of gathered data breakdowns and the lack of an information system that fully records the various violent incidents that occur. Many types of violence are also missing from official and academic records, such as death threats, attempted murders, the recruitment and use of children by criminal groups, and the usur-

pation and expulsion of inhabitants from their homes, territories and lands.

Women's violent deaths are also a cause for concern, particularly due to the cruelty and the type of violence used, which reflects a systematic pattern of attacking women for the fact of being women. The lack of preventive strategies and investigation into cases means that many crimes go unpunished.[8]

In Honduras, the gangs are mainly concentrated in the districts of the metropolitan area of the capital, Tegucigalpa, of San Pedro Sula and of La Ceiba, although there are also smaller groups in the towns of Choloma, Danlí and El Paraíso.[9]

In recent years, police repression exerted on these groups has led to many of them moving from the cities into the country's rural areas. There, the situation is even harder, as these are very large areas without almost any State presence, so the population is exposed to a major lack of protection and vulnerability.

All of this goes to confirm the serious humanitarian crisis in the country, which remains hidden and lacks effective protection and prevention mechanisms to guarantee durable solutions for at risk and directly affected population.

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6   OHCHR (2017). Annual report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Honduras. A/HRC/34/3/Add.2.

7   University Institute of Democracy, Peace and Security (2016). Citizens' Perception of Insecurity and Victimisation in Honduras, Executive Report 2016, 8.

8   It is estimated that between 2006 and 2016 around 4,787 women died in violent circumstances. This figure could increase if the trend of the death of a female victim every 18 hours continues.

9   In Honduras, the main gangs are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Barrio 18, although there are others, such as the West Side and the Mara 61, which were formed more recently.

The context in El Salvador

In 2017, for the third year running, El Salvador was the country with the highest homicide rate in Central America, and has one of the highest homicide rates in the world: 81.2 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, 60 in 2017 and 51 in 2018, according to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

The murder of children and young people is at alarming levels. According to the 2018 Global Index, Stolen Childhoods, published by Save the Children, in 2015 El Salvador was third in the world with a rate of 22.4 homicides of people below the age of 19 per 100,000 inhabitants.[10] In 2016 in El Salvador, 540 minors were murdered,[11] which accounted for more than 10% of the 5,278 homicides that occurred throughout the country. The vast majority of these murders –95%– were committed against adolescents aged 12 to 17. In 2017, according to statistics from the Institute of Forensic Medicine, 91% of homicides committed against children and adolescents were against people aged 15 to 19 and, of these, 92% were male. On the other hand, according to data from the Observatory for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, a child or adolescent disappears in the country every day.

It should be pointed out that the maltreatment of children and adolescents is widespread in the country: more than half of households use some kind of psychological or physical punishment against children.

According to the 2014 National Health Survey, around 52% of children between 1 and 14 are violently disciplined: 39% with physical punishment and 32% with psychological aggression. These authoritarian regimes within people's homes lead to a naturalisation of violence by society, becoming the normal pattern of behaviour at the public level and in private and family relations.

Also of concern are the data relating to gender-based violence, which has risen alarmingly since 2015. According to the 2017 Situation Report on Violence Against Women by the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development (ISDEMU), 574 women were murdered in 2015, 524 in 2016 and 398 in 2017. From January to May 2018 a total of 176 women were murdered. This violence affects women throughout their life, but the main victims are young women and those of reproductive age.

According to the same report, sexual violence mainly affects girls, adolescents and women of reproductive age. Each year, the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic receives more than 6,000 women who have been victims of crimes against their sexual freedom, of which almost 80% are cases of abuse against girls under the age of 17. Between January and June 2018, the National Civil Police received 2,060 reports of sexual violence, equivalent to 11 reports a day.[12]

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10   The World Health Organisation (WHO) considers a rate of 10 or more homicides per 100,000 inhabitants to correspond to pandemic level.

11   "Dos menores de edad son asesinados cada tres días en el país". La Prensa Gráfica, El Salvador. 30 January 2017.

12   Sexual Violence Indicators by the Salvadoran Women for Peace Organisation.
http://observatoriodeviolencia.ormusa.org/violenciasexual.php

Finally, it should be pointed out that, in the past five years, around 15% of the suicides in the country were of children and adolescents. According to the Institute of Forensic Medicine (IML), between 2012 and 2016 a total of 366 children and adolescents aged between 10 and 19 committed suicide for various reasons. Although it is often hard to establish the causes of these suicides, they include depression, relationship conflicts, unwanted pregnancy and alcoholism.[13]

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13   Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (2017). Informe de la situación de la niñez y la adolescencia en El Salvador.

The context in Guatemala

Guatemala is a country seriously affected by poverty. According to the National Institute of Statistics, approximately seven out of ten minors under 18 live in poor households, 70.2% of children under ten live in poverty and more than two and a half million children have no access to education.[14] Guatemala is first in Latin America and sixth in the world in child malnutrition, as indicated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights:[15] 48% of children under five suffer from chronic malnutrition.

In recent decades, the country has recorded a growing rise in homicide violence, which is concentrated in a few specific regions: Guatemala, Escuintla, Petén, Izabal, Chiquimula, Jutiapa and Santa Rosa. In Guatemala and Chiquimula, the homicide rate is more than 80 per 100,000 inhabitants. Children and young people aged 11 to 30 are the main victims of homicide,[16] and the rate of homicides committed against adolescents and young people aged 15 to 24 is 55.4 per 100,000 inhabitants. A full 80% of these violent deaths are perpetrated using firearms.

Sexual violence has increased in Guatemala in recent years. In the first four months of 2017 alone, 37.8% of the cases of sexual assault, equivalent to 990 rapes, were committed against adolescents aged 13 to 17, followed by those against children aged 7 to 12. A total of 230 cases of sexual violence were also reported against children aged 0 to 6.[17]

Poverty and social exclusion, poor-quality education and domestic violence have led to the rise and spread of criminal groups. Faced with the lack of education and work opportunities, children and adolescents join these groups, often seeking ties of belonging, recognition or protection. Added to this situation is a weak institutional basis with insufficient resources and a persistent problem of corruption, which is incapable of dealing with the problem effectively.

The lack of mechanisms for collecting reliable data and of information systems makes it difficult to conduct an assessment of the situation of violence suffered by children and adolescents in Guatemala, identify victims and design effective public policies in response to this situation.

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14   Human Rights Ombudsman of Guatemala (2016). Detailed report.

15   IACHR (2017). Human rights situation in Guatemala. Country report. OEA/Ser.L/V/II.

16   Centro de Investigaciones Económicas Nacionales (2011). Prevención de la Violencia Relacionada con la Adolescencia y la Juventud. Lineamientos de Política Económica, Social y de Seguridad 2011 – 2021. Guatemala.

17   IACHR (2017). Human rights situation in Guatemala. Country report. OEA/Ser.L/V/II.

The impact on education of gang violence

In contexts such as those just described, where structural and generalised violence produces consequences for the population that are similar to those of an armed conflict, the impact of this violence on children's and adolescents' right to education is particularly serious.

Some of the most direct and visible effects of gang violence relate to the rise in insecurity and threats in schools for teachers and pupils alike, violent attacks and loss of life, and the cutting back of school hours, the deteriorating quality of education and school dropout rates. The fear that children may be recruited as members of mara or pandilla gangs both on the way to and from school and at school itself, or that girls may suffer sexual violence or assault, means that many families choose not to send their children to school, as a protection mechanism.

The presence and permanence of gangs at schools, together with other forms of violence and the deteriorating figure of the teacher depict a highly unfavourable scenario for achieving real human development. Educating and receiving education in an environment dominated by insecurity and violence affects pupil-teacher relations, and relations between members of the community. In this context, the breach of children's and adolescents' right to education is systematic.

Violence in schools in the NTCA is expressed in a range of ways. The most extreme, the killing of teachers and students, continues to have alarming dimensions. In other cases, school attendance is restricted or prevented for students and teachers from areas controlled by opposing gangs. Some schools have been infiltrated by students linked to criminal groups, which leads to an increase in extortions, drug selling, recruitment and control over the educational decisions made by schools. On occasions, some schools have gone to the extreme of closing as a consequence of the generalised violence.

Basic and secondary education are the most affected by this situation, and the highest rates of pupils missing school are reported at the basic levels of education, among children aged 12 to 15. Despite efforts by governments to guarantee access and continuity to the school system, dropout levels are high.

In the three countries, the response to gangs violence in and around schools has focused on repression, with the militarisation of a number of schools, which now operate with police and military presence. This response, however, can increase the risk for the school community and many children and adolescents live in fear, both for the criminal violence and for the violence inflicted by the security forces, which in many cases do not take the appropriate measures to protect children or observe the law with regard to human rights provisions.

In this context, school is no longer a place of protection, stimulus and development, instead becoming a place of risk and major insecurity for children and adolescents. Some of them choose to stay away, as either a temporary or definitive measure, which in turn limits and puts at risk the opportunities for development and for social and work-related inclusion of thousands of young people in the region, contributing to the rise of irregular migratory flows in search of opportunities in other countries.[18]

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18   UNDP 2013, UNHCR 2014.

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) defines an attack on education as any threatened or actual use of force against students, teachers, academics, educational support and transport staff, or educational officials. Attacks may be directed not only at individuals, but also at educational buildings, resources, materials or facilities, including school buses. The reasons may be political, ideological, military, ethnic, sectarian or religious. Attacks on education not only kill, injure and traumatise students and education staff, they also affect the pupils' right to education. They prevent teachers and educational institutions from providing an inclusive, quality education, and limit students' access to schools and universities.[19]

Violent attacks and shootings

Honduras: studying amidst the crossfire

The Maximiliano Sagastume school stands on a hillside in the middle of the neighbourhood of the same name, in north Tegucigalpa. When it was built, no efforts were spared in terms of protection measures: iron bars on the windows and a three-metre perimeter wall topped with barbed wire.

This is because the school stands right on the border between two neighbourhoods where two opposing gangs operate: to the north is the neighbourhood of El Picachito, controlled by the gang known as "El combo que no se deja", and to the south lies the neighbourhood Sagastume II, stronghold of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). The two gangs compete for control of the neutral area of the Sagastume I neighbourhood, so the school stands literally between two firing lines.

On 27 February 2017, the students at Maximiliano Sagastume found themselves trapped in the crossfire during a shootout between members of the two rival gangs. Bullets splinters rained down, breaking the classroom roof, wounding three girls, one boy and their teacher.

The attack caused a veritable stampede among the school's pupils, and classes were suspended for eight days until a police cordon was set up to dissuade further action from members of the MS-13 and "El combo que no se deja" gangs. The panic caused by the attack also led many families to transfer their children to other schools.

And the panic only increased when, a few days later, the mutilated bodies of two 14-year-old twin girls appeared, who had been kidnapped following the shootout.[20]

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19   Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2018), Education under Attack 2018.

20   "La violencia de las pandillas acosa las escuelas de Honduras", La Nación. Tegucigalpa, 23 March 2017.

Children in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador live on a daily basis with the violence inflicted by gangs, who exert territorial control in the various neighbourhoods of the more peripheral and marginalised areas of towns and cities. Clashes between opposing groups are frequent, and it is not unusual for educational institutions in border areas controlled by rival groups to be trapped in the crossfire.

In El Salvador, according to data from the Ministry of Education (MINED), 3,327 places of learning, equivalent to 64% of the country's education centres, are in communities where gangs are present. A similar number of centres are located in areas where robberies and thefts, the sale of drugs or the carrying of knifes and firearms are reported. Only 636 education centres (12%) are in communities that do not experience any kind of complication linked to violence.

> *"Violence is moving into the protective space of schools. The education space is being lost. There's no security. Now nobody feels safe in school. Before it was in the community, and now it's found its way into school".*
>
> Save the Children staff,
> Honduras

Rigorously collected data on the number of incidents of this kind is hard to come by, as there is no record of these attacks, which are mostly only known about through the press. What's more, many incidents do not come to light, as the generalised fear of reprisals, added to the lack of trust in public institutions, means that teachers and directors of affected education centres do not report these situations to the authorities.

