

RESEARCH ARTICLE

After the Gang: Desistance, Violence and Occupational Options in Nicaragua

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Abstract

Gangs are widely considered major contributors to the high levels of violence afflicting Latin America, including in particular Central America. At the same time, however, the vast majority of individuals who join a gang will also leave it and, it is assumed, become less violent. Having said this, the mechanisms underlying this ‘desistance’ process are not well understood, and nor are the determinants of individuals’ post-gang trajectories, partly because gang desistance tends to be seen as an event rather than a process. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research carried out in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor neighbourhood in Nicaragua’s capital city Managua, and more specifically a set of ‘archetypal’ gang member life histories that illustrate the occupational options open to former gang members, this article offers a longitudinal perspective on desistance and its consequences, with specific reference to the determinants of individuals’ continued engagement with violence (or not).

Keywords: gangs; desistance; violence; Nicaragua; occupation; life trajectories

Introduction

Gangs are one of a handful of truly global social phenomena, present across time and space in almost every society on the planet.¹ Although there exists significant variation between different periods and contexts, a defining feature of gangs is their intimate association with violence. Nowhere is this more evident than in twenty-first-century Central America, where gangs are widely perceived to be among the most important actors within the contemporary panorama of brutality.² Numerous academic studies have explored how and why gangs are violent, both in Central America and elsewhere, proposing a range of theories that variably locate

¹Jennifer M. Hazen and Dennis Rodgers (eds.), *Global Gangs: Street Violence across the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

²Dennis Rodgers and Adam Baird, ‘Entender a las pandillas de América Latina: Una revisión de la literatura’, *Estudios Socio-Jurídicos*, 18: 1 (2016), pp. 18–23.

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explanation at the individual, the organisational or the contextual level.³ Most tend to see violence as a form of behaviour that gang members acquire through the gang. At the same time, however, these studies have also highlighted how most individuals who join a gang will eventually leave that gang, through a natural ‘desistance’ process.⁴ It is widely assumed that individuals who leave a gang become less violent, but the way this occurs is not well understood.

Part of the reason for this is that although there has been considerable research on desistance, and a variety of motivations, methods and determinants have been identified, less is known about its consequences over the long term. To a certain extent this is because desistance is frequently considered as an event rather than a process, as Géraldine Bugnon has pointed out in her research on desistance from crime in Brazil.⁵ But it is also arguably due to methodological issues. As José Miguel Cruz and Jonathan Rosen have pointed out in relation to their research on gang desistance in El Salvador, their focus was only ‘on the intentions of disengagement, not on the desistance process itself ... [because for the latter] we would have needed [to carry out] a longitudinal study’.⁶ Most studies of gangs and gang members are synchronic rather than diachronic in nature, as gangs and gang members are not easy to access, much less develop a long-term research relationship with. Consequently, most investigations arguably offer a time-bound perspective on gang dynamics. Certainly, few studies have systematically explored the lives of former gang members *after* they have left the gang, yet it is arguably precisely this that is needed to explain how and why desistance might (or might not) lead to a decline in individuals’ recourse to violence.

Based on two and a half decades of ethnographic research on gang dynamics in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández,⁷ a poor neighbourhood in Nicaragua’s capital city Managua, this article explores the determinants and consequences of the post-gang trajectories of individuals who were members of various iterations of the local neighbourhood gang, drawing in particular on a set of 20 longitudinally collected ‘archetypal’ life histories. I begin by considering some of the ideas that have been put forward to explain why and how individuals leave gangs, both generally and specifically in relation to Central America, as well as the assumptions made concerning individuals’ continued recourse to violence, and the limitations of such analyses. Following a discussion of the methodological underpinnings of my research, I then consider gang desistance in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, situating it within a general overview of evolving neighbourhood gang dynamics, before exploring the five principal occupational options open to former gang members, and analysing their variable determinants and consequences, with a specific

³For an overview, see Dennis Rodgers and Jennifer M. Hazen, ‘Introduction: Gangs in a Global Comparative Perspective’, in Hazen and Rodgers (eds.), *Global Gangs*, pp. 1–25.

⁴Christian L. Bolden and Anna Q. Iliff, ‘Gang Desistance’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 20 June 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.440> (URLs last accessed 15 Aug. 2023).

⁵Géraldine Bugnon, *Governing Delinquency through Freedom: Control, Rehabilitation and Desistance* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 227.

⁶José Miguel Cruz and Jonathan D. Rosen, ‘Mara Forever? Factors Associated with Gang Disengagement in El Salvador’, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 69 (2020), p. 9.

⁷This name is a pseudonym, as are also all the names of individuals mentioned in this paper.

focus on individuals' continued engagement with violence (or not). A final section offers some concluding reflections.

Gang Desistance

Although being a gang member has been shown to be a finite social role all over the world,⁸ most research on gang desistance has focused on the USA.⁹ Early studies, such as Frederic Thrasher's *The Gang*,¹⁰ or Albert Cohen's *Delinquent Boys*,¹¹ viewed gang membership as a phase within a broader developmental life-cycle. Joining the gang was in effect seen either as a form of youth rebellion or of working-class youth sub-culture, and leaving the gang was a natural consequence of growing up. Such quixotic assumptions tended to predominate until Martín Sánchez Jankowski's *Islands in the Street*,¹² a unique multi-sited, decade-long ethnographic investigation of gangs in Boston, Los Angeles and New York, that was among the first to consider gang desistance in a more systematic and detailed manner. In particular, Sánchez Jankowski identified six basic reasons for leaving a gang: (1) moving to individual delinquency (due to the high transaction costs of collective action); (2) joining another group (such as a 'social club, political party, [or] organized crime [group]'); (3) the gang falling apart (because collective action is not easy to maintain in the long run); (4) imprisonment; (5) dying; and (6) getting a job (albeit generally as a low-paid member of the 'underclass').¹³

Partly because he was principally concerned with analysing the organisation rather than the disbandment of gangs, Sánchez Jankowski did not elaborate on the underlying dynamics of these different forms of gang desistance, but subsequent research has highlighted how disengagement from a gang can take place either abruptly or gradually, and is generally the result of individual decision-making rather than a forced consequence of structural constraints.¹⁴ Abrupt desistance generally involves individuals experiencing major 'turning points' or a singular life event – marriage, parenthood, steady employment, migration, going to prison, for example – that lead to a life-style change. Gradual desistance involves a more drawn-out process of detachment, reflecting the fact that leaving a gang 'rarely follows a seamless, linear transition',¹⁵ as individuals will often have difficulty executing a wholesale life-style change in one go. In both cases, the impulse to leave the gang comes from the individual. Irrespective of whether gang members

⁸See Herbert C. Covey, *Street Gangs throughout the World*, 3rd edn (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2021).

⁹For a review, see Dena C. Carson and J. Michael Vecchio, 'Leaving the Gang: A Review and Thoughts on Future Research', in Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz (eds.), *The Handbook of Gangs* (New York: Wiley, 2015), pp. 257–75.

¹⁰Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1927).

¹¹Albert K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1955).

¹²Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁴See Carson and Vecchio, 'Leaving the Gang'.

¹⁵Scott H. Decker, David C. Pyrooz and Richard K. Moule Jr., 'Disengagement from Gangs as Role Transitions', *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24: 2 (2014), p. 268.

leave abruptly or gradually, however, most studies assume that their engagement with violence will decline after leaving the gang. Underlying this assumption is the idea that it is the gang that socialises individuals into patterns of violence, and that, by leaving the gang life, individuals integrate into more peaceful mainstream society.

