

## GUNS, DRUGS, AND “ZERO TOLERANCE” SPUR ORGANIZED ARMED VIOLENCE BY CHILDREN IN 10 COUNTRIES, WARNS NEW STUDY

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### - Parallels and Differences Seen Between Child Soldiers and Armed Urban Youth

Washington, DC: A major new study of ten countries finds that governments are encouraging the growth of organized armed groups – or gangs - by imprisoning and even executing their members, instead of helping young people to rise above the poverty and social disintegration that is pushing them to join gangs in the first place.

The report is the first comparative study of children in organized armed violence outside of conflict zones. Entitled “Neither War nor Peace,” it draws on three years of research in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Jamaica, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, South Africa and the US. The US case-study is written by John Hagedorn, who directs the Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois-Chicago and runs a successful [website](#) on the issue.

The project was coordinated by Children in Organized Armed Violence (COAV), a partner of The Advocacy Project that works in the slums (favelas) of Rio de Janeiro. Luke Dowdney, director of COAV, edited the final report.

Dowdney and his colleagues paint a bleak picture of children being sucked into a culture of violence, intimidation and crime - often with lethal results. Most interviewed had become fully armed members by the age of 14 and many had used guns to kill. All but one of the eight young South Africans interviewed had been shot at least once. Two of those who participated in the survey were killed before the report could even be published.

92% of those interviewed were male. When girls are involved in organized violence, says the report, they tend to use weapons like knives, and are less vulnerable to gun deaths.

The researchers selected members from some of the world’s most prominent and notorious groups. They include the “bandas delincuentes” in Colombia, which are close to Colombia’s paramilitaries and narcotraffickers; ethnic militias like the “Egbesu Boys” in Nigeria; the “maras” in El Salvador and Honduras, who originated in Los Angeles among the Salvadoran refugee and immigrant population and are now returning to Central America; and street gangs like the “Black Gangster Disciples” from the Latino and black population in Chicago.

The report draws parallels between the way these groups use children and the recruitment of child soldiers. The groups have strict command structures, pay salaries and often enforce discipline with death. Their young members perform military-style functions, such as manning checkpoints, serving as bodyguards, and assassinating opponents.

Membership of such a group is a source of pride, power and money, and the report does not absolve its members from responsibility. But it also sees youth who join as highly vulnerable to “risk factors” over which they have little control, such as crime, poverty, unemployment and government corruption. Most of these interviewed had left school and live in single-parent families.

Another “risk factor” is the increasing availability of guns. In Honduras, Colombia, and Nigeria, children have access to AK- 47s, M16s and rocket grenade launchers before their twelfth birthday. In some countries assault rifles can be purchased for the same price as a chicken.

Despite the similarities, the report also draws a clear distinction between armed urban youth and child soldiers. Child soldiers operate in a context of war, and are subject to the rules of war. Classifying group members as soldiers could result in the denial of their civil rights and legitimize the use of force against them, warns the report.

Perhaps the biggest difference lies in the official response of governments. With encouragement from the UN, governments are increasingly prepared to accept that child soldiers who commit war crimes deserve rehabilitation due to their age and the coercive nature of their recruitment.

There is no such subtlety in their response to armed groups. The report finds that governments are using lethal force, imprisonment and even summary execution. Rehabilitation programs are under-funded, and juvenile justice systems are hopelessly inadequate. Even the use of words like “juvenile delinquent” and “gang member” brand group members as criminals and irredeemable.

Yet many governments collude with armed groups even as they try to suppress them. In the Philippines, politicians hire vigilantes as private armies. In the townships of Jamaica, corrupt local leaders arm adolescents and use them to gain votes. Officials sell guns to children, take bribes from them, extort money, and sell them confiscated drugs – while declaring a crackdown on their “criminal” behavior.

The report warns that this ill-conceived response is producing a serious backlash. Most of the groups, like the Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) in the Philippines, started as legitimate community protection groups. Like the majority of the other groups interviewed, they have become increasingly violent as a result of their “growing involvement in the illicit drug trade, increased access to small arms and persistent and often violent state repression.”

Instead of using “zero tolerance”, says the report, governments should address the social decay that is pushing young people to join the gangs. Some of the best solutions are local. For example, communities can work together to identify the risks, develop projects, strengthen families, invest in local schools, build leisure facilities and provide psychological support for children affected by violence.

The report urges governments to help young people rise above the many pressures in high-risk areas. One successful project in Chicago, Street-Level Youth Media, serves as a form of community-based conflict prevention by giving “at-risk” youths an opportunity to use video to communicate with rival groups.

- Read the [COAV book](#) online.
- Read the blogs of 2004 AP intern [Alex Goldmark](#)
- For further information and interviews, contact [Luke Dowdney](#)
- For further information on gang research, contact [John Hagedorn](#), or visit the [website](#).