In February 2017, the Office of the Honduras National Commissioner for Human Rights warned that several education centres had been attached in the previous four years, including a pre-nursery in San Pedro Sula, where in the early hours of 1 October 2013 armed men entered firing weapons, causing the death of five people, including a 5-year-old girl. Another five children and one adolescent survived the attack, as they hid upon hearing shots fired.

Shootings or gunfights occur not only around schools, with the risk of students being hit by stray bullets, but inside the schools themselves. Some teachers tell of how shots fired in schools have meant they have had to close the classrooms and continue with their classes despite the fear.

Murder of students and teachers

"Zone 6 in Guatemala is a really vulnerable area, the violence is affecting the children's mothers and teachers. Some pupils have seen mothers murdered at the school gate, and school bus drivers have been killed as well".

Academic supervisor,
Guatemala

"Everyone in the neighbourhood knows that when you see something you shouldn't, you're in danger. They don't talk to you, they don't question you, they just kill you, that's the best way to shut you up. Any sudden movement in the street, any sound frightens me. At night I can't stop thinking about whether they'll be coming for me".

The journey between home and school has become a veritable nightmare for many children in the NTCA. It is where they feel least protected and most exposed to gang violence. Despite the situations of major insecurity, which occur even in schools, students still think of schools are safer spaces, due to the sense of protection coming from the presence of other students and education staff.

And it is on the journey to and from school when the killing of children and adolescents is more frequent. The killing may occur for different reasons, from having refused to collaborate with the gang to having witnessed a criminal act, as explained by a 14-year-old boy from Guatemala:

Even school buses are a risky place for students: they are often subject to attacks against their drivers, for a failure to pay the extortion fees levied or to settle scores. It is not uncommon in these attacks for students to be killed or wounded as well.[21]

Educators are also murdered for various reasons, such as refusing to pay for extortion or refusing to obey the orders of a gang. They have sometimes been killed in front of their pupils, as in the case of a teacher who in August 2018 was murdered at the entrance to a school in Guatemala. The school principal and an 11-year-old pupil also received bullet wounds during the attack.[22]

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21 "Un muerto y tres lesionados en ataque armado a microbús escolar", Elsalvador.com. 18 May 2017.

22 "Fallece maestro baleado en escuela de Amatitlán", Prensa Libre. 6 August 2018.

Students murdered in Honduras and El Salvador

The Special Bulletin on Violence Against Children published in 2016 by the National Autonomous University of Honduras stated that, between 2008 and 2015, the country recorded 4,627 child homicides.[23] The most affected age group was 12 to 18, at 89.1% of deaths by homicide. In turn, the Special Bulletin on Homicides of University Students[24] published in 2018 by the same institution shows the scale of the violence inflicted on the school-age population. From January 2010 to March 2018, a total of 26,403 children and young people suffered violent deaths, of which 1.8% (485 fatalities) were children, and the remaining 98.2% were young people aged 12 to 30.

In El Salvador there is a discrepancy between the data provided by the Ministry of Education (MINED) and the data from teaching trade unions and from the press. Thus, whereas the teachers' trade union states that between 2014 and 2016 a total of 29 teachers and 130 students were killed,[25] a figure that has increased year on year, according to the MINED in 2017 a total of 15 students and 4 teachers met violent deaths. Always according to the Ministry, all of these cases were gang related, and meant a significant drop compared with 2016, when 30 students were killed in El Salvador.[26]

In Guatemala, there are no official records or data on student and teacher killings.

Gang members infiltrating schools: violence, threats and extortion

In many schools in the three countries, the situation has become unsustainable in recent years as a result of infiltration among students of gang members, who often carry knives and firearms.[27]

The Maras and Pandillas Unit of Honduras estimates that at least 40% of the student population of schools in San Pedro Sula sympathise with these groups, and that around 10% are gang members.[28]

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23   In 2015, a total of 111 of the country's 298 municipalities recorded 38 child homicides. The three municipalities with the highest number of incidents were the Distrito Central (153), San Pedro Sula (94) and Choloma (40).

24   National Autonomous University of Honduras (2018). Boletín Especial sobre homicidios de estudiantes universitarios. Edición Especial no. 63, April 2018.

25   "Las pandillas controlan la educación en El Salvador", Notimérica. 25 April 2016.

26   "MINED registra 15 estudiantes asesinados por pandilleros en 2017", La Prensa Gráfica. 14 December 2017.

27   "Las pandillas controlan la educación en El Salvador", Notimérica. 25 April 2016.

28   "Las pandillas hondureñas reclutan niños en las puertas de las escuelas", Cosecha Roja. 10 September 2012.

Students belonging to mara and pandilla gangs carry out surveillance and information activities in schools, often from the school canteens. But they also extort other students and teachers, and often sell drugs in the school, to the extent that substance abuse now affects children as young as 9.

The violence inflicted by these students against their schoolmates and teachers through fights, thefts, robberies, coercions, acts of vandalism, assault and threats generates a climate of generalised fear, affecting the quality of education.

According to the Observatory of Violence of the Autonomous University of Honduras, in 2017 at least 400 Honduran schools reported serious incidents of internal violence due to harassment, as well as armed robberies by gangs.

The people interviewed agree that pupils and teachers are subjected to extortion on school premises by students linked to gangs, and that this is well known by everyone, but due to a fear of reprisals, this type of violence tends to be suffered in silence, and as a result there are no available statistics on the matter. In some schools, a fee is even charged for using the bathrooms.

An investigation by a Honduran newspaper analysed pupil extortion in several neighbourhoods of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Under the threat of physical violence, classmates were forced to pay sums ranging from 100 to 200 lempiras (€3.5 to €7) a week. This payment is also demanded from the teachers, who are extorted through telephone calls and text messages.[29]

According to InSight Crime, extortion and threats by gangs affected 60% of schools in El Salvador in 2016, leading to almost 39,000 minors leaving school.[30] On other occasions, the extortion comes from outside, as in the case of a school in Guatemala which in 2014 received an envelope with a rifle bullet inside and a note demanding payment of 50 quetzales (around €5.50) per student, under threat of the school being attacked if the money were not delivered.[31]

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29 "Extorsiones también se ordenan desde colegios", La Prensa. Honduras, 3 September 2013.

30 "Cierre de escuela privada en Honduras tendría que ver con extorsión". InSight Crime. 17 February 2017.

31 "Dos muertos y doce heridos por balacera en una escuela de Guatemala". Univision. 1 September 2014.

Influence on the working of schools and imposition of rules

The people interviewed for this report highlight the influence that gangs have within schools. Gangs influence the dynamics of some schools, imposing their own rules and standards, and in so doing altering the normal working of these schools. Thus, they establish who among the pupils may carry a mobile telephone, despite the school's regulations forbidding these devices, or demand certificates for pupils who have not completed the school year.

The Violence Prevention Unit of the Department of Education in Honduras has even reported that in some cases the gangs finance teachers' salaries, and by doing so condition how certain schools operate.

Forced recruitment of children

"They start recruiting in sixth grade, particularly among those who don't live with their parents, but with other relatives".

Teacher, Honduras

In many neighbourhoods in the three countries, the journey to and from school poses another risk for children. It is the forced recruitment by gangs in order for these violent groups to increase their numbers and replace the members that are killed in clashes or arrested by the security forces. Refusing to form part of the gang can mean death for the child chosen to be recruited.

Children perform tasks that are essential to increase territorial control in a particular neighbourhood, and vary depending on their age. The youngest act as lookouts or "banderitas" (little flags): they keep watch on the streets in the area and run to warn groups if a rival gang member or the security forces enters the area.

As a representative from an international organisation in Honduras recounts:

"Although each group has different procedures, in general children have different roles and levels when they're recruited. In many cases, recruitment starts from 5 to 6 years, as "banderitas", as spies, they're given a phone and some sneakers, and their job is to report what happens".

Children are also used to deliver trafficked drugs, guard the locations where the drugs are hidden, and for drug dealing activities inside schools. At other times they transport weapons or collect extortion payments from traders in the neighbourhood. Finally, at 15 or 16 they become paid killers (or "gatilleros"), for which they are often required to kill someone as a test of their affiliation to the gang.

In El Salvador, children and adolescents are used and abused by criminal organisations, as they are considered as cheap and dispensable labour, and face less severe judgments.[32] As a result, they are tasked with carrying out the most serious crimes and the riskiest activities, both in terms of their personal integrity and if arrested by the security forces.[33]

This situation is also a major concern in Guatemala, where there are many cases of recruitment of children as young as 6 to transport drugs, weapons and messages between gangs, and of adolescents aged 13 to 17 to commit murders.[34]

Although it is impossible to determine the figures of children recruited by mara and pandilla gangs in the NTCA, according to UNICEF more than 4,700 children and young people had been recruited by these criminal groups in Honduras.

32 "El Salvador dirige su 'mano dura' a menores". Insight Crime. 11 April 2016.

33 IACHR (2015). Violence, Children and Organised Crime.

34 According to the Deputy Minister of Prevention and Childhood of the Ministry of Governance (Interior), Arkel Benítez. Diario Siglo XXI.

Girls: sex slaves of gang members

Girls and young women are captured or recruited in most cases for purposes of abuse or sexual exploitation. Many are forced to have relations with gang members and leaders, and are sexually abused and exploited for sexual purposes.

> *"I'm really afraid that they might take my sister. When I hear the things they do to girls, I can't stop thinking about my sister. My mother says that it would be better if she didn't leave home, and tells me to be very aware of her at school. I'm always with her to make sure no one bothers her".*

Boy, 14,
Guatemala

Young females have normally become involved in the gangs and criminal organisations from a position of differentiated gender roles, in order to be sexually exploited and used in tasks involving looking after others and for support. However, in recent years their role has begun to change, and they are now starting to play more active roles in the organisations, such as carrying out activities linked to collecting extortion payments. They are also used to traffic drugs, as "mules", exposing them to drug traffickers, which in many cases has put their lives at risk or meant they face custodial sentences for drug trafficking offences.

> *"Many girls are forced to be "jairas", or dolls of the gang leaders, and are later sold, exchanged... There are fewer female killers, but they are also used to sell drugs and as "mulitas" or little mules, transporting drugs".*

Representative from an international organisation,
Honduras

In her visit to El Salvador in 2016, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery identified problematic areas in the context of increased violence; these included coercion of girls, adolescents and women to take part in sexual activities with gang members, including so-called 'brides', who are forced to carry out intimate visits in prisons. "These practices, prima facie, constitute contemporary forms of slavery and are banned by international human rights standards".[35]

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35 "Protect the victims, particularly women and children – UN expert on contemporary slavery asks El Salvador". OHCHR. 29 April 2016.

It is important to take into account that the areas where the recruitment and other gangs activities take place are areas with high levels of poverty and a lack of opportunities. Children and adolescents in these areas are often pressured, threatened or tricked into collaborating with these organisations, but there are also cases of adolescents who seek these groups out, looking for opportunities, recognition, protection and a sense of belonging.[36]

One Honduran teacher interviewed states that it cannot be ignored that violence has become normalised and permeates all areas of children's lives in a context marked by poverty and a lack of hope.

"A child who lives at home where there are weapons, where there are beatings, maltreatment, the thieving of the gang-member child who has to feed his drug addiction, the harass-ment, the lack of protection, with gang-member parents, an alcoholic mother or father, who have been unable to deal with so much violence, the continual exchange of drugs, the lack of hope that people have and the lack of central government investment in security for people and communities...".

Children and adolescents with few economic resources or who have been abandoned are the most vulnerable to forced recruitment by organised crime groups, who often exploit the existing legal framework – in Honduras, for example, minors cannot be convicted of a criminal offence. The need to supplement economic shortcomings is exploited by criminal groups to offer children and young people the possibility of escaping poverty in an apparently easy way and in the shortest possible time.[37]

Limits to access to education due to violent territory-based control

"In early 2016, the Instituto Saúl Zelaya high school found itself in the middle of a turf war. The school was on the border between four 'hot' neighbourhoods. Members from the Barrio 18 gang decided to ban youngsters from Las Torres, an area controlled by the Mara Salvatrucha (also known as MS-13), from going to classes, and the threats started.