One of the few studies that does not automatically make this assumption is David Pyrooz and Scott Decker's investigation of desistance among former gang members in Phoenix, Arizona. Explicitly seeking to test the proposition that 'because gang membership and involvement in crime are closely linked, ... we [would] expect that desistance from one's gang should be accompanied – in the main – by a reduction in involvement in crime', they find 'that leaving the gang is not automatically associated with reduced serious offending'.¹⁶ They relate this finding to the nature of the motives and the method for leaving the gang – including in particular whether individuals are stimulated by 'pull' or 'push' factors, and whether their exit from the gang was 'hostile' or 'non-hostile' (i.e. consensual) – as well as whether former gang members continue to have ties with their gang. Pyrooz and Decker in fact find the latter factor to be the most important explanatory variable for enduring patterns of post-gang violence: 'when partitioning motives and methods for leaving the gang by gang ties, we find that those who retained ties were at least twice as likely ... to be arrested for serious offenses regardless of why or how one left the gang'.¹⁷

At the same time, even if gradual distancing from the gang can involve continued connection with it, being a gang member entails more than just being violent, and there is no reason why the ties that an individual continues to have with the gang after leaving must necessarily involve violence. As James Diego Vigil has pointed out in relation to Latino gangs in the USA, gangs are inevitably situated within a wider youth culture, representing 'a street style that both conforms and contrasts with familiar youth patterns', and gang members naturally engage in the usual activities of youth – they talk, joke, exchange stories, listen to music, dance, court, drink and smoke, among others.¹⁸ Indeed, the fact that non-gang members frequently associate with gang members as a matter of course without necessarily being caught up in patterns of violent behaviour also suggests that contact with the gang does not automatically socialise into violence. To this extent, continued ties to a gang do not have to imply continued patterns of violent behaviour. Not all social connections are equivalent, and they moreover do not necessarily impact on individuals in either a consistent or a continuous manner.

Truly understanding the determinants and consequences of the post-gang trajectories of former gang members thus requires a more contextualised and dynamic analysis that does not just assume that desistance will inherently lead to less violent behaviours or that this can occur only as a result of radical breaking of an individual's ties to a gang. This is particularly important in relation to contexts where

¹⁶David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker, 'Motives and Methods for Leaving the Gang: Understanding the Process of Gang Desistance', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39 (2011), pp. 423, 422.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁸James Diego Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988), p. 2.

gangs have an enduring, endemic institutional presence, such as in Central America, as this often promotes the perception that being a gang member involves a lifetime commitment, from which 'there is only one way to get out, and that's in your pine-box suit' (coffin).¹⁹ Such representations have clearly contributed to a pervasive fatalism in relation to being able to do anything to mitigate the gang phenomenon in the region, which is widely seen as intractable, self-perpetuating and enduring.²⁰

As Sonja Wolf has pointed out, however, there have been a number of studies suggesting that options for gang members to leave the gang and to forge less violent modes of being do exist.²¹ In particular, these have focused on the way that evangelical religious conversion can allow individuals to adopt a new life-style, one that is fundamentally different to that associated with being a gang member, but equivalent in scope, thereby providing a framework through which to develop a new social identity.²² At the same time, however, the relationship between evangelical churches and gangs is more complicated than the former just being 'havens' for desisting members of the latter. As Rosen and Cruz have pointed out, gang members who convert are effectively often on probation, their behaviour closely monitored by the gang. One of their interviewees highlighted:

I was [supervised] ... They watch where, at what time, with whom you go and what you do. In most cases [if you divert from the religious path], they (the gang) correct you once, by beating you up. It's called *corte*. Four to six people beat you up for about 2–3 minutes. It is pretty tough and can end up with a broken rib or other injuries that stay in the body. Then you can continue God's path. The second time they correct you in a worse way. It can be [being] beaten with a bat. Some have been left paraplegic. The third time, if you didn't get it, you don't want anything with God or the gang, they kill you.²³

This clearly suggests that desistance in Central America is not only perhaps more complicated than in other parts of the world, but also involves continued violence. Having said this, most of the existing studies of Central American gang desistance concern members of Salvadorean, Guatemalan or Honduran '*maras*'. A distinction needs to be made regionally between *maras*, on the one hand, and '*pandillas*', on the other. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, institutionally *pandillas* are a long-standing feature of all Central American societies, while *maras* are a newer, hybrid type of gang that exists only in El Salvador, Guatemala and

¹⁹'Neftalí', cited in Robert Brennenman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

²⁰See, for example, <https://www.noria-research.com/central-america-stuck-in-traffic-the-downward-spiral-of-the-northern-triangle/>.

²¹Sonja Wolf, 'Critical Debates: Criminal Networks in Mexico and Central America: Dynamics and Responses', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 55: 3 (2013), p. 163.

²²Brennenman, *Homies and Hermanos*; Stephen Offutt, *Blood Entanglements: Evangelicals and Gangs in El Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Jon Wolseth, *Jesus and the Gang: Youth Violence and Christianity in Urban Honduras* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011).

²³Jonathan D. Rosen and José Miguel Cruz, 'Rethinking the Mechanisms of Gang Desistance in a Developing Country', *Deviant Behavior*, 40: 12 (2019), p. 1500.

Honduras, and emerged in the early 1990s as a result of particular transnational migratory dynamics between these countries and the USA.²⁴ *Maras* are clearly more disembedded from their local contexts, more violent, more institutionalised, and also generally have greater and more enduring control over their members than *pandillas*. Their particular dynamics arguably constitute them as something of an exception, both within the region as well as when compared to gangs elsewhere and, in many ways, *pandillas* are much more typical of global gang dynamics, certainly in relation to gang desistance processes. This is particularly true of Nicaraguan *pandillas*. Although their nature and dynamics have varied dramatically over the past three decades,²⁵ being a gang member in Nicaragua has consistently remained a finite social role, and they can therefore be said to constitute an ideal Central American example through which to explore the underlying nature of gang desistance, its determinants and its consequences. Before this, however, the next section outlines some of the methodological underpinnings of my research.

Studying Gangs and Gang Desistance in Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández

I have been carrying out longitudinal ethnographic research in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández since 1996. In practice, this has involved nine field trips totalling 23 months over 1996–7, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2020, during which I have engaged in a mixture of participant observation and in-depth interviewing, as well as conducting regular mapping exercises and focus group discussions.²⁶ I have also carried out a household survey of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, photo-documented its infrastructural transformation over time, and investigated a range of different issues including poverty, gender relations, labour, economic survival, migration, remittances, history, memory, violence, kinship, urban development,

²⁴Oliver Jütersonke, Robert Muggah and Dennis Rodgers, 'Gangs, Urban Violence, and Security Interventions in Central America', *Security Dialogue*, 40: 4–5 (2009), pp. 373–97; Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁵José Luis Rocha, *Lanzando piedras, fumando 'piedras': Evolución de las pandillas en Nicaragua 1997–2006* (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2007); 'Violencia juvenil y orden social en el Reparto Schick: Juventud marginada y relación con el Estado', Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) discussion paper no. IDB-DP-308, [Washington, DC], 2013; José Luis Rocha and Dennis Rodgers, *Bróderes descubiertos y vagos alucinados: Una década con las pandillas nicaragüenses, 1997–2007* (Managua: Envío, 2008); Dennis Rodgers, 'Living in the Shadow of Death: Gangs, Violence and Social Order in Urban Nicaragua, 1996–2002', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38: 2 (2006), pp. 267–92; 'Of Pandillas, Pirucas, and Pablo Escobar in the Barrio: Historical Change and Continuity in Nicaraguan Gang Violence', in Sebastian Huhn and Hannes Warnecke-Berger (eds.), *Politics and History of Violence and Crime in Central America* (New York: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 65–84; 'Gang Governance in the Tropics: The Political Economy of Violence and Social Order in Contemporary Nicaragua', in David C. Brotherton and Rafael Jose Gude (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 399–411; Dennis Rodgers and José Luis Rocha, 'Turning Points: Gang Evolution in Nicaragua', in Small Arms Survey (Geneva) (ed.), *Small Arms Survey Yearbook 2013: Everyday Dangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 46–73; Julienne Weegels, 'The Terror and Scourge of the Barrio': Representations of Youth Crime and Policing on Nicaraguan Television News', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 50: 4 (2018), pp. 861–87.