For months, pupils and teachers spent their days in fear. The school suspended classes in March to draw up a safety plan." (La Tribuna)[38]

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36   See note 33.

37   Casa Alianza Honduras. Honduras Observatory for the Rights of Children and Young People. (2015). Niñez y juventud en las redes del crimen organizado en Tegucigalpa.

38   "Honduras: Aulas en la línea de fuego". Otras voces en educación. 5 June 2017.

The violence inflicted by gangs with the aim of controlling the territory of different neighbourhoods directly affects children's access to education.

Some areas are in constant dispute between different groups, leading not only to violence clashes in which schools and students become involved, but also to invisible borders being established between neighbourhoods, which children cannot cross.

> *"I'm from an area where there are boys from gangs with numbers, and my school's in another area, where the gangs use letters. It's hard for me, I often can't go to school because there are shootouts, my parents won't let me go, and things are really ugly there, quite a few have stopped going to school, because they've been threatened due to being from somewhere else. Some are at home, and some are in work".*
>
> Student, 13,
> El Salvador

These invisible borders limit children's freedom of movement, and can prevent them from getting to school when it is located in an area controlled by a rival group to the gang that controls their neighbourhood. The journey to school becomes a daily risk, and faced with this situation, many parents choose to stop sending their children to school. Children thus become confined to their homes.

> *"There is a great deal of confinement because of invisible borders. In 2016, one of the neighbourhoods changed hands, so all the kids stopped being able to go to school. There are children under threat and they can't leave home".*
>
> Representative from an international
> organisation, Honduras

In many cases, children who have to cross any of these imposed lines to get to school are threatened and extorted, forced to pay a certain amount in order to cross the border. In Honduras, this amount is called the "war tax", and can be as much as 200 lempiras a week for students (around €7). These are prohibitive amounts for any family living in these neighbourhoods.

Violence is also imposed with the use of certain codes, which include clothing, and corporal or verbal expressions, which children have to use as a self-protection strategy in order to move around these areas, and take the journey from home to school. This situation is particularly delicate for children who have been displaced from other areas of the country, as they have to learn these new codes in order not to arouse suspicions over their presence in the new environment and further increase their situation of vulnerability.[39]

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39   Norwegian Refugee Council (2016), ¿Esconderse o Huir? La situación humanitaria y la educación en Honduras.

Gangs also impose timetables and curfews that forbid people to be out on the streets and in public places, and which are observed by everyone. There are also restrictions on using public transport, as the continual threats made and extortions levied on drivers has led to a progressive decline in the availability of transport in these areas. This makes it harder for people to get around and access services such as health and education.

Extortion and threats made to teachers

Teachers and senior management teams in schools are also victims of psychological violence, intimidation, damage to vehicles and assault, often as a result of discipline or coexistence rules imposed on pupils, or of the grading system.

In El Salvador, according to the Ministry of Education, in 2015 and 2016 a total of 40 and 50 cases of teacher intimidation were reported. However, the teachers' trade union SIMEDUCO states that there are thousands of teachers who are threatened and victim of extortion. The amount demanded from them is around $20-25 a month (€18-22). One of the school's teachers is chosen to collect the payments from his or her colleagues, and has to deliver the money to a specific place, in exchange for his or life.

Many teachers receive death threats as a consequence of how they have acted with regard to a particular student, e.g. for having disciplined or called attention to a student with links to a gang, or for not having obeyed the orders of students linked to these organisations, for which they are required to pass the student for the subjects or courses being taken at school.

Furthermore, witnessing or reporting an unlawful act committed by students or other individuals belonging to a gang can put a teacher's life at serious risk.

> *"It's dangerous to fail a child in an exam, as you could receive a visit from a gang member... If a child fails a course, the teacher is blamed for it".*
>
> Teacher, Honduras[40]

This situation negatively impacts on the teaching activity, as many teachers are forced to work in an atmosphere of fear, insecurity, vigilance and control. Their functions are limited and subject to the discretion of the gangs,[41] which has a negative effect on the right to education of pupils, who are deprived of a quality education.

In this generalised context of insecurity, fear and violence, signs of burnout are becoming more frequent among educators and senior managers.

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40   Report by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, on his mission to Honduras (2016). A/HRC/32/35/Add.4.

41   Programa Nacional de Prevención, Rehabilitación y Reinserción Social (2011). Situación de maras y pandillas en Honduras.

School teachers need protection and training on how to work in high-risk environments and mitigate the impact of violence. In many cases, they have had to develop protection and self-care strategies with the help of international organisations in order to survive and keep working.

> *"It's been 20 days with attacks every week. Teachers are mobilising and have learnt self-care with Save the Children... taking precautions, changing routes... There is no protection from the State".*
>
> Academic supervisor,
> Guatemala

> *"The Ministry of Education only instructs the school's director, but provides no support. And directors need more support to resolve all these kinds of problems".*
>
> Academic supervisor,
> Guatemala

Faced with this situation, many teachers choose to request a transfer away from the school. According to the Honduran press, in 2016 every day an average of two teachers requested a transfer due to a lack of security.[42] Faced with this situation, the Ministry of Education of El Salvador developed a protocol to transfer teachers quickly and efficiently. Nevertheless, the three countries are lacking instruments to identify which transfer requests are motivated by the situation of violence, as the existing forms and procedures do not include violence as a reason for requesting a transfer.

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42   "Honduras: Incrementan peticiones de traslados de maestros en oficina departamental". El Heraldo. 27 May 2017.

The long-term consequences of violence

The various manifestations of gang violence against students and teachers have long-term consequences on children's education in the Northern Triangle of Central America. These range from being transferred from the school as a protection measure against the threats and real danger of recruitment and being killed to the loss of education quality or the closure of schools.

In the most extreme cases, where children are forced to move within their own country to flee from violence, their right to education is seriously affected due to the bureaucratic obstacles they face when enrolling at new schools, which in some cases leads to them dropping out of school entirely.

What follows explains in more detail how the situations described above affect the right to education of children in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Change of school or transfer

One of the first strategies used both by families and by teachers to protect themselves from threats and violence is to change or transfer school. Fear means that, in most cases, pupils who change school do so suddenly and silently, without telling classmates or teachers, so that, from one day to the next, they simply do not come to school, and nobody knows where they are.

Even though in countries such as Honduras and El Salvador it is usually a requirement to state the reason for the school transfer request, the people making the request do not usually state the real reasons. This is due to fear or mistrust in public institutions, and means that many transfers that are motivated by violence, and which should therefore be treated as a priority and with protection and support, remain invisible.

The lack of support and protection from institutions means that families feel like they are on their own and unprotected when faced with this decision. If transfers are not treated as a priority or are not authorised, they can even lead to the child dropping out of the school system.

"People start coming out, 'you're going to hand over my son, because we're leaving, and give me the documents somewhere else that isn't here'...".

Basic education teacher,
Honduras

Added to this are the difficulties that families encounter when they try to enrol their children at a new school when the academic year has already started, a situation that particularly affects children aged 5 to 11 in Honduras.

Sometimes, transferring to a new school is not enough to guarantee the safety of a child threatened by gangs. As a teacher from a private high school in El Salvador recounts:

"A 15-year-old girl came to us having been referred from another school, who had had problems with gangs, but after four months she left again, because her mother and sister came, and took her away, because the girl had received death threats again".

The debate over transfers of both pupils and teachers is on the desk of the Department of Education in Honduras, which is studying a proposal to implement specific, swifter procedures for transfers motivated by violence.

School dropouts and lack of schooling

"The education system lost two thousand students, in zone 1, zone 2 and zone 3. This year, 2018, just in these areas of the city and nearby municipalities, that's the number of students that have been lost. It's not known about, but it shows up in programmes since, for example, two thousand meals were no longer served...".

Academic supervisor, Guatemala

The violence and threats, together with the absence of prevention and protection measures by the States, are causing many children in the NTCA to stop going to school, leaving them without a school education.

In some cases, this dropping out happens sporadically, and manifests as absenteeism: as the academic supervisors interviewed in Guatemala describe, these are known as "comet children", those who come and go in the education system, for short periods, a few days, a week, a month.

According to the study published by UNICEF in 2017, in El Salvador 23% of students between 13 and 15 stated that in the previous month they had skipped school for one or more days for safety reasons.[43]

"My two friends left. One went out of fear, because they wanted to force him to sell marijuana, and he didn't want to. They were threatening him in a really ugly way, and he had to leave. The other went because they killed a cousin of his, and they told him that he would be next".

Student, 14, Guatemala

In many of these cases, dropping out of school becomes permanent, which is reflected in the high rates of desertion and school dropouts in the three countries. However, once again, the lack of visibility in which these cases occur and of recognition of the problem by the authorities makes it impossible to establish a clear link between dropping out of school and the situation of insecurity, and as such the percentages of cases that have a direct link to violence are unknown.[44]

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43   UNICEF (2017). Una situación habitual: Violencia en la vida de los niños y los adolescentes.

44   Department of Education of Honduras (2016). Sistema educativo hondureño en cifras. Periodo académico 2015.

A report by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) on the impact of gang activity on the safety and education of Honduran children interviewed 1,110 homes in areas affected by violence in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, which revealed that 1,239 children of school age did not go to school.

The report also found one child not attending school per household in the sectors most affected by the generalised violence in Honduras. According to this report, a third of the current generation in Honduras are waiting to be able to access a safe education space.[45]

The increase in school dropout figures in the NTCA

Despite efforts by the three countries to tackle the situation of violence and despite some progress in this regard, the figures for leaving and dropping out of school continue to rise, with a significant increase in the past three years. These figures reveal a situation which in recent years has remained invisible and, therefore, not included in national political priorities.

According to data from the Department of Education in Honduras, between 2014 and 2016 school dropouts hit the national education system hard, with 170,578 pupils not finishing the school year, an average figure of almost 3%.[46] More boys than girls drop out of school, and is most prevalent between 7th and 9th grade of Basic Education.

The same government department has also expressed concern over the lower registration numbers in 2018 compared with those of 2017. Specifically, 32,199 fewer students enrolled in 2018. This fall in numbers mostly affects the public education system.

The Department of Education indicates that the causes for children dropping out of school include migration, child labour, generalised and school-based violence, teenage pregnancy and poverty. A total of 2,886 students are calculated to have given up their studies due to violence in 2016. Only three departments —Atlántida, Cortés and Francisco Morazán— make up 70% of the cases of children dropping out of school due to violence.

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45   Norwegian Refugee Council (2016), ¿Esconderse o Huir? La situación humanitaria y la educación en Honduras.

46   Department of Education of Honduras (2017). Sistema Educativo Hondureño en Cifras, Periodo Académico 2014–2016. The most affected areas are departments such as Colón, Gracias a Dios, Santa Bárbara, Yoro, Olancho, Choluteca and Cortés.

Data from the Department of Education of Honduras shows that the municipalities with the highest levels of violence are those with the highest rates of children dropping out of school. This goes to show that there is a direct relation between violence and losing access to the right to education. However, and despite this evidence, there are no strategies from institutions to prevent children and young people from dropping out of school.

School dropout figures are equally alarming in El Salvador, where despite the educational programmes and plans implemented in recent years, according to the Ministry of Education 39,000 students dropped out of the educations system in 2015, 35,000 in 2016[47] and 12,000 up to June 2017.[48] Although there is a drop in 2017, the figures are equally worrying, if compared with the data for 2009, when 6,100 students were reported to have dropped out of school.

According to the Trade Union of Public Education Schoolteachers in El Salvador (SIMEDUCO), however, these figures are conservative. A study carried out in 2015 to determine why students dropped out of school revealed that 100,000 students stopped going to schools due to violence, and that this was the main cause for dropping out of school in the country.[49]

The educational programmes that the State has implemented to reduce school dropout figures are flexible methods based on a blended system of attendance, with semi-distance education, night classes and accelerated learning, enabling children and adolescents to receive an education despite not always being physically in class. This programme is currently being rolled out in 470 centres, but only covers the municipalities prioritised by the Safe El Salvador Plan (PESS), i.e. 50 municipalities of the 262 in the country.