²⁶In addition, I have been in regular contact with a range of individuals in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández over the years via letters, phone calls, emails, Skype and WhatsApp.

politics and spatiality. The main focus of my research, however, has been the evolving dynamics of the local neighbourhood gang.²⁷ My investigations have traced the emergence of a vigilante gang in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which then institutionalised in the mid-1990s, before transforming into a predatory drug-dealing gang in the early 2000s. This gang was violently suppressed and replaced by a more professional drug trafficking ‘*cartelito*’ in the mid and late 2000s. The latter’s collapse in the early 2010s saw the re-emergence of ephemeral street corner gangs, which, due to changes in policing patterns, were then replaced by an all-female virtually connected peer network locally called a ‘*combo*’ in the mid- and late 2010s.²⁸ This disappeared following the Nicaraguan government’s authoritarian crackdown in the wake of popular protests in April 2018, although former gang members from different generations are now individually co-opted by the authorities as paramilitary auxiliaries to help repress political dissent, as will be discussed in further detail below.

I summarise this particular evolution in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang dynamics in Table 1, dividing it into seven distinct phases, respectively an ‘emergent’ phase (1989–92), a ‘golden era’ phase (1993–8), a ‘drug-dealing’ phase (1999–2005), a ‘*cartelito*’ phase (2006–11), a ‘revival’ phase (2012–15), a ‘*combo*’ phase (2016–18) and, finally, a ‘post-April 2018’ phase. The nature and size of different gang iterations has fluctuated across phases, as has the spread and median age of members, with the former ranging from seven to 26 years of age overall, while the latter has varied between 15 and 24 years of age. Different gang iterations can also be associated with distinct logics, types of violence and weaponry.²⁹ On the other hand, the socio-economic background of gang members has not changed significantly across these different phases, and nor has their gender, as, except for the *combo* phase, barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang iterations have only involved young men.

My knowledge about these gang dynamics derives from a mixture of participant observation, informal conversations and formal interviews with both gang members and non-gang members in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández over the course of the past two and a half decades. Overall, I have had some form of direct interaction with almost every single individual who has been a local gang member since 1996, and I have carried out formal interviews with about half of the total number. From my second visit to Nicaragua in 2002 onwards, I also began ‘repeat interviewing’ a smaller subset of gang members, collecting their life histories in what might be termed ‘longitudinal real-time’ (see Table 2).

This subset of 20 individuals from different barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang iterations has been constituted through a combination of serendipity, convenience and purposeful sampling. The 20 life histories do not constitute a representative sample as such, but rather, based on my broader knowledge about barrio Luis

²⁷For details about my methodological approach including ethical considerations, see Dennis Rodgers, ‘Joining the Gang and Becoming a *Bróder*: The Violence of Ethnography in Contemporary Nicaragua’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 26: 4 (2007), pp. 444–61; ‘From “Broder” to “Don”’: Methodological Reflections on Longitudinal Gang Research in Nicaragua’, in Kees Koonings, Dirk Kruijt and Dennis Rodgers (ed.), *Ethnography as Risky Business: Field Research in Violent and Sensitive Contexts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019), pp. 123–37.

²⁸The term seems to have been borrowed from a Colombian telenovela shown on Nicaraguan television at the time.

²⁹For more details about the dynamics of these transformation, see Rodgers, ‘Gang Governance in the Tropics’.

Table 1. The Different Phases of the Gang Dynamics of Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández

Phase	Nature/ Logic	Structure	Age range	Number of members	Forms of violence	Weaponry
Emergent (1989–92)	Vigilante	Single group, constituted on the basis of shared experience of military conscription (plus two younger ‘mascot’-like members).	18–24 (plus two aged 9 and 10)	14	One-on-one fighting; some group brawls	Fist fights and bladed weapons
‘Golden era’ (1993–8)	Vigilante	Three age-differentiated cohorts; three intra-barrio geographical subgroups; some generational turnover.	7–22	c. 100	Ritualised inter-gang warfare; collective delinquency	Mainly bladed weapons, occasional use of firearms
Drug dealing (1999–2005)	Economic	Single group, emerged from a previous gang geographical subgroup, some <i>ad hoc</i> addition of members.	16–25	18–20	Instrumental violence to support local drug economy	Frequent use of both bladed weapons and of firearms
Period of the <i>cartelito</i> (2006–11)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Revival (2012–15)	Social	Multiple peer groups, organically constituted in a sequential manner.	13–17	6–12	Spontaneous inter-gang conflicts	Mainly bladed weapons
<i>Combo</i> phase (2016–18)	Social	Single all-female peer group, constituted through school and Facebook and maintained virtually.	16–23	15	One-on-one fighting (in person and virtually)	Fist fights
Post-April 2018 phase (2018–)	Political	Former gang members recruited individually to act as <i>parapoliciales</i> (paramilitaries) for the authorities.	18–26	Individuals	Random violence to intimidate and repress anti-government protests and dissension	Firearms

Table 2. A Longitudinal Sample of Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández Gang Members

	Name	Gang membership	Interviews									Current contact
			1996–7	2002	2003	2007	2009	2012	2014	2016	2020	
1	Kalia	late 1980s and early 1990s	X						X	X		Contact only when in barrio
2	Bismarck	early and mid-1990s	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	In regular virtual contact
3	Milton	early and mid-1990s	X			X		X		X		In regular virtual contact
4	Julio	mid-1990s	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	In regular virtual contact
5	Marlon	mid-1990s	X				X	X			X	Contact only when in barrio
6	Elvis	mid-1990s	X	X	X		X		X			In regular virtual contact
7	Jhon	mid-1990s and early 2000s	X						X		X	Contact only when in barrio (in prison since 2017)
8	Jader	early 2000s		X		X		X		X	X	In regular virtual contact
9	Mungo	early 2000s			X	X			X		X	Contact only when in barrio (in prison 2011–14)
10	Bayardo	early 2000s		X		X	X					Died in 2012
11	Miguel	early 2000s				X	X	X				Contact only when in barrio

(Continued)

Table 2 (Continued)

	Name	Gang membership	Interviews									Current contact
			1996–7	2002	2003	2007	2009	2012	2014	2016	2020	
12	Kaiton	early 2000s					X	X			X	In regular virtual contact
13	Spencer	early 2000s					X	X			X	In regular virtual contact
14	Mayuyu	early 2000s		X		X		X				Contact only when in barrio (in prison 2002–6 and since 2013)
15	El Gordo	early and mid-2000s		X	X	X		X				Died in 2014
16	Jasmil	early and mid-2000s		X				X		X		Contact only when in barrio
17	Aldo	early 2010s							X	X	X	Contact only when in barrio (in prison since 2020)
18	Gueybo	mid-2010s								X	X	Contact only when in barrio
19	Olga	mid-2010s								X	X	In regular virtual contact
20	Jorge	mid-2010s									X	Contact only when in barrio

Notes: All names are (self-chosen) pseudonyms.

I distinguish 'early' (1990–2/3, 2000–3, 2012–14/15), 'mid' (1993–7/8, 2004–6, 2015–18) and 'late' (1988–9, 1998–9) periods of gang membership.

Fanor Hernández and its local gang dynamics, I believe them to be ‘archetypal’, in the sense developed by Thomas Belmonte in his classic study of Naples during the late 1960s and early 1970s.³⁰ More specifically, Belmonte drew on the Jungian notion of an ‘archetype’ to represent how social life in the Neapolitan underworld involved a limited number of ‘protean’ forms of being – such as the ‘trickster’ or the ‘scapegoat’, for example. His study offers a series of portraits of individuals corresponding to different archetypes, using the twists and turns of their lives to get to grips with the broader relational configuration of the Neapolitan underworld. In other words, Belmonte’s notion of an archetype is a heuristic trope through which to think about contexts where the lives of those who inhabit them tend to conform to a limited number of social roles. This is very much the case with former gang members in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, and the 20 life histories in my subset are illustrative of a number of key life course processes, including in particular the way that the occupational options open to former gang members are finite in scope, and how different options can impact variably on post-desistance trajectories. Before discussing this in detail, however, I consider in the next section the nature of gang desistance in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, and more specifically whether this has an impact on post-desistance trajectories.

Gang Desistance in Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández

There exists a widespread saying among Nicaraguan gang members: ‘*No hay viejos pandilleros*’ (‘There are no old gang members’). Gang membership in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández has indeed been consistently finite over the past two and a half decades, even if the age at which individuals exit from the gang has varied over time. This tended to be around 21 to 22 years of age during the 1990s, around 24 to 25 years of age in the early and mid-2000s, around 17 years of age in the early 2010s, and around 21 to 22 years in the mid- and late 2010s.³¹ At the same time, individuals’ motivations for leaving the gang have always been highly personal, idiosyncratic, and dependent on opportunity. Those reported to me include – in no particular order – having children, marriage, experiencing a violent trauma (e.g. being severely injured), being imprisoned, becoming bored, having a lucky escape, being conscripted into the army, emigrating, a death in their family, moving away from the neighbourhood, having a friend killed in front of them, parental pressure, evangelical religious conversion, being betrayed by other gang members, and finding steady employment.³² Some of these have been more common than others at different points in time as a result of broader contextual circumstances, including the degree of violence associated with different gang iterations in

³⁰Thomas Belmonte, *The Broken Fountain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

³¹The age of desistance does not make much difference in terms of post-gang trajectories, except in the case of youth who desist much earlier, for example in their early teens. These tend to re-focus on their schooling – which most gang members do not take very seriously – although, in terms of outcomes, most end up following similar trajectories to gang members who desist later, except for being less likely to engage in professional crime or political activism, for reasons explained below.

³²Dying could of course also be added to this list, with the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang suffering a variable annual death rate over the past two decades, from 4 per cent per year in the mid-1990s to up to 10 per cent in the early 2000s. Having said this, dying is obviously a means of leaving the gang that is significantly different to the others listed above, particularly with regards to its ramifications for a post-desistance trajectory.

barrio Luis Fanor Hernández – that in the early and mid-2000s was more violent than the one in the mid-1990s, for instance³³ – and the variable risk that gang membership consequently entailed, or the wider state of the Nicaraguan economy and levels of unemployment, for example. Beyond the influence of such very general factors, however, I have not been able to detect any consistent pattern to individuals' motivation for desisting. Moreover, none of these factors or events necessarily lead to desistance, as different individuals can experience them differently; this is particularly true in relation to violent trauma, with some gang members shrugging off events that deeply shocked others. Ultimately, the specific motivation for desistance seems to be something very individual, dependent on a person's particular experiential understanding and interpretation of things.³⁴

Similarly, while some members of the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández leave the gang abruptly, from one day to the next, others do so more gradually, steadily reducing their involvement in gang activities over a variable period time. The way that gang members leave the gang can be partly related to the nature of their motivation for doing so. Evangelical religious conversion almost inevitably leads to an abrupt cutting off of relations with the gang, for example (because the latter became perceived as a source of 'evil'). Those who experience a violent trauma, on the other hand, generally tend to reduce their involvement with the gang in a step-by-step manner, often starting with a reduced participation in violent gang activities, but then slowly disengaging from others – e.g. collective drinking, hanging out on street corners, etc. – one at a time.³⁵ Other motivations for leaving the gang, such as having children, for example, could lead to either an abrupt or a gradual form of desistance, despite the fact that there exists a general attitude among gang members – well summarised by Elvis, a former gang member from the mid-1990s, during the course of an interview in 2002 – that 'When you have children, you have to distance yourself from the whole gang thing, you've got to become respectable, you have to work in order to support your family, you've got to become like everybody else and you can't hang out in the streets any more.'

As is the case with the motivation for desistance, I cannot discern any clear logic as to why an individual chooses one way of leaving the gang over another except that it seems to be a question of opportunity, as well as sometimes personal idiosyncrasy. Moreover, contrary to Pyrooz and Decker's findings in the USA, there is also no clear link between an individual's motivations for desisting and their post-desistance recourse to violence. Take, for example, the contrast between Mungo and Mayuyu's experiences of being imprisoned, which led both of them to leave the gang but with very different consequences. Mungo was sentenced to eight years of prison for drug dealing in 2011, but was released after serving only three. He was obviously very affected by the whole experience, as he told me during an interview in 2014:

³³See Rodgers, 'Living in the Shadow of Death'.

³⁴At the same time, it is important to note that one constant of gang desistance in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández is that it has always been non-hostile (i.e. consensual).

³⁵Evangelical conversion can also similarly sometimes be more of a process than an event, as Miguel's experience highlights well: he converted in 2004, then 'lapsed', before re-affirming his conversion again in 2007, and doing so repeatedly on a cyclical basis over the course of several years. Miguel would however progressively and permanently 'give up' a specific 'evil' after each 'lapse' – e.g. fighting, taking drugs, drinking, etc. – which suggests that conversion can also sometimes be a gradual form of desistance.

It was hard, *maje*, real hard. You can't trust anybody in there, you've always got to look out for your ass, because otherwise they'll fuck you ... The only law in there is the law of the jungle, the only way to survive is by beating the shit out of anybody who wants to fuck with you ... I tell you, I got so tired of that ...

Mungo had previously been an extremely prominent and indeed violent member of the *barrio Luis Fanor Hernández* gang, always the first to become involved in fights, but following his release he adopted a much more docile, passive way of being, which he explained in terms of 'keeping out of trouble' (*no me pongo por ningún alboroto*), 'not looking for anybody' (*no busco a nadie*), and 'staying put' (*me quedo quieto*).

Mayuyu's experience serving a four-year prison sentence for assault between 2002 and 2006 was very different. As Mayuyu explained during an interview in 2012: '*Fue lo máximo, maje* (It was the best, mate), I learnt so much in there ... There's no shitting about in prison, it's kill or be killed ... There's nothing hypocritical (*trucha*), you know? You've just got to impose yourself and be *poderoso* (powerful), and that's it!' When he was released, Mayuyu shunned his former gang member peers and instead joined the newly emergent *cartelito* in *barrio Luis Fanor Hernández*, in fact leading its campaign to eliminate the gang, a process that culminated in a series of violent confrontations between the two groups in mid-2006 that left several gang members critically injured and one dead, coldly executed by Mayuyu in broad daylight 'as a warning to the others', as he put it during an interview in July 2012. Mayuyu was subsequently one of the *cartelito*'s most brutal 'enforcers' until its demise in 2011, after which he became an independent drug dealer until being arrested for assaulting a customer in 2013 and sentenced to nine years in prison, where he currently remains, having had his sentence increased in 2019 after violently assaulting a fellow inmate.