In Guatemala, school dropout rates are also very high, particularly in rural areas. In 2016, school dropouts increased by 38.3% compared with 2015, particularly in the basic education cycle,[50] where 58,851 students dropped out of school in 2016.[51]

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47 "La deserción escolar rondó el 2,2 % en 2016". Elsalvador.com. 18 January 2017.

48 "MINED reporta deserción de 12,000 estudiantes". La Prensa Gráfica. 25 August 2017.

49 "Deserción escolar por violencia se ha triplicado en últimos dos años". Elsalvador.com. 19 July 2016.

50 According to the National Education Law, Secondary Education in Guatemala consists of one Basic Education Cycle, also known as the Basic Cycle and the Diversified Education Cycle. The Basic Cycle is for pupils who have finished Primary Education, between 13 and 15 years old, and prepares them to continue on to the Diversified Education Cycle or Diversified Cycle.

51 "Conferencia de prensa del Ministro de educación". Prensa Libre. 7 January 2016.

School dropout rates in Guatemala do not tend to be related to violence. Ministry of Education (Mineduc) statistics indicate that 2018 began with 3,887,264 pupils enrolled at schools across the country. However, in the first four months of the year, 13,006 pupils dropped out. According to these statistics, the reasons for dropouts are related to the lack of pupils' interest in continuing their studies, due to work, migration, lack of resources, and other reasons. In no case is violence indicated as the cause behind children leaving the education system.[52] However, interviews carried out with educational supervisors in Guatemala reveal a very different reality:

"In zone 6, the third most heavily populated zone in Guatemala City, 800 students were lost the education system due to a lack of safety. That's 20% of the total for a year. They're not in the education system. They're not anywhere".

Hiding to save one's life: confinement

"There are many cases of children being confined. (…) They try to keep children shut away so they're not recruited and don't become soldiers for the gangs".

Save the Children educator,
Honduras

Children who abandon the education system due to the risk that going to school entails are in many cases confined in their homes, completely invisible to the institutions and organisations working in the region. This makes it extremely hard to provide alternative education methods, and these children eventually end up not receiving a school education.

Only a small percentage of families, which have the resources to do so, can continue with their children's education from home.

"Those who've left, no, they don't keep studying. I know one case, it happened suddenly, and the next day nobody could find him. He had to move, 15 years old, him and his mother, because of threats, and she says it's for the best that he doesn't go, because at school he's only going to find problems, that's how she put it".

Teacher,
El Salvador

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52 "Miles de niños abandonan la escuela. Diagnóstico de las principales causas de deserción escolar". Prensa Libre. 19 November 2017.

Confinement also exposes children to a situation of particular vulnerability, as in many cases homes are informal settlements, with a room where up to six or seven people live, and where children spend days on end without leaving the home, on their own or in the care of older siblings.

Once again, there is a clear lack of mechanisms that can be used to identify children who have been seriously affected by gang violence, and to protect and accompany them, guaranteeing their basic rights.

The consequences of violence for girls

Education as a human right implies access, without being discriminated against and in conditions of equality, to a basic quality education, a process of continual learning and for children to develop and take part in the social aspects of life with the same opportunities. Gender equality in education means all children having access to the same opportunities to go to school, that there are teaching resources without discriminatory stereotypes, that they can enjoy the whole school period and that they acquire the same knowledge and academic qualifications so that, at a later date, they can access the same jobs and in conditions of equal pay.

In contexts where the right to education, as indicated in previous sections, is seriously threatened by violence, younger and adolescent girls suffer their consequences to a greater extent, given that violence reinforces prevailing patterns of discrimination in a particular social environment.

> *"When they have shootouts, the boys head for the San Ramón area, where our school is. As young ladies they always follow us, it's frightening, knowing what they are, and sometimes strange things can happen…".*
>
> Pupil, 14,
> El Salvador

The risk of harassment and sexual abuse on the way to school and in schools, both by the violent groups and by the security forces, means that many families make the decision to keep their daughters away from school, as a means of protection. As indicated, many girls and female adolescents are forced to have relations with gang members, and often become pregnant, which poses a huge risk to their health and definitively deprives them of their education.

According to data from the Ministry of Education of Honduras, 257 girls abandoned their studies in 2016 due to pregnancy. The regions with the highest violence rates –Cortés, Francisco Morazán and Yoro– account for almost half of the cases. In this same period, 15 cases of pregnancy were recorded in girls of school age as a consequence of sexual violence. However, the same report states that this figure pertains to reports filed at schools, so the real figures are likely to be much higher.

On the other hand, when economic resources are reduced or threatened by extortion, it is very common for families to prioritise access to education for their sons rather than their daughters. In other cases, violence has an impact to the extent that many women become the head of the family and need their older daughters to stay at home to look after their younger siblings and perform domestic tasks.

These situations arise more frequently as age and education level of girls rise, so in general terms there is a marked drop in the percentage of girls at higher levels of primary education, or in secondary education.[53]

The decision made by families to halt their daughters' education triggers a spiralling lack of opportunities, hindering the progress and social integration of these girls. When they stop going to school, young females often end up confined to their homes, doing housework that involves both domestic chores and care-related activities.

The impact of violence on female teachers

For many families, the presence of female teachers in schools brings an element of trust and protection, that may influence their decision to send their daughters to school.

Teachers also play an important role for girls, as they are often seen as models to follow, and proof that women can also benefit from higher levels of education and manage to attain a position in the academic world.

However, gang violence also affects female teachers in a particular way. There are many dangers that these women face on their journey to school, from assault and robbery to sexual violence. Yet neither are they safe from violence once at school: as indicated previously, teachers face extortion, threats and even murder for refusing to obey orders given by gang members.

Faced with these constant threats to their safety and integrity, many female teachers feel forced to leave their job, and in many cases turn to looking after their homes.

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53   Entreculturas (2010). Educación en tiempos de espera; Entreculturas (2018). Niñas libres de violencia (2018).

Schools closing due to violence

In May 2016, two pupils and a former pupil from the Instituto Superación San Francisco high school in Comayagüela, Honduras, were found dead inside a car, together with the bodies of two more young people. A week later, other pupils from the school received threatening messages via their mobile phones. Classes were suspended for two days due to the fear that more pupils could end up being attacked.[54]

One of the most evident consequences of the violence exerted by gangs towards pupils, teachers and education centres is the closure of schools and the cancellation of school days.

The situation of extreme insecurity and constant threats in which some schools find themselves, together with the lack of State-provided protection measures, means that in many cases classes are temporarily suspended, which on occasions leads to the school closing permanently. The school's opening hours can also be affected, with reductions in the number of teaching hours or school days being cancelled, as well as evening classes, to avoid exposing pupils and teachers to a greater danger.

School closures are also affected by the high rates of pupils dropping out of certain schools, as well as the increasing number of transfers from teachers who can no longer put up with the continued extortion and intimidation. Faced with this "drain" of teachers, public institutions have failed to give a response, and in many cases the transferred teachers are not replaced, or are replaced with a major delay.

According to the individuals interviewed for this report, there are schools in El Salvador that have ended up with literally no teachers at all.

In El Salvador, 12 private and three public schools were forced to close their doors in 2016 as a result of violence and student transfer or dropout rates.[55] Additionally, from April to September 2016 in Tegucigalpa, evening classes were suspended in 15 school due to security problems, affecting more than 3,600 students and at least 48 teachers.[56]

Extortions can also lead to schools closing down, as occurred with a private school in Honduras, which temporarily suspended classes in February 2017 as a result of the so-called "war tax".[57]

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54   "Colegio Superación San Francisco suspende clases por amenazas de alumnos". El Heraldo. 5 May 2016.

55   "Inseguridad forzó cierre de 12 colegios privados". El Diario de Hoy. 29 January 2016.

56   Norwegian Refugee Council (2017). Informe sobre el impacto de la actividad pandillera en la seguridad y educación de niños hondureños.

57   Insight Crime.

"At Puerto Cortés two months ago they attacked a school with stones. It was an attack against students and teachers. We were forced to suspend classes for a week. (…) We can't get in now. I've got to the point of telling the Board to tell teachers to start at 12 and leave at 4, sacrificing an hour of class. Up to now we haven't closed any school, but the way things are going we're going to have to make some decisions," said the departmental Director of Education". [58]

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58 "Las pandillas hondureñas reclutan niños en las puertas de las escuelas". Cosecha Roja. 10 September 2012.

Psychosocial consequences of violence

Beyond the physical wounds, the generalised violence that permeates the lives of children and adolescents has long-term psychosocial consequences which, if not dealt with, can be irreversible and end up perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Having suffered direct violence or been witnesses to violence against family members, friends and acquaintances, children live in constant fear and anxiety, which prevents them from developing fully as people.[59] Sadness, a feeling of loneliness and abandonment, hopelessness and insomnia are some of the manifestations of this anguish. This is according to Melisa,[60] 17, from El Salvador:

> *"I can't sleep, I'm quite afraid. I feel frightened all the time, but at night I can't get to sleep, and I feel like it's fear that won't let me sleep".*

Fear is often accompanied by feelings of rage, pain, shame and humiliation, which in most cases remain unexpressed, through silence and introversion.

At school, children are restless, nervous, they develop impulsive and violent behaviours, undermining normal class activity and learning. The continued exposure to violence and the limited life expectations means that many children lose interest in their education, as they lack a life project to follow.

This manifests itself in a short attention span and an inability to retain knowledge, combined with poor creativity.

> *"A child is said to have learning problems. No, what that child has is a situation of violence".*
>
> Save the Children technical staff,
> Honduras

As a consequence, antisocial behaviour and suicide attempts become more and more frequent, especially among young females. As indicated by the individual responsible for psychosocial care in Save the Children projects in Guatemala, it is essential to train teachers and educators to detect these cases in time.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that teachers and senior management teams in schools are also affected by the situation of violence in which they work, and are often subject to threats and extortion. This has a negative impact on their work, and can lead to disrespectful attitudes towards pupils, a lack of motivation with regard to knowledge management and an inappropriate handling of conflicts.

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59   Médicos Sin Fronteras (2017). Forzados a huir del Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica: una crisis humanitaria olvidada. The anxiety and stress suffered by migrants and refugees both in their countries of origin and while en route to the United States leaves them highly vulnerable to anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress.

60   The interviewee's name has been changed for her safety and protection.

Faced with this situation, schools have very few if any resources at their disposal with which to respond to the huge emotional demand made on teachers. In Guatemala, the figure of school advisor, which existed two decades ago and provided psychosocial care for pupils, was replaced by that of school counsellor. Those employed in this position, sometimes with 500 to 700 pupils in their care, clearly do not have the capacity to carry out any individualised intervention, and often limit their tasks to administrative work.

In this context, the ECPaz project carried out by Save the Children in Guatemala over a five-year period developed a psychosocial approach at both the group and the individual level, in the most serious cases, to support children and help their psychosocial wounds heal, through listening and the creative expression of their feelings. One of the major achievements of this project was helping children and adolescents develop their social, emotional and cultural skills, which in many cases translated into increased security and self-confidence, and a notable improvement in their aspirations for the future.

"Psychosocial care has been an essential tool for us, for us to have this space has been a great help as often as young people we don't open up about our feelings, particularly with our parents. So confiding in an adult can feel really satisfying, particularly in a confidential setting. The more we talk about that, the more we get off our chest and weed out any negative feelings we have on the inside. For me it's been quite a big help, and I've seen some good changes in my classmates".

Adolescent,
ECPaz project leader

Impact of measures taken by Governments in response to violence

The States' response to gang violence in schools to date has focused mainly on repression. As a result, schools have become increasingly militarised, with a greater deployment of Military and National Police, armed and in uniform, in and around school premises.

The police and army presence, together with the security measures that many schools feel forced to adopt, such as high perimeter walls and wired fences, means that schools look more like prisons than places of learning and personal development.

On the other hand, in recent years student arrests have increased, including in and around schools, in many cases arbitrarily, stigmatising young people solely because of their physical appearance and the neighbourhood that they come from.

These measures have been strongly criticised by the education sector and by human rights organisations, as far from providing effective protection for children affected by violence, it can lead to increased vulnerability and put students' lives at a greater risk.