The differences between Mungo and Mayuyu's post-imprisonment patterns of violence are striking, and highlight well how a specific motivation for desisting does not necessarily have to have the same impact on different individuals, and will not automatically lead to similar outcomes, particularly in relation to violence. This is something that can also be observed in relation to most of the other gang desistance motives mentioned above, and related to two broader, contextual factors linked to the evolution of *barrio Luis Fanor Hernández* gang dynamics. On the one hand, the violence skill sets that gang members acquired from being in the gang varied from phase to phase. For example, gang members from the early and mid-1990s and early 2000s were much more adept at firearm-based violence than gang members from the late 1990s and early and mid-2010s, due to the fact that they had been taught how to use guns by individuals who had received formal weapons training in the army,³⁶ while the latter acquired their know-how much more informally. This clearly impacted on individuals' possibilities of resorting to violence after leaving the gang, with fewer former gang members from the latter period engaging in professional criminality, for example.³⁷ On the other hand,

³⁶See Dennis Rodgers, 'Bróderes in Arms: Gangs and the Socialization of Violence in Nicaragua', *Journal of Peace Research*, 54: 5 (2017), pp. 655–7.

³⁷At the same time, this relation was not necessarily consistent as some gang members acquired their knowledge about weapons through sources other than the gang, including for example Gueybo, who was a gang member in the mid-2010s, when gang members mainly used bladed weapons, but who learnt how to use firearms through his policeman uncle.

the variation between the experiences of Mungo and Mayuyu can also be related to a more exogenous temporal factor. Specifically, Mayuyu's post-gang occupation as a *cartelito* enforcer clearly played a major role in determining his patterns of extreme violence after leaving the gang. When Mungo came out of prison in 2014, however, the *cartelito* had disappeared, and the drugs trade was disorganised, meaning that his 'opportunities' for being violent were quite different to Mayuyu's. This temporal element suggests that the consequences of desistance in relation to former gang members' recourse to violence may be determined more by the nature of the post-gang occupations that former gang members engage in than by their motivations for desisting, as the next section explores.

After the Gang

Although there have been some atypical individual exceptions, desisting gang members in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández have generally engaged in a limited number of post-gang occupations over the past two decades and a half. More specifically, the post-gang occupations of the overwhelming majority of individuals can be said to have corresponded to one of the following five options:³⁸ (1) irregular informal activity; (2) regular informal employment; (3) professional criminality; (4) formal employment; and (5) political activism.³⁹ None of these options are mutually exclusive, and individuals have engaged in different ones sequentially at different points in time. Some are clearly also more common than others, in particular informal employment (whether irregular or regular), which is twice as frequent

³⁸In a previous publication comparing gang desistance in Nicaragua and South Africa and its potential lessons for post-conflict processes of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR), I identified eight occupational options (see Dennis Rodgers and Steffen Jensen, 'The Problem with Templates: Learning from Organic Gang-Related Violence Reduction', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 4: 1, 2015, pp. 1–16). I have since decided that three of these eight, namely 'prison', 'joining the army', and 'migration', do not properly constitute occupations *per se*. Being imprisoned is not something that defines people in the same way as an occupation, being seen more as a time-bound event. Joining the army is a relatively rare occurrence that is moreover temporary in nature – the two barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang members who joined the army did so for five-year stints – as are its consequences. Migration is obviously not an occupation *per se*, although it can have an effect on former gang members' post-desistance recourse to violence. Milton, for example, reported having to 'behave himself' when he went to Costa Rica as a labour migrant after leaving the gang in 1997, because 'the police there crack down on Nicaraguans', while Elvis, who emigrated to the USA in 2010, explained how once he had arrived there, he had actively modified both his behaviour and his appearance in order to seem more 'respectable' and 'hard working'. In particular, he changed his gangster-style haircut and began to dress in a way that covered up his tattoos, and he also stopped drinking and taking drugs, both of which he said caused him to become violent.

³⁹It should be specified that these are the options open to male gang members. As mentioned previously, the overwhelming majority of gang members in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández have been male, but there were female gang members during the *combo* phase between 2016 and 2018. Partly due to positionality issues, I have unfortunately not had sustained contact with many former female gang members, and my subset of 20 repeatedly interviewed individuals includes only one, Olga, who became a housewife after leaving the gang. This was however clearly at least partly due to the particular dynamics of the *combo* gang iteration, which revolved principally around female gang members fighting with rivals over young men to take on as domestic partners (Olga left the gang after successfully 'winning' her husband): one of the other two female former gang members I know well has similarly become a housewife, while the other runs a *pulpería* (corner store) from her home (which would count as regular informal employment).

within my sample as professional criminality or formal employment. At the same time, these different occupational options all have a definite but variable influence on a desisting gang member's behaviour, in particular with regard to their recourse to violence, as I will now consider for each in turn.

Irregular Informal Activity

'*Estoy sin pegue*' ('I'm unemployed') is unsurprisingly the condition of many former barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang members, considering that – as with most youth in the neighbourhood – they are unskilled, and that the Nicaraguan labour market generally offers only a limited range of opportunities for such individuals. In many ways, though, this (non-)occupation should more accurately be characterised as 'underemployment'. As Keith Hart famously observed in relation to the urban economy of Ghana, 'few of the "unemployed" are totally without some form of income',⁴⁰ particularly in contexts of extreme impoverishment, since the stark alternative is to go hungry and die. Such income-generation activities tend to be highly contingent, and Hart lists a whole range of examples that he observed in Nima, the Accra slum he studied, including 'street hawkers', 'carriers', 'musicians', 'launderers', 'shoeshiners', 'vehicle repair', 'brokerage', 'ritual services, magic, and medicine' and 'pawnbroking', among others.⁴¹ Although such activities would now be considered part of a separate informal economy, Hart initially simply saw them as epiphenomenal of underemployment, and their key characteristic for him was actually their irregularity rather than their informality.

Indeed, the putatively 'unemployed' in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández are in actual fact involved in a whole range of irregular informal economic activities, very similarly to the situation in the Nima slum described by Hart. These include activities such as scavenging, casual construction work, street hawking, recycling, repairing motorcycles, digging ditches, painting, or washing cars, for example. The two activities most commonly associated with unemployed former gang members are scavenging and casual construction work. For example, Julio, a former gang member from the 1990s, spends significant chunks of his day scouring barrio Luis Fanor Hernández for metallic waste, to collect and sell to local scrap metal merchants. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, he gets up early to look for discarded empty beer and rum bottles, which he then takes to local *pulperías* (corner stores) to claim the deposits on them. For his part, Jasmil, a former gang member from the early and mid-2000s, works casually on construction sites in Managua. Sometimes he is employed only for a few days, other times for whole weeks, but he is never formally contracted, and rather called as and when he is needed by 'a friend of a friend', and always paid daily in cash. Both Julio and Jasmil live very much hand to mouth, and they and their families often go hungry as a result of the irregularity of their economic activity.

Violence is very much a factor in both Julio and Jasmil's activities. For example, Jasmil, in an interview conducted in 2009, explained how he often gets into scrapes on construction sites in order to 'impose myself and not have to do the shit jobs ...

⁴⁰Keith Hart, 'Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11: 1 (1973), p. 81.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 69.

[because] if you end up doing those, you don't always get paid, because you're just one more guy, the last one at the end of the queue', while Julio, in an interview carried out in 2016, said that he regularly resorts to violence 'to defend my scavenging territory against others who try to encroach on it'. The fact that both were previously gang members clearly gives them a comparative advantage in this respect. As Jasmil put it, 'I'm lucky, because of my past, I know how to fight, but there's guys out there who have no idea, and they're the ones who always get stuck doing the worst jobs on the construction sites.' Julio raised the violent benefits of having been a gang member more indirectly, pointing out during an exchange that

I know the neighbourhood inside out because I was a gang member – remember how we'd protect the neighbourhood, patrolling it, and so on? This means that I know how to defend my territory properly, because I know it like I know the palm of my hand – I know where to hide things, where to lay ambushes and take back any metal poached by others, the best escape routes ...

Ultimately, Julio and Jasmil's violence is directly related to the nature of their irregular informal activity, and more broadly to the fact that they are effectively at the bottom of the metaphorical pile, fighting over scraps, so to speak (albeit literally, in the case of Julio). The violence 'expertise' gained from having been gang members is one of their few useful assets in such circumstances and enables them to take maximum advantage of a highly precarious situation, ensuring that they are paid or that they collect enough metal to generate sufficient income to be able to eat.

Regular Informal Employment

When a former gang member in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández enjoys regular employment, this is more often than not informal in nature. Most such occupations involve some kind of local entrepreneurial activity, such as catering or providing transport services. Milton, who was a gang member in the early and mid-1990s, for example, runs a thriving tortilla-making business that he started from scratch in 2012, with a delivery model that he developed himself based on 'just-in-time' distribution techniques honed during a brief stint as a drug dealer in 2010–11,⁴² and which has proven to be uniquely successful. Milton employs five people to make over 3,000 tortillas a day, seven days a week, which he then delivers himself by motorcycle as and when his clients need them. In 2014, this provided him with a weekly profit of almost US\$200, a huge income in the contemporary Nicaraguan context, considering that the median wage in the formal sector was then US\$132 per month.⁴³

Milton is however quite exceptional relative to other former gang members who are in regular informal employment. Somebody like Aldo, a gang member from the

⁴²See Dennis Rodgers, 'Of Drugs, Tortillas, and Real Estate: On the Tangible and Intangible Benefits of Drug Dealing in Nicaragua', in Enrique Desmond Arias and Thomas Grisaffi (eds.), *Cocaine: From Coca Fields to the Streets* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 190–208.

⁴³Danish Trade Union Council for International Development Cooperation, 'Nicaragua: Labour Market Profile 2014', Copenhagen, 2014, p. 9.

early 2010s, is much more typical, pedalling a 'caponera' or cycle-rickshaw from the nearby market. Along with seven other individuals, two of whom are also former gang members from the neighbourhood, he spends about eleven hours – usually from 6:30am to 5:30pm – every day of the week ferrying customers and their shopping from the market cycle-rickshaw stand to surrounding neighbourhoods, generally earning between C\$10 and C\$20 (approximately US\$0.40–0.80 at the time) for each journey. He usually averages ten trips a day, therefore earning about C\$150, or almost US\$6, in total, but he has to pay C\$50 a day to the owner of the cycle-rickshaw, who also runs the cycle-rickshaw stand, and who has to pay market inspectors for a 'permit' in order for them to turn a blind eye to the stand, which is not officially sanctioned. Partly because of the stand's informal status, the owner is notorious for his volatile hiring and firing practices, and Aldo is one of the few cycle rickshaw drivers to have been working at the stand for more than two years. This is largely because the precarious nature of Aldo's employment relation means that he is careful not to do anything that might provoke the ire of his employer. This includes avoiding violence. As he put it during an interview in 2012:

I've got to be careful what I say and what I do ... He especially doesn't like it if we have arguments or fight over customers, because it's bad for business, and also then the inspectors come and threaten to close the stand down ... You remember Jhon, yes? He used to be a cycle-rickshaw driver too, but he'd always be fighting and the owner got tired of it and just fired him from one day to the next.

Aldo is obliged to be less violent because he doesn't work for himself. Milton, for his part, is obviously his own boss, but his tortilla business also inherently promotes a less violent way of being, as he made clear during an interview in 2012, when he explained how he'd sold his last handgun in 2006 because 'I haven't needed a gun since starting my business ... who's going to steal tortillas?' To this extent, both Aldo and Milton highlight how regular informal employment can reduce violent behaviour. In Aldo's case, he is compelled to be less violent by the precarious nature of his employment relation with the cycle-rickshaw stand owner, while in Milton's case the nature of his business means that there is little scope to be violent.

Professional Criminality

During the 1990s, around 10–15 per cent of gang members became professional criminals, or '*tamales*', after leaving the gang. Their activity mainly involved engaging regularly in robbery and mugging, although a couple of individuals, including for example Kalia, who was a gang member in the late 1980s and early 1990s, also went on to participate in more serious banditry, for example holding up delivery vans or carrying out armed attacks on retail stores. This particular pattern of behaviour changed significantly with the turn of the century and the rise of drug dealing in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, which most gang members in the early 2000s became involved in. The neighbourhood drug economy initially involved a single individual, a former gang member from the late 1980s and

early 1990s known as ‘El Indio Viejo’ (‘The Old Indian’),⁴⁴ who throughout the 1990s was the neighbourhood’s principal drug dealer, albeit selling only marijuana (most of which he grew himself). In late 1999, he began to source and sell cocaine, mainly in the form of crack. Because this is quite labour intensive to ‘cook’, El Indio Viejo began to recruit others to help him from early 2000, mainly from the local pool of former and current gang members, and this transformed barrio Luis Fanor Hernández drug dealing into a three-tiered pyramidal economy. El Indio Viejo was at the top of the pyramid, and brought the cocaine into barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, which he then wholesaled ‘by the kilo’ to ‘*púsheres*’, who were all former gang members. *Púsheres* resold this cocaine in smaller quantities – ‘by the ounce’ – or, more commonly, converted it into crack which they sold from their homes principally in the form of ‘*tucos*’, lumps about the size of the first phalanx of a thumb, mainly to a regular clientele that included ‘*muleros*’, who were all current gang members, and were the bottom rung of the drug-dealing pyramid. These would cut the *tucos* up into ‘*tuquitos*’ which they then sold in ‘*paquetes*’ of two hits to all comers on the neighbourhood’s street corners. At its greatest extent, the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández drug economy directly involved 29 individuals – El Indio Viejo, nine *púsheres* and 19 *muleros* – all of whom were either former or current local gang members.⁴⁵

These included Bismarck, a former gang member from the early and mid-1990s, who was a *púsher* between 2000 and 2006. In 2001, he made a profit of a little over US\$1,100 from dealing a kilo of cocaine every month,⁴⁶ which represented an extremely sizeable income at the time. But even at the lowest level of drug dealing, the street-selling *muleros* earned substantial revenues, averaging around US\$450 per month in 2002, for example. Not surprisingly, perhaps, drug dealing was therefore an extremely attractive occupational proposition,⁴⁷ but at the same time there were also specific requirements for entry into the occupation. In particular, the fact that all those directly involved in drug dealing in the early 2000s were either former or current gang members was significant and indeed, logical, insofar as the illicit

⁴⁴‘*Indio viejo*’ is also the name of a typical Nicaraguan culinary dish, a stew made with maize and shredded beef. I have purposefully chosen this pseudonym because its double meaning mirrors the multiple associations of this individual’s real sobriquet, while simultaneously being a bit confusing in order to better protect the person’s identity.