Militarisation of schools

The heavy-handed policy that the three NTCA countries have implemented in recent years to combat gang activity has manifested itself in a growing presence of police and military in schools most affected by violence, which means that pupils now spend their days permanently alongside armed, uniformed military personnel. Paradoxically, in many cases it is the students, teachers and families who ask for this measure to be adopted, because of their lack of information about alternative protection measures.

In this situation, and without sufficient instruments of protection and guarantee, children's lives can come under even greater threat by the strong presence of weapons at their school, carried by both gang members and by the police and military in attendance. In this context, armed clashes can occur between the security forced and gang members, where pupils can end up killed or wounded.

Children and adolescents feel terrified, both by the criminal violence and by the violence inflicted by the security forces, which in many cases do not take the appropriate measures to protect children or observe the law with regard to their human rights. There is almost complete ignorance among the security forces regarding the appropriate child protection protocols and standard procedures.

"Sometimes it's the police themselves who deliver the beatings, they're like a barrier, because when a young person goes to school and sees that the police are near, sometimes that child will turn back, out of fear".

Teacher,
El Salvador

43

Furthermore, girls and female adolescents do not feel safe when there is a presence of police and military in and around their schools. Many have reported being assaulted or sexually abused by the same security forces that are supposed to protect them.

The police forces, on the other hand, use children and adolescents to obtain information about pupils who are in or have links to gangs, which can lead to these pupils being singled out and stigmatised, which can in turn lead to reprisals.

In Honduras, faced with the increase in attacks on schools, the National Inter-institutional Security Force doubled its school surveillance activities, carrying out patrols in and around school facilities to capture individuals suspected of attacks against pupils.

Also in Honduras, the Guardians of the Fatherland programme has been strongly criticized by organisations such as Coiproden and even the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which in its 2018 visit to the country raised its concern over Armed Forces and police being brought into school environments. According to the IACHR, this measure, which is aimed at controlling gang presence in schools and the sale and use of drugs, imposes a military culture that is contrary to the goal of peace, stigmatises children from certain social sectors and puts them at risk, and is not therefore in line with the goals that education should seek to pursue.[61] Within the framework of this programme, according to the individuals interviewed for this report, children from certain neighbourhoods are taken to carry out military training.[62]

In El Salvador, the Ministry of Education signed an agreement with the National Civil Police in 2015 to provide security in schools and school environments. In 2018, there are 1,100 schools in the country with a police and army presence.

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61   Conclusions from the visit to Honduras by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. August 2017.

62   Interview with UNHCR representative in Honduras.

"There have been times when we've had harassment and intimidation, because the school has been surrounded by police, soldiers... hence, boys and girls are afraid to go in, because they see them and stop them, and even just the fact that they're there, just their presence, cause fear. And when the police aren't there, the gang is. If it's not one thing, it's the other".

Teacher,
El Salvador

In Guatemala the situation is very similar. The National Civil Police implements a programme called "Safe Schools", with the aim of providing pupils and teachers with protection and preventing harassment from gang members. But of the 34,000 education centres in Guatemala, only 175 had benefited from the programme as of August 2018: 115 schools that are in red areas, which means they are vulnerable to delinquency, have perimeter and internal security, and a further 60 schools were dealt with by local police stations.[63]

In its 2017 report on the human rights situation in Guatemala,[64] the IACHR stated its concern over the public safety strategy in the country, having learned that armed military personnel sometimes teach lessons, including family planning classes. It considers this to form part of a strategy by the State to build ties of trust between the State's armed forces and the country's children and adolescents.[65] In this regard, the IACHR has reiterated that the civilian population's trust in the armed forces should be forged "via other means and mechanisms, without the right to education being affected". It considers the fact of personnel from the armed forces teaching subjects on the academic curriculum to fall short of the State's duty to provide a quality education by professionals specialised in teaching children and adolescents.

63   "Escuelas seguras continúan brindando seguridad a 115 centros educativos". Ministry of the Interior of Guatemala. 7 August 2018.

64   IACHR (2017). Human rights situation in Guatemala. Country report. OEA/Ser.L/V/II.

65   On the other hand, as part of a visit to the Petén region, the IACHR observed that members of the army had occupied a school, and even stayed there overnight.

"Heavy-handed" approach and stigmatisation of young people

A consequence of violence in schools is also that young people become stigmatised, for the simple fact of being young. Many adolescents state that they feel discriminated against and poorly treated by security agents, who think of them as potential delinquents, based on how they dress or the neighbourhood where they come from.

In most cases, the children and adolescents who form part of the gangs do so in the context of a situation of extreme vulnerability, under pressure, threats and trickery, who are not understood or taken into account by the authorities. The strategies for combating gangs in the three countries are based on the official discourse, according to which the gangs are the main elements responsible for criminal behaviour and violence in the three countries. This discourse has been accompanied by a social stigma linked to those young people who live in their communities and neighbourhoods with a presence of gang structures. The young population that falls victim to homicide is quickly catalogued as part of the gang structure, whereby the main cause of death is claimed to be due to conflict between gangs.[66]

This discourse reinforces the social perception that children and adolescents – particularly males living in the poorest neighbourhoods – are the cause behind the social climate of insecurity and violence. This has been used as justification for the heavy-handed, repressive approach, which has inspired certain legislative and political initiatives[67] which rather than providing solutions, feed a circle of violence which does nothing to deal with the structural causes.

In Guatemala, although the "clean-up" of gangs is not supported by any legal measures, the police implemented plans to eradicate the gangs based on arbitrary interpretations of existing laws. This policy, known as "Plan Escoba" or broom plan, consisted of locking up in prison any young person suspected of being involved in gangs, based on indicators such as the possession of drugs. Most of these arrests were illegal.[68]

Several studies state the danger of implementing reactive strategies as a response to juvenile violence, including mass arrests of young people, based on the presumption that they belong to a gang, as well as drastic sentences being given. In some of these countries, there have been reports of social cleansing practices carried out by State security forces with complete impunity, such as the so-called "extermination squads" in Guatemala.

In all cases, the measures implemented do not include actions related to prevention and to tackling the structural causes, and young people have not been listened to in order to provide them with alternatives to their educational, employment or social situations. On the contrary, in many cases these measures breach people's rights and have been proven to be inefficient in halting juvenile violence.[69]

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66   Human Rights Department of the Passionist Social Service (2017). El impacto en los derechos de adolescentes y jóvenes del municipio de Mejicanos. Inseguridad y violencia en El Salvador.

67   Special law against acts of terrorism (2006). Decree no. 108. El Salvador.

68   Bruneau Thomas C. (2014). Pandillas and security in Central America. Latin American Research Review, Vol. 49, No. 2. Latin American Studies Association.

69   Interpeace (2009). Violencia juvenil, maras y pandillas en Guatemala.

In this context, and as shown further below, programmes such as "Schools Building Peace", which Save the Children is carrying out in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, bring a different approach to how young people are perceived and turn young people into key stakeholders for development and in the search for solutions, with highly positive results.

> *"It's important to work with gangs. It would be really useful because they are how they are due to a lack of opportunities and ways to express their way of being, of taking part. They need a space where they have an opportunity and a chance to express themselves".*
>
> Young people taking part in
> the Save the Children programme Schools
> Building Peace, Guatemala

Although some of the policies to increase the presence of security forces at schools and in areas with low safety levels have helped to reduce some indicators of violence, they are aimed at achieving results in the short term, but do not tackle the underlying causes and are not sufficiently focused on prevention or on social investment programmes and promoting rights.

As the IACHR has reiterated, these policies do not respond to the mandate of comprehensive protection for children, nor do they take their best interests into consideration or manage to provide effective and long-lasting responses to the problem. And furthermore, their implementation very often results in other human rights breaches.[70]

The IACHR has stated its concern regarding the increase in arbitrary arrests of adolescents based on their appearance and the belief that they might belong to a gang or criminal group, without any proof of them having committed an offence, thus contributing to the stigmatisation and police harassment towards certain social groups. Furthermore, the most common response from the State with regard to recruitment and the use of children and adolescents in gangs is via the juvenile court system, not considering children and adolescents as victims of breaches of their right, but rather as criminal offenders.

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70 IACHR. Child Violence. Repressive Responses by the State.
 http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/multimedia/2016/ViolenciaNinez/respuestas–inseguridad–crimen.html

Fleeing from violence: Forced displacement

In late 2018, the images of the so-called "migrant caravan" reached the public opinion of many countries all over the world, opening the eyes of people who had previously been unaware of the reality faced by others, who every day cross Central America from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in search of a better future in the United States. Save the Children is a witness on the ground to how children are exposed to terrible hardships and dangers on their journey north. They are more vulnerable to abuse by human traffickers, to falling into slavery networks, suffering sexual violence and all kinds of harassment by the security forces. The conditions in which they travel are extremely hard, having to walk hundreds of kilometres in desert-like areas, under a burning sun and with almost no access to water or food. In early December 2018, a 7-year-old girl from Guatemala died in police custody having arrived in New Mexico with her father, due to dehydration. She had not eaten or drunk anything for several days.

To call these people "migrants" is a huge mistake, as they leave their countries because of a real fear of being killed by the mara and pandilla gangs who operate there. These are people in need of international protection, as has been recognised by the UNHCR[71] and as such they should be guaranteed their right to request asylum and not be deported to their countries of origin.

However, the reality is very different, as children have to face the hard migration policies of Donald Trump's government, which has gone to the extreme of detaining children crossing the border between Mexico and the United States, separating them from their relatives, sometimes for several days.

Another facet of the forced displacement caused by gang violence is the abandonment of the community by individuals or entire families, and the displacement to another neighbourhood or city, away from the constant extortions and threats. A sudden and silent displacement, and therefore completely invisible, which exposes children to enormous vulnerability and lack of protection.

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71   The UNHCR has made its position in this regard clear with a "Guidance Note on Refugee Claims Relating to Victims of Organized Gangs", in which it states that the "UNHCR's perspective is that the interpretation of the 1951 Convention grounds needs to be inclusive and flexible enough to encompass emerging groups and respond to new risks of persecution. Young people, in particular, who live in communities with a pervasive and powerful gang presence but who seek to resist gangs may constitute a particular social group for the purposes of the 1951 Convention. Additionally, people fleeing gang-related violence may have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their political opinion, especially where criminal and political activities heavily overlap. In the absence of effective State protection, individuals may also fear persecution at the hands of gangs which pursue religious or ethnic ideologies through violent means".

Internal displacement

"In the northern area, San Pedro Sula, the whole family moved, in 24 hours (for an ultimatum set by the gang). Around 55 homes have been abandoned, due to forced displacement. If you look at those homes and calculate how many children there were, we could get an idea of what this represents".

NGO technical staff member,
Honduras

As stated in the annual report by the Ombudsman for Human Rights of El Salvador for the years 2014-2015, "Situations such as threats to life, extortions and pressure for adolescents and young people to join delinquent gangs have led to an increase in cases of internal displacement of entire families. This situation has demonstrated the shortcomings of the family, children and women protection systems, which do not provide families with appropriate care or protection. This limitation damages and re-victimises the affected population, who feel forced to leave their home, their community and even their extended family. In the case of children and adolescents, in addition to all of the above, they are also forced to leave their school and their friends as the only way to protect their lives".

In Honduras, the 2016 NRC report[72] highlighted the silent flight of many children, keeping a low profile as a strategy so as not to be located by the gangs threatening their families. In order not to raise suspicions, some families abandon their homes leaving behind their domestic items, and thus face a shortage of necessary basic items with which to rebuild their lives in another place.

There is no official data on internal displacement, and the data that does exist differs from one report to another. What we do know is that the internally displaced population supported by the UNHCR in 2017 was 174,000 people in Honduras and 71,500 in El Salvador. In Guatemala, although no data is available on persons displaced within the country, 62,200 were recorded as people in a situation of special interest by the UNHCR.[73]

"In Guatemala City, in zone 18, in May 2018, of the 20 homes that were in the neighbourhood, seven families left. They had lived there for more than 40 years. All of a sudden, they weren't there any more".

Academic supervisor,
Guatemala

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72   Norwegian Refugee Council (2016), ¿Esconderse o Huir? La situación humanitaria y la educación en Honduras.

73   No estimate has been calculated of the number of people displaced internally in Guatemala due to the fact that the phenomenon of displacement is not recognised, so there is no record of displaced persons. According to the 2017 report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), in 2016 there were 257,000 internally displaced people in Guatemala.

The UNHCR also stated in 2015[74] that access to education for displaced minors in Honduras was lower that for the rest of the population, particularly for children between 5 and 11 years of age. In this country, displaced children can lose months of schooling because they cannot enrol in a new school once the school year has started. This situation can in some cases lead to children dropping out of the education system altogether.

On numerous occasions, forced displacement means extra costs and loss of income and support networks, while at the same time the extortions have diminished the families' economic capacity. Faced with this economic blow, some families are unable to continue to meet the costs of their children's education, and boys are forced to work to contribute to the household's sustenance. Girls, in turn, take over the domestic work and looking after their younger siblings.

Despite the evidence and the gravity of the situation, Honduras is the only country that officially recognises internal displacement and has begun to implement policies to meet the needs of the displaced population. El Salvador[75] and Guatemala, in turn, are still reluctant to recognise that violence in the neighbourhoods and communities is forcing families to abandon their homes with the aim of saving their lives.

As a consequence, the people who are displaced because of violence have no mechanisms of protection and care, and live in a situation of fear and mistrust of the authorities, so in most cases do not report the situation, remaining completely unprotected and invisible.

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74   UNHCR (2015). Descriptive Report on Internal Displacement in Honduras.

75   In El Salvador, the only institution that recognises the existence and the seriousness of the phenomenon of internal displacement is the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights.

Internal displacement in Honduras

The 2017 Special Report on Forced Internal Displacement in Honduras, by the National Commission for Human Rights in Honduras (CONADEH), states that forced internal displacement in the country is motivated mainly by the violence suffered in the community of origin, such that gang violence becomes one of the main agents for expulsion.

The reports states that this is a generalised phenomenon that affects households and people in various municipalities and neighbourhoods across the country, where the population is constantly exposed to being displaced. The first cause or risk of forced internal displacement are death threats (36%), followed by murders of relatives (17.6%), extortion (14.8%), forced recruitment (8.1%) and attempted murder (7%).[76]

It should be noted that in 14% of cases, the person who directly suffered the violence that led to the displacement from the family home was a minor.

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76   Other causes are: injuries (3.2%), sexual violence (2.8%), abduction or kidnap (2.3%), domestic violence (1.9%), family violence (1.3%), forced disappearance (1.2%), dispossession of land (1.2%), eviction (1.2%), usurpation of property (1%) and discrimination (0.4%).

Fleeing the country in search of protection

Mara and pandilla gangs are able to pursue their victims inside the countries in which they operate, so in many cases internal displacement is not enough for families to flee the threats posed by these gangs. This, together with the lack of protection for displaced persons by the authorities in the three countries, means that many family groups, but also unaccompanied children, are forced to set out on a journey in search of protection beyond their national borders.

According to the UNCHR report Global Trends, in 2017 the Northern Triangle of Central America was still experiencing a growing number of people fleeing from their country for multiple and complex reasons, such as poverty, inequality and discrimination, and because of the breaches of their human rights brought about by the situation of generalised violence.

Traditionally, nationals from the NTCA seeking international protection apply for asylum in the United States and Canada. However, in recent years, other countries in the region have experienced a drastic increase in the number of asylum applications from the NTCA, particularly Mexico, Costa Rica, Belize, and to a lesser degree Nicaragua[77] and Panama.

"One of those gangs that was in San Pedro threatened to kill us. And if we had stayed there we were going to lose our lives. For no reason, just because they wanted us to join and

we didn't do it. So around 3 or 4 in the morning we grabbed a raft, which most people call a "cámara". And I was really afraid because I thought that, if we were to tip over, we would drown. Particularly me, as I can't swim".

Honduran girl, 16, at the detention centre for minors in Tapachula, Mexico

In 2017, according to the UNHCR report, at the global level there was a considerable increase in asylum applications from nationals of El Salvador (59,400), Guatemala (36,300) and Honduras (34,900). Most of these applications were issued in the United States, with an increase of 44% over the previous year, reaching levels that had not been recorded since the 1980s. People from El Salvador were the most highly represented nationality, with 49,500 applications, almost 50% more than in 2016 (33,600). Guatemalans and Hondurans were the next highest nationalities, with 35,300 and 28,800 applications respectively.

According to the Honduras Returned Migrant Help Centre, from 2009 to May 2014 around 77,243 unaccompanied migrant minors entered the United States, of which 27,579 were from Guatemala, followed by Honduras with 25,985 and El Salvador with 23,679. Between January and September 2014, 8,432 children and adolescents[78] were returned to Honduras.[79]

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77   The political crisis and repression that Nicaragua has been going through since April 2018 is changing this situation, as Nicaragua has become a country lacking in security, while on the other hand many people, particularly young people, are trying to leave the country.

78   Of these, at least 2,513 are children under 6 years old, 1,430 between 7 and 12 years old, and 4,489 between 13 and 17 years old, indicating that most repatriated minors are in this age range.

79   Centro Nacional del Sector Social CENISS (2015). Informe estadístico de las personas repatriadas, retornadas de septiembre de 2015.

For children from the NTCA, the decision to set out on the journey to the United States means interrupting their education and their life project in their countries of origin, without knowing if or when they will ever be able to return to school. Fully aware of the importance of education for asylum-seeking and refugee children, Save the Children calls on the governments of the countries receiving these children to ensure they receive schooling within the first month of their arrival.

The "failure" of the migration project: deportation

Equally alarming are the figures for people from the NTCA who are deported back to their countries from the United States and Mexico. According to the UNHCR, in 2015 more than 230,000 citizens from the NTCA were arrested by the authorities and returned to their countries of origin, a figure which is double that from previous years. Many of the people deported were minors.

The situation of deported children is one of extreme vulnerability, and it is highly likely that they will go back to being recruited and persecuted by the gangs, which means they will go back to suffering the impacts from that violence from which they had fled.

As well as the fear of returning to their communities of origin, upon their return there is an increased fear of not being accepted at school and being singled out and kidnapped by criminal organisations due to the belief that those who return do so with money. This fear means that in many cases children who have been returned are confined to their homes, without going outside or going to school, so they do not receive a school education.

In many cases being returned brings with it a stigma, both in the family space and in communities, due to the belief that the deportation is motivated by acts of criminality. The stigmatisation takes place in various forms, such as being treated with contempt, assault, beatings or marginalisation, and can occur in schools, parks, churches and sports facilities. In the case of deported girls, stigmatisation is associated with the fact that they may have been sexually abused, raped, or the fact that they have had relations with gang members.

Faced with the enormous vulnerability of the deported children, there is a lack of strategies and resources to provide care for children who have been returned. For example, in the case of the "El Edén" Centre in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, the only childcare measure is the administrative processing, by a civil servant, of a note addressed to the principals of the schools of origin, so that the deported children may be accepted back into the school and are given help so that they don't lose the whole school year. There is no subsequent follow-up, nor is there any protocol that guarantees reincorporation into the education system or to accompany students who may need help as a consequence of the traumatic situation they have undergone.

Children who have been deported experience feelings of deception, sadness, frustration, disillusionment, anger and shame for not having reached the country of destination. They additionally feel like they have been given up on by the place where they return to live.[80]

On the other hand, accidents often occur on the migratory route, which leads to the children and adolescents returning to their country of origin with mutilations, mental illness, depression and feelings of persecution, to which on their return they find no programme of support, protection and reintegration. According to the National Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras, most of the staff dealing with deported children in the reception centres are volunteers, who lack the necessary training to deal with the special needs that arise from their situation of particular vulnerability.

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80   Casa Alianza Honduras (2016). Niñas y niños migrantes. Factores de expulsión y desafíos para su reinserción en Honduras.

Initiatives to protect education in the NTCA

As already indicated, State's response to violence in the three countries is mainly focused on repression, through heavy-handed policies, aimed at putting an end to the gangs, criminalising the young people involved and placing the population's human rights at serious risk.

All the individuals interviewed agree that, despite the importance of preventive measures, no policies have been implemented in this regard in any of the three countries. When these policies do exist, they are not fully implemented due to a lack of resources, of continuity between different governments, and of political commitment. Proof of this is the hugely disproportionate budgetary differences between security and defence, which are constantly being increased, and allocations devoted to preventive measures. Thus, in Honduras, for the National Programme for Prevention, Rehabilitation and Social Reinsertion of People in Gangs (PNPRRS), the sole government programme aimed at preventing the problem of mara and pandilla gangs, dealing with children at risk and taking care of juvenile offenders, only operates with 1.6 million lempiras (less than €60,000), and receives no economic support from the Central Government.

> *"For prevention, first of all there is no budget, so there's no way to deal with prevention. Prevention should be a particular line of work, with very specific parameters, but there is none. It's about prevention and alignment, of both external, internal and interinstitutional co-operation, and special budgetary items for prevention in each of the instances where it is needed.".*

> Interview with a representative from the Ministry of Education (MINED), El Salvador

However, it is clear that the situation of structural violence cannot be tackled while preventive strategies and comprehensive approaches are left to one side. As the IACHR has stated, although gangs may be one source of vandalism, violence and delinquency, it cannot be ignored that much of this arises "in response to the needs of adolescents and young people to have spaces fit for socialisation in environments where there are very few constructive options. Gangs also help to generate a sense of identity, of belonging and of social recognition in contexts of exclusion and limited opportunities for adolescents to be involved in public life and in issues of interest to them".[81]

Beyond the focus on repression and the heavy-handed policies of the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, there are numerous initiatives in the region to develop education spaces that are free of violence and to promote a culture of peace. What follows is a presentation of some of the initiatives implemented both by the Governments of the three countries and by the various international organisations and NGOs working in the region.

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81   IACHR (2015). Violence, Children and Organised Crime.

An Educated El Salvador

In 2014, the national priority was established in El Salvador to provide effective security for Salvadorans through the "National Policy of Justice, Security and Coexistence 2014-2019".[82]

As part of this policy, in 2015 the "Safe El Salvador Plan" (PESS),[83] was launched. It is a security strategy plan that prioritises 50 municipalities, aimed at reducing the high levels of violence through five approaches: prevention, control and criminal prosecution, rehabilitation and reinsertion, protection of and assistance for victims, and institutional strengthening.

On paper, the PESS is a different effort to the previous "heavy-handed" plans, and has succeeded in reducing the rates of homicide and of some types of crime at the national level. However, it places great emphasis on control and criminal prosecution, and on the security strategy, relegating to a second level the other approaches on which it is based. Proof of this are the approval in 2016 of extraordinary security measures, the increasingly significant role of the Armed Forces, the increase in sentences and the creation of new criminal offences.

It is in this context that the Inter-institutional Agreement on "The Prevention of Violence and Security in Schools to Strengthen a Culture of Peace", mentioned previously, was established in 2015 between the National Civil Police and the Ministry of Education. As part of this agreement, in 2018 a "Plan for Prevention and School Protection"[84] was launched, which includes 1,100 schools across the country and which seeks to strengthen prevention and protection through the co-ordination of government institutions and communities to "back" the measures taken by the National Civil Police and the Armed Forces.

In turn, in 2016 the National Education Council (CONED) presented the An Educated El Salvador Plan, which proposes specific actions to meet six challenges: schools free from violence and central pillar for prevention; quality educators; comprehensive development of early childhood; 12 years of universal schooling; higher education for a productive, innovative and competitive country; and infrastructure that is in accord with a comprehensive, high-quality education.

Some of the achievements[85] of the An Educated El Salvador Plan have been the development of a National Policy of Coexistence in School and Culture of Peace,[86] which was presented in May 2018, a National Teacher Training Plan, the reincorporation of at least 4,500 pupils through the project to make education flexible in municipalities prioritised in the PESS, and the expansion of the Full-Time Inclusive School, which seeks to provide opportunities so that all children complete 12 years of schooling.