⁴⁵For more details, see Dennis Rodgers, ‘Drug Booms and Busts: Poverty and Prosperity in a Nicaraguan Narco-Barrio’, *Third World Quarterly*, 39: 2 (2018), pp. 261–76.

⁴⁶For more details, including in relation to the sources of my information, see Dennis Rodgers, ‘Critique of Urban Violence: Bismarckian Transformations in Contemporary Nicaragua’, *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 33: 7–8 (2016), pp. 85–109, and ‘Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with their Moms? Contrasting Views from Chicago and Managua’, *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 78 (2017), pp. 102–14.

⁴⁷This of course contrasts strongly with Steven Levitt and Sudhir Venkatesh’s famous analysis of the finances of a drug-dealing gang in Chicago, which found that most of those involved earned little more than ‘roughly the minimum wage’, with only a few privileged individuals at the top of the gang pyramid receiving anything in the way of substantial returns, as a result of which ‘gang members below the level of gang leaders live with family because they cannot afford to maintain a separate residence’ (‘An Economic Analysis of a Drug-Selling Gang’s Finances’, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 115: 3 (2000), pp. 757 and 771). This however applies to contexts where drug selling occurs in an open and competitive labour market, which was not the case in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, where the labour market was highly segmented: see Rodgers, ‘Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with their Moms?’

nature of the drug trade means that drug dealers do not have access to legally enforceable contracts or property rights, and violence rapidly emerges as a primary tool with which disputes are resolved and uncertainty minimised. Gang members represented local instances of a special category of individuals that Charles Tilly famously labelled ‘violence specialists’,⁴⁸ and were therefore positioned in a privileged manner to engage in drug dealing.

This changed over time, however. From the rather *ad hoc* origins detailed above, El Indio Viejo professionalised his organisation, becoming gradually more selective in picking his business partners (all the more so as gang members became addicted to crack, and increasingly untrustworthy). By 2005, he was leading a shadowy group that was referred to locally as the *cartelito*, or ‘little cartel’. This included some of the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández *púsheres*, and only a couple of the *muleros*, as well as outsiders. Following a spectacular clash in 2006 motivated by the gang’s disreputability as being increasingly side-lined, the *cartelito* forcibly disbanded it, and took over exclusive control of dealing in the neighbourhood.⁴⁹ Around 2009, the *cartelito* re-focused its activities around drug trafficking rather than dealing, and then subsequently fell apart in 2011 following El Indio Viejo’s arrest. This allowed for the rise of a small number of independent street-level dealers in the neighbourhood. Almost all of these were former gang members, including for example El Gordo (‘The Fat One’), who had been in the gang in the early 2000s, working as a *mulero* for El Indio Viejo. He sold both crack and marijuana, but a major difference from the past was that he sourced his wares outside the neighbourhood. He moreover also constantly complained during an interview in 2012 that ‘It’s not like it used to be, you just can’t make good money with drugs any more’, and was clearly not as well off as previously.

What did not change was that El Gordo continued to resort to violence to manage his drug dealing. This was however of a different nature from his time as a *mulero* in the early 2000s, when he, along with other *muleros*, had collectively resorted to violence principally to enforce contracts and provide security to El Indio Viejo. Now he deployed brutality on his own account mainly to defend his sales territory from other independent street dealers. This contrasted strongly with Jader, who was also a gang member and *mulero* in the early 2000s. Contrary to how most other *muleros* from this period were treated, El Indio Viejo allowed him to continue as a street dealer after the disbanding of the gang in 2006 because they were related. Partly because of this, Jader learnt to manage his drug dealing in non-violent ways, as he developed his individual dealing activity at a time when the *cartelito* was cracking down on any behaviour patterns that might draw attention to the neighbourhood and lead to potential disruption of their trafficking. Jader has continued to deploy his more ‘subtle’ means of managing his drug dealing since the fall of the *cartelito* in 2011, although the unregulated nature of drug dealing means that the risk of violence breaking out is always present, and Jader is by no means inept at being brutal. Indeed, he was involved in a shoot-out in January 2023 as a result of a dispute

⁴⁸Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁹See Dennis Rodgers, ‘The Moral Economy of Murder: Violence, Death, and Social Order in Nicaragua’, in Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (eds.), *Violence at the Urban Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 21–40.

with three former prison cell mates who had asked him to sell them drugs at a discounted price. When Jader refused, one of them shot him through the jaw, but he nevertheless managed to disarm his assailant, shoot him and then chase off the other two, before getting himself to hospital to undergo reconstructive surgery on his jaw.

Formal Employment

Only a small number of former gang members are formally employed. This has less to do with issues of gang member stigmatisation – the number of formally employed former gang members has generally seemed to me to be roughly proportional to that of the wider economically active population in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández – and more to do with the fact that the Nicaraguan economy offers few formal employment opportunities. According to official government figures, only 36 per cent of the country's economically active population is employed in the formal sector.⁵⁰ To a large extent, obtaining formal employment is a question of chance and connections. Spencer, for example, worked in a seat belt-manufacturing factory in one of Managua's Free Trade Zones. He obtained his position in 2012 on the recommendation of his brother, who was already working there. Another former gang member, Kaiton, works as a stacker in a warehouse for a local paint company. Rather unusually, he was hired on the spur of the moment after defending one of the paint company's trucks from looters when it broke down on a thoroughfare near the neighbourhood.

Marlon is probably the most successful formally employed former gang member in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. He joined a taxi cooperative in 2002, after working for several years as a driver for the Pepsi-Cola company, delivering soft drinks to stores throughout Managua. It was a job that he inherited from his father, but which he then passed on to his younger brother when his uncle, who was a taxi driver, retired, and Marlon had the chance to take over his taxi cooperative membership. Marlon had no car – his uncle decided to keep his for his own private use on retirement – so he initially worked as a *'cadete'*, renting a car from another cooperative member for C\$200 (approximately US\$15 at the time) per *'turno'*, or shift. Over the course of the next couple of years, Marlon saved up enough to put down a deposit and obtain a (second-hand) car on credit, which he drove as his own taxi, allowing him to pay his debt off within a few years. Since then, he has been making around US\$10 a day driving his taxi for one of two day shifts plus the night shift, five to six days a week.

Formal employment is an occupation that clearly leads former gang members to having less recourse to violence. In Spencer and Kaiton's cases, this is primarily due to their fear of being fired, but they have also clearly internalised a particular way of being. Although neither of them is very enthusiastic about their jobs, and both complain about the fact that despite their salaries not being very high – Spencer earns about US\$150 a month, and Kaiton around US\$130 – they have to pay health insurance and pension contributions, which they see as 'unfair' deductions from their take-home pay, and they are at the bottom of the hierarchy in their respective workplaces, this does not provoke the – often violent – response that it usually

⁵⁰See Global Fairness Initiative, 'Roadmap to Economic Formalization: Promoting Informal Labor Rights (PILAR) in Guatemala and Nicaragua', Washington, DC, 2009, p. 4.

would among gang members, who have a particular sense of justice, monetary ethics, and hierarchy.⁵¹ Both Spencer and Kaiton accept the deductions and their subordinate position, recognising that they are lucky to have secured regular employment. Similarly, Marlon is very conscious that if he draws negative attention to himself while driving his taxi he is likely to be expelled from the cooperative, and since being a taxi cooperative member is the only way to drive a taxi legally in Nicaragua, he is always extremely careful not to engage in any form of violence, whether on the road or otherwise, while working.