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82   Ministry of Justice and Public Security. National Policy of Justice, Security and Coexistence 2014-2019.

83   Plan El Salvador Seguro. (2015). Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia. El Salvador.

84   "Gobierno lanza «Plan de Prevención y Protección Escolar 2018»". Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Republic of El Salvador. 18 January 2018.

85   "CONED presenta informe a un año de implementación del Plan El Salvador Educado". Government of El Salvador. 22 June 2017.

86   "MINED lanza la Política Nacional de Convivencia Escolar y Cultura de Paz". Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Republic of El Salvador. 29 May 2018.

Another initiative of note is "Open Schools for Coexistence"[87] which forms part of the PESS, and which objective is to create a culture of coexistence, providing children and adolescents with opportunities for a positive use of free time, strengthening their security and resilience, and developing skills for an active and productive citizenship.

Despite the advances made by these initiatives, the challenge is to achieve a greater national commitment to education and its funding, in order to ensure their sustainability and implementation across the country, as well as the need to prioritise prevention and creation of opportunities to the detriment of security actions by the police and army in schools.

Safe Schools in Guatemala

In Guatemala, the aforementioned "Safe Schools" programme has been promoted since 2011 by the Ministry of Education, together with the Vice-Ministry for the Prevention of Violence. Its aim is for public schools to be safe spaces, free from violence and addictions, which it seeks to achieve through social and situational prevention strategies.

Social prevention is carried out through trainings on citizen security and prevention addressed to pupils, educators and relatives, through recreational and sports activities, and by promoting school violence prevention plans. Situational prevention consists of installing security cameras around schools, patrols in the area surrounding schools by the National Civil Police and the presence of officers to reduce violent clashes.

This programme has had good results in reducing violence around schools, but in 2018 it was only implemented in 115 schools in five municipalities and counted with 175 National Civil Police officers, despite plans to increase the protection in 240 schools.[88]

"The government has created projects to minimise violence in schools, but the approach is not a good one. The government is working with adults, giving talks to young people. It is better to commit to peer to peer communication".

Young people's focus group,
Guatemala

Within the framework of the Safe Schools Programme, an analysis was carried out of school violence that included verbal and physical violence between pupils, assaults in school, discrimination, fights, thefts, and the sale and consumption of drugs, and which was used as a basis to draw up the "School Violence Prevention Guide". This guide is aimed at implementing strategies by promoting a culture of peace in schools, counter the problems of violence and strengthen educators' capacity to address violence prevention issues.

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87   "Presidente Sánchez Cerén lanza «Escuelas Abiertas para la Convivencia»". Government of El Salvador. 25 November 2017.

88   "Programa de escuelas seguras se ampliará a 240 escuelas en Guatemala durante 2018". Agencia Guatemalteca de Noticias (AGN). 9 March 2018.

Guatemala also adopted a National Violence Prevention Strategy for 2017–2027, which sets out the different scopes of action, which include schools.[89] In turn, the National Police Model for Tackling Violence and Crime, Citizen Security and Peaceful Coexistence 2014-2034 also includes a Safe Schools section, with the idea of consolidating public primary and secondary schools as safe spaces that are free from violence and addictions, all necessary for the education process. This framework includes the forming of Student Councils for Safe Schools Participation, the purpose of which is to promote student involvement in actions that meet the needs with regard to preventing violence and crime in each school.

A training plan on prevention will also be implemented, and psychological assistance will be provided for students with symptoms of physical, verbal or psychological abuse, who have been sexually assaulted or whose fundamental rights have been breached.

The Ministry of Education, in turn, has specialised educational actions in place to assist children, adolescents and young people at risk of becoming involved in mara and pandilla gangs. Education curricula include violence, juvenile delinquency and the phenomenon of gangs as cross-cutting issues, although there is a lack of specific teaching materials to work on them.

Finally, in 2008 the Open Schools Programme was launched, providing young people in the capital city with the chance to use schools outside of normal teaching hours to attend cultural and sports workshops, making positive use of their free time. This has proven to be a successful programme, but has been implemented in only a very few schools, and does not include specific work with young people and children at risk of being integrated into gangs.[90]

Although these programmes are positive, very often there are no suitable facilities to put them into practice, and there is a lack of co-ordination mechanisms between the various stakeholders involved (State, local authorities and civil society).

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89   National Violence Prevention Strategy 2017–2027. Ministry of the Interior of Guatemala. 14 July 2017.

90   Interpeace (2009). *Violencia juvenil, maras y pandillas en Guatemala.*

Ensuring Education in Honduras

It should be pointed out that, in the context of the general policy of citizen security and to strengthen the prevention of crime and social violence, the Government of Honduras has implemented a series of reforms, together with a gradual increase in budgetary allocations for the security sector. In 2017, this amounted to almost 13.6% of the national budget.

The Government's security strategy has focused on the armed forces, which as a result has led to a notable increase in the military presence on the streets.[91] This has caused concern for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which has stated that the deployment of military forces to carry out public security functions should only occur in exceptional circumstances, be limited in time and be under strict civil control.[92]

In turn, in 2016 the Office of the National Commissioner for Human Rights presented the Human Security Strategy for Sustainable Development titled "Municipalities for Welfare Solidarity", in 36 municipalities at the national level, with the aim of strengthening protection for communities with a focus on early prevention, based on developing skills, values and participation.

Within the framework of this strategy, municipal multi-sector networks were set up with the purpose of empowering, encouraging involvement and mobilising people in a situation of vulnerability.

Together with this, processes have been implemented to provide education and training on human rights and to raise awareness among local authorities and the community.

Within the framework of the commitment to provide schools with protection, certain preventive measures have recently been implemented. With support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the "Ensuring Education" programme was launched in April 2018, with the objective of preventing, attending to, monitoring and reporting violence that occurs in schools, by creating safe learning spaces.[93] The programme has a budget of US$20 million and will focus its efforts on schools with the highest rates of violence across five cities.

In May 2018, the assessment was concluded to implement the Strategy for Prevention, Protection, Reduction and Control Violence in Education Centres in Honduras (EPPREVACEH), the overall objective of which is to support the efforts of the Department of Education to guarantee security in the country's schools, using a systemic, multi-sector and multidisciplinary approach to preventing school violence.

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91   OHCHR (2017). Annual report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Honduras. A/HRC/34/3 Add. 2.

92   On international forums, the Government has indicated that the deployment of armed forces with a public security function was a special temporary measure and that those forces would be gradually removed as the police provided reinforcements.

93   Asegurando la educación: Gobierno fortalece programas de prevención de violencia. Government of the Republic of Honduras. 5 April 2018.

The Strategy includes a School Violence Prevention Plan, which has been in place since August 2018, with the aim of lowering the levels of violence by dealing with individual cases, involving educational advisors, the "Educators for Peace" programme, which seeks to improve teaching skills to tackle the violence affecting schools, and the "To Win School" programme aimed at strengthening socioemotional skills.

Additionally, and with technical support from the German Agency for International Co-operation GIZ-Prevenir, an Inventory of Approaches to Prevention in Schools and Community was presented in June 2018, with the objective of implementing actions to reduce the rates of violence in the country's centres of learning.

Despite the numerous existing initiatives to provide a response to the situation of violence, the interviews conducted and the reports consulted for the research coincide in that results are not being seen due to a lack of institutional frameworks, co-ordination and budget to enable effective implementation.

The Safe Schools Declaration

Honduras was among the first 37 States to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration on 29 May 2015. El Salvador followed in November 2017, and Guatemala took this important step in May 2019.[94]

The Safe Schools Declaration is an intergovernmental political commitment that provides countries with the opportunity to make a stand in support of protecting students, educators, schools and universities from attacks at times of armed conflict. It is the result of a processes of consultations led by Norway and Argentina in Geneva in 2015.

Endorsing the Declaration, the States commit to take steps to prevent education being attacked and to mitigate the negative consequences of attacks to education. These measures include: collecting reliable data on attacks and the military use of schools and universities, providing assistance for victims of attacks, investigating reports of breaches of national and international rules and prosecuting perpetrators, developing and promoting "conflict-sensitive" education, ensuring the continuity of education during conflict, supporting the work of the United Nations as regards the Children and Armed Conflict agenda and using the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.[95]

Both the Declaration and the Guidelines only apply in the context of armed conflict (whether international or non-international), so would not apply per se in the context of other situations of violence in the NTCA. However, considering the consequences of this violence for children, which in many aspects are equivalent to those of an armed conflict (murder, recruitment, attacks on education, among others), we consider it important to highlight these instruments in this report so that they may be taken into account when analysing the efforts made by the three countries to protect education from the impact of gang violence.

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94   As this report goes to press, 90 States have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration.

95   GCPEA (2014). "Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict".

Programmatic response from Save the Children and other civil society organisations

As it has just been explained, the programmes that have been implemented by the States to protect education from violence have not produced the expected results. This is due in part to the fact that they have focused on combating some of the more visible expressions of violence, with an approach based on repression and coercion, without tackling the multiple causes and complex structures that underpin the violence in these countries.

There are however other experiences that have had positive results and which have specifically tried to tackle violence from its multiple dimensions, involving young people, the community and families in the solution, using preventive and constructive approaches. Their aim is for school to be a place of safety, trust, development and a source of alternatives.

Because of the importance of generating learning processes in these contexts, some of these experiences are highlighted below.

The **FORPAZ project,**[96] carried out by Save the Children in Honduras, forms part of the Regional Security Initiative for Central America, and is based on various experiences that have been implemented since 1978, with a focus on a community-based methodology. With funding from USAID, it was implemented in two stages between September 2013 and September 2017.

The aim of the project is to promote a culture of peace in schools and communities with a vulnerable population in urban areas with high levels of criminality, through violence-prevention activities involving key community stakeholders.

The project has focused on developing capacities in families, at school, and among children, adolescents and young people, as an opportunity to create processes of change that contribute to reduce violence. The issues addressed include a culture of peace, values, self-esteem, assertive communication and life plans, using the methodology of "training of trainers".

The activities include educational fairs to promote the involvement of children and youth, and working with young people who are not in school, with an emphasis on vocational training in collaboration with the Honduran Institute of Vocational Training (INFOP). The experience has shown that it is possible to build active resilience.

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96   Strengthening local capacities to build a culture of peace in communities in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

The **Schools Building Peace (ECPAZ) project** was implemented by Save the Children over a five-year period (2014-2018) in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, with funding from the Association of Norwegian Students and Save the Children Norway. It is aimed at schoolchildren, young people outside the school system and leaders of youth networks.

Its objectives are:

- To build a culture of peace in a participatory and inclusive way.

- Include the culture of peace in the school curriculum through dialogue and the organised involvement of young people, educators and parents by creating a safe learning environment in schools.

- Reduce incidents of violence in schools between peers and with teachers, with positive contributions from families and communities.

- Promote young people's access to alternative opportunities for education and training that meet their needs, abilities and times.

- Strengthen young people's capacities and their involvement, and contribute to empower them to defend their rights and build peace.

- Promote and strengthen national and regional youth networks of collaboration with the aim of building a culture of peace.

The project's components include educating the various stakeholders in aspects relating to a culture of peace and human rights, promoting and strengthening youth networks, sharing experiences and developing sporting and recreational activities. The work is based on co-operation agreements with local governments, educational authorities and other institutions.

"[We've achieved] major changes, in terms of people's attitudes, in how they took ownership of the project... they have learned how to handle their emotions. The children are now more committed and have a better understanding of their rights, but also their obligations. Furthermore, they've all developed a leadership through school governments by taking part in camps and through skills training. [The skills training] has been really valuable because, first of all, it made us reflect on the importance of tools for living as educators and the huge responsibility that educators have to transform children's lives".

ECPAZ project supervisor,
Guatemala

The **HEART programme** (Healing and Education through the Arts), implemented by Save the Children in El Salvador, is part of a global programme that helps children seriously affected by chronic and toxic stress[97] to mitigate the effects of violence experienced by children and young people. This is a psychosocial support programme for children based on artistic activities, such as drawing, theatre or music, to help them process and communicate their feelings with regard to the experiences that they have lived through.

The recovery process begins when a child shares his or her memories and feelings, both orally and through artistic expression, with support and care from an adult or another companion. The result is a child who feels less isolated, and with more connection and sense of safety around trusted adults and companions in his or her life. This also helps children to feel more secure about themselves, which helps in their learning and improves their opportunities to have a better future.

Thousands of Hands is a German Agency for International Co-operation project that was implemented by Childfund Honduras in 2013. The objectives are to bring together and strengthen families and schools to help children deal effectively with the challenges of daily life and promote abilities and skills for parents, carers and educators which will help them to guide their students and children towards 'living well'.

The programme has a strong focus on strengthening capacities and the systemic prevention of violence, and has two main components, family and school, and a component of integration. Encounters take place with school teachers and principals with the aim of establishing a plan for coexistence at school with involvement from the education community.

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97   Experts in mental health define toxic stress as "the most dangerous form of reaction to stress". This occurs when children experience danger in a particularly hard, frequent and prolonged way without sufficient support from adults. The response to this toxic stress can have a lifelong impact on children's mental and physical health, as well as on their cognitive, social and physical development.

The **strategy School Searching for Children and Adolescents,** developed in Honduras by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), has the aim of identifying children and adolescents between 5 and 17 years of age who are outside the formal education system and detecting the reasons why they are not accessing the education system.

Through a census carried out in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, children and young people who are not studying are located, the conditions they are in and the reasons for not attending school are determined, and the necessary support is given so they can start enjoying their right to education again.

The strategy focuses on four areas of work: the psychological aspect, life ambitions, self-esteem and self-concept.

Young Builders is a programme implemented in El Salvador over five years by the Catholic Relief Services (CSR). In 2015 implementation also began in Honduras. The purpose of the programme is to provide young people with access to opportunities, connecting them with a fair job, supporting them in setting up microbusinesses or helping them in their return to the education system.

The programme is aimed at young people at risk aged 16 to 25. Its focus is on youth leadership, and it uses methodologies that focus on motivation and friendly accompaniment.

Recommendations

The situation that has been described makes it clear that there is a need for concrete steps to be taken to ensure that children in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras can enjoy a violence-free education and develop their full potential. Despite the fact that the governments of the three countries have implemented different initiatives and strategies to counter gang violence, these have proved ineffective due to the lack of a comprehensive and preventive approach, and on many occasions due to a lack of necessary resources for effective implementation.

For this reason, we propose the following recommendations to ensure adequate protection and care for children affected by violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

TO THE GOVERNMENTS OF EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA AND HONDURAS

Comply with national and international obligations regarding the right to education, in all its dimensions and principles, implementing all available resources to ensure progressive compliance.[98] Additionally, it is urgent for States to avoid discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to education of children and adolescents living in areas of most risk of violence, as well as those who have been internally displaced or deported.

- Provide both human and budgetary resources to schools in areas with a high risk of violence, implement protection protocols and support the work of educators and managerial teams.

- Establish a protection system in schools that guarantees the right to education within the framework of the international commitments made, avoiding the presence of uniformed and armed military and police in schools whenever possible.

- Provide agile transfer processes both for pupils and for teachers in case of serious risk and threat to life and full development, guaranteeing the continuity of education.

- Follow up the cases of school dropout by assessing the causes behind it, and implement comprehensive action plans for these situations.

- Establish monitoring protocols for cases of confinement, guaranteeing the continuity of studies, using alternative teaching methods and providing psychosocial support.

- Document, systematise and monitor the human rights situation of the population that has been victim of forced displacement, with the aim of ensuring their access to basic services, including education.

- Immediately deal with the situation of children and adolescents who have been deported and are returning to their communities, to ensure their integration into the education system.

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98   See Appendix "Obligations of States regarding the right to education".

Reinforce the role of school as a safe space that contributes to the learning process, human development and social cohesion.

- Recognise the role that schools can play in identifying situations of risk or vulnerability for children. Provide psychosocial care for pupils through figures such as the school advisor (in the case of Guatemala) or school mediator, who should have the necessary training and skills to perform their role.

- Ensure psychosocial support and accompaniment for teachers and management teams. Provide them with training for working in contexts of violence, which includes self-care, conflict management and psychosocial support.

- Implement protection and prevention measures in schools based on good practices that already exist in the NTCA (such as the Open Schools programme), in co-ordination with civil society organisations.

- Develop strategies and comprehensive prevention policies, reducing risk factors, with participation from schools, communities and civil society organisations, in order to enable all stakeholders to take ownership of these strategies and policies.

- Promote a vision of children and adolescents that rejects stigmatisation and recognises them as right holders, developing processes in which they can an active and constructive role, and their voices are listened.

- Actively involve students, families and communities in building spaces for peace.

Even though the **Safe Schools Declaration** only applies in situations of armed conflict, many of its commitments and the recommendations developed by the GCPEA to ensure that education is protected from attacks are also applicable in the situation of violence that affects the NTCA.

- Adopt all possible measures to prevent schools being used for purposes related to criminal gang violence, such as recruitment, extortion and threats.

- Investigate and monitor all incidents of violence that occur in schools and provide instruments of protection so they can be reported.

- Intensify monitoring, data collection and reporting on attacks on education, with indicators disaggregated by sex, age and type of institution, which will enable prevention and response mechanisms to be put in place.

- Provide assistance for all victims who have had their right to education breached due to violence, with particular attention for girls, female adolescents and female teachers.

- Ensure that education promotes values of peace and does not foster the conflict.

- In areas of greatest risk, implement risk-reduction strategies and comprehensive protection and security plans in conjunction with schools, communities and municipalities.

TO DONORS, INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY STAKEHOLDERS

It is crucial to give visibility to the other situations of violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America as a humanitarian crisis that requires a co-ordinated response that includes both long-term interventions aimed at prevention, as well as urgent, immediate response measures and assistance for victims in high-risk areas.

- Support comprehensive assessments, which tackle the structural causes of violence, and implement preventive programmes with a focus on human rights and capacity building.

- Facilitate technical and financial support for response strategies, prioritising child protection and education interventions, taking into account the commitments of the Safe Schools Declaration.

- Take a comprehensive approach, in conjunction with the States involved, to tackle the humanitarian crisis of forced displacement and the deportation of children and adolescents with an approach based on integrated protection and assistance.

- Support effective stakeholder networks, providing spaces for dialogue and for building trust, involving public institutions, education communities, children and adolescents, educators, parents and representatives from civil society organisations.

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Appendix

OBLIGATIONS OF STATES REGARDING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Education is a fundamental human right enshrined in a range of international treaties and which is considered an indispensable means for the fulfilment of other human rights. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that everyone has the right to education. Since then, this right has been recognised and implemented through a range of international regulatory instruments drawn up by the United Nations, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It has also been incorporated into various regional treaties and has been enshrined as a right in most national constitutions.

In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand) established education as a fundamental right as "foundation for lifelong learning and human development", recognising the important role that education plays to help ensure "a safer, healthier, more prosperous and environmentally sound world, and contributing to social, economic, and cultural progress, tolerance, and international cooperation".

States must respect, protect and guarantee the right to education. Guarantees must be in place to provide sufficient fully equipped educational infrastructures; to ensure material, economic and non-discriminatory access to education; to ensure the education system is flexible and adapted to children's interests, of good quality and culturally appropriate.

Education is key to developing everyone's dignity and for a society free and without discrimination. In contexts of violence and humanitarian emergency, the right to education must be given special protection and guarantees, as it is the foundation of coexistence based on the building of peace.

The following are the obligations to which El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are bound by, both in terms of internal legislation and with regard to the international treaties they have signed.

Internal regulation on the right to education and protection from violence

El Salvador adopted the "Law on the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents" from 2009, which promotes respect, protection and observance of the right to education. It refers to children as rights-holders, putting emphasis on equity and non-discrimination. However, the references to violence are fundamentally linked to corporal punishment in schools, without tackling violence among peers or that caused by gangs.

On the other hand, even though the "Law of Special Contribution for Citizen Security and Coexistence" was passed in 2015, by which the government undertakes to protect the environment outside schools, the challenge still remains to bring an end to violence within centres of learning.

The National Education Law in Guatemala[99] establishes the principles and purposes of education, as an inherent human right and an obligation of the State, aimed at the comprehensive development and improvement of human beings through a lifelong, gradual and progressive process and as an instrument that contributes to the shaping of a just and democratic society. It also establishes the commitment to provide an education based on human, scientific, technical, cultural and spiritual principles, which comprehensively shape the individual, prepare him or her for work and social coexistence, and enable access to other levels of life.

The Law on the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (PINA) was passed in 2003 and establishes the best interest of the child as a guarantee of any decision made regarding children and adolescents. It states that the rights of children must be ensured, always taking children's opinions into account according to their age and maturity. It also establishes the need to report physical, mental or sexual abuse, and cases of children dropping out of school, by which the authorities of educational establishments must inform the relevant authority of all pertinent cases. This law also enshrines the right to protection against the illegal trafficking, abduction, kidnapping, sale and slavery of children and adolescents.

In Honduras, the Basic Law on Education recognises education as a fundamental right and establishes the State's duty to "guarantee, respect and protect the exercise of this right, and, to the community, the duty to help develop, manage and improve education".

Adherence to international obligations

The legal framework applicable to attacks against schools and universities, and to their use in support of military action during armed conflicts, is found mainly in the framework of international human rights law and in international humanitarian law, which regulates actions during international and non-international armed conflicts.

Despite the fact that the situation of violence in the NTCA analysed in this report is not an armed conflict as such, it does incorporate many elements that have to do with a context of violence and crisis, threat to life and direct attacks on schools, and therefore it is our consideration that many of the criteria in the framework of protection that applies in the context of armed conflicts should be applicable.

The Safe Schools Declaration has already been mentioned, to which Honduras and El Salvador signed up to in 2015 and 2017 respectively, while Guatemala joined in 2019, and by means of which the States undertake to protect schools from attacks in time of armed conflict. The commitments resulting from the Declaration include establishing safe places and implementing inclusive designs that are resistant to the threats to which schools are exposed, relocating unsafe schools, involving education communities and implementing plans for the ongoing monitoring, funding and supervision of school facilities. All of these would apply to the context of violence in the NTCA countries.

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99   Legislative Decree No. 12 (1991).

On the other hand, the following table shows the situation in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras regarding the most relevant international treaties with regard to the right to education. As can be seen, the three countries have ratified instruments that enshrine everyone's right to education, with some exceptions relating to the optional protocols establishing the creation of official bodies to oversee treaty compliance:

	El Salvador	Honduras	Guatemala
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (PIDESC)	YES	YES	YES
PIDESC Optional Protocol	YES	YES	NO
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRN)	YES	YES	YES
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	YES	YES	YES
CEDAW Protocol	NO[100]	NO	YES
American Convention on Human Rights Pact of San José	YES	YES	YES
Protocol of San Salvador (Optional Protocol to the American Convention)	YES	YES	YES

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100   Despite having signed the Protocol, El Salvador has not ratified it.

Initials and acronyms

ACAPS: Assessment Capacities Project

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CENISS: Social Sector National Census. Honduras

ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross

IACHR: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

COIPRODEN: Network of Institutions for the Rights of the Child. Honduras

CONADEH: National Commission for Human Rights. Honduras

CONED: National Education Council. El Salvador

CRS: Catholic Relief Services

EPPREVACEH: Strategy for Prevention, Protection, Reduction and Control Violence in Education Centres in Honduras

GCPEA: Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack

GIZ: German Agency for International Co-operation

IDMC: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

IML: Institute of Legal Medicine. El Salvador

IDMC: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

ISDEMU: Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development

MINED: Ministry of Education. El Salvador

MINEDUC: Ministry of Education. Guatemala

NRC: Norwegian Refugee Council

OEA: Organization of American States

UN: United Nations

WHO: World Health Organization

OSV: Other situations of violence

PESS: Plan El Salvador Seguro

PNC: National Civil Police

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme Administrator

SIMEDUCO: Trade Union of Public Education Schoolteachers in El Salvador

NTCA: Northern Triangle of Central America

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

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