Political Activism⁵²

There exists a long tradition of youth political activism in Nicaragua, particularly associated with the Juventud Sandinista, or Sandinista youth organisation, known popularly as the 'JS-19' (the '19' refers to the date of the Sandinista victory in July 1979). Individuals who were JS-19 activists during the revolutionary period (1979–90) talked about having been caught up in the programmatic idealism of the Sandinista revolution, explaining how by participating and contributing to the 'collective good' they felt that they had been helping to build 'a better world', including setting an example to others in order to bring about a 'new Nicaraguan man'. Although by the mid-1990s this idealism and social effervescence had dissipated, a striking feature of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang dynamics was the way that members at the time actively claimed to be 'the last inheritors of Sandinismo', and how they justified their vigilante violence aimed at protecting the neighbourhood in terms of a quasi-Guevaran 'love' for the local community.⁵³ The gang's transition from patterns of vigilante violence to more predatory forms of brutality focused on protecting the emergent drugs trade in the early 2000s clearly undermines the notion that gang violence was imbued with any revolutionary impulse, but the late 2000s saw a renewed connection between gangs and politics, albeit a very instrumental one.⁵⁴

The return to power of the Sandinista party in 2006 has by no means constituted a revolutionary renewal but, rather, has seen the consolidation of a plutocratic regime whereby the electoral primacy of the Sandinista party – which is now more of an economic conglomerate than a revolutionary party – is ensured through a combination of shutting out the opposition, electoral fraud, media domination and the implementation of a plethora of highly targeted, small-scale social programmes that effectively constitute a form of institutionalised clientelism.⁵⁵ This

⁵¹See Dennis Rodgers, '(Il)legal Aspirations: Of Legitimate Crime and Illegitimate Entrepreneurship in Nicaragua', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 64: 4 (2022), pp. 48–69.

⁵²This section draws partly on Dennis Rodgers and Stephen Young, 'From a Politics of Conviction to a Politics of Interest? The Changing Ontologies of Youth Politics in India and Nicaragua', *Antipode*, 49: 1 (2017), pp. 197–9.

⁵³See Rodgers, 'The Moral Economy of Murder', p. 29.

⁵⁴It is important to stress that I am in no way implying that there is an inherent connection between violence and political activism, whether generally or specifically in Nicaragua.

⁵⁵See Maya Collombon and Dennis Rodgers, 'Sandinismo 2.0: Reconfigurations autoritaires du politique, nouvel ordre économique et conflit social', *Cahiers des Amériques Latines*, 87: 1 (2018), pp. 13–36 and José Luis Rocha, Dennis Rodgers and Julienne Weegels, 'Debunking the Myth of Nicaraguan Exceptionalism: Crime, Drugs and the Political Economy of Violence in a "Narco-state"', *Journal of Latin American Studies* (2023), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X23000676>.

became particularly obvious in late 2008, following the Sandinista party's unexpectedly comprehensive victory in the November municipal elections. Most international observers, the opposition and the media denounced these results as fraudulent; they gave rise to an unprecedented series of demonstrations against the Sandinista government orchestrated by the – mainly middle class – opposition. Daily protests were organised in the country's major urban centres to vocally contest the results. These rallies were initially peaceful, but within a couple of weeks they began to be systematically and violently disrupted by armed youth.

Most of these were former gang members recruited by the Sandinista party, including in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. Here Simón, the local representative of the JS-19, hired half a dozen former gang members to paint pro-Sandinista graffiti on the route of the demonstrations, providing them with paint and paintbrushes, and paying them C\$100 each (approximately US\$5 at the time). After a week of painting graffiti, Simón asked the former gang members whether they would be willing to violently disrupt the regular opposition demonstrations instead, telling them that he would supply them with mortars, guns and machetes, as well as ammunition, and that they would be paid C\$200 each, and be taken to the demonstrations by bus. Weapons were to be returned within 24 hours of having been distributed, which made this an extremely attractive deal, as Bayardo explained during an interview in 2009:

I couldn't fucking believe it, man. The bus would come and pick us up in the morning, they'd give us the weapons, ammunition, and half our money, and then we'd fight, and after that go home, and still have the guns and shit for the rest of the day and the night, which meant that we could use them for whatever we wanted, like assaulting or robbing people, which was just perfect because ... well, it's become difficult to get your hands on good guns these days ... Then the bus would come the following morning and we'd have to give them the weapons and we got the other half of our money. It was all such fucking easy money, *maje*, can you believe it?

Bayardo's comments clearly highlight the way his 'political activism' was in many ways just as instrumental as the Sandinista party's hiring of former gang members. They also point to the fact that this particular form of political activism led to violence not only in the context of the former gang members' 'politicking', but also much more broadly, and to this extent it is an occupation that can be said to have overlapped significantly with certain forms of professional criminality.

This form of instrumentalised political activism persisted throughout the 2010s. It however expanded and institutionalised much more following the mass popular uprising against the current Sandinista government that took place in Nicaragua in April 2018.⁵⁶ Caught unprepared, the government repressed the protests violently, breaking up demonstrations, taking down barricades, and instituting a reign of fear

⁵⁶See *ibid.*; Manuel Ortega Hegg *et al.*, *La insurrección cívica de abril: Nicaragua 2018* (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2020); José Luis Rocha, *Autoconvocados y conectados: Los universitarios en la revuelta de abril en Nicaragua* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2019) and *Tras el telón rojinegro: Represión y resistencia* (Guatemala City: Editorial Cara Parens de la Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2021).

and terror through arbitrary acts of violence and the imposing of curfews in poor neighbourhoods. Over 600 people have been killed, hundreds more 'disappeared' or exiled, thousands arrested, while tens of thousands have fled the country. This 'pacification' process has involved the police as well as armed groups of paramilitaries deputised by the police. The total number recruited is estimated to be between 8,000 and 10,000, and many of them are former gang members, along with military veterans, former policemen and Sandinista party activists. This included Jorge, a gang member in the mid-2010s, whom I interviewed in 2020. He was recruited by the local JS-19 coordinator in late 2018, and had been provided with a firearm and paid C\$300 (approximately US\$10 at the time) a day to enter other neighbourhoods at night and shoot at random in order to intimidate people. Similarly, Jader, who was a gang member in the early 2000s before becoming a drug dealer in the early 2010s, but was caught and sentenced to six years in prison in 2016, told me in 2020 how he had been released from prison early in December 2018 in exchange for agreeing to become part of a 'reserve army' of extra paramilitaries that could be mobilised around the November 2021 elections, if needed.

Conclusion

Although gangs are undoubtedly significant institutional mediums for socialisation into patterns of violent behaviour, whether in Central America or elsewhere, there also exists a quasi-universal natural desistance process from gangs, whereby individuals inevitably leave and are generally assumed to become less violent as a result. The mechanisms through which this happens are not well understood, however, partly because desistance is something that has tended to be explored as an event rather than a process. Drawing on my longitudinal research on gang dynamics in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, I have sought to show how the motivations for disengagement from a gang can be highly individual and idiosyncratic, and their impact on violence similarly variable. At the same time, I have also shown how, while the consequences of desistance can be similarly variable, particularly in relation to the continued recourse to violence by former gang members, outcomes can be related more consistently to the nature of individuals' post-gang occupations.

The five occupation options that constitute the usual scope of possibilities for most Nicaraguan gang members after they leave the gang – (1) irregular informal activity; (2) regular informal employment; (3) professional criminality; (4) formal employment; and (5) political activism – have varying impacts on individuals' post-gang patterns of violence, with some – irregular economic activity, professional criminality and political activism – often leading to an institutionalisation of the recourse to violence, while others – regular informal employment and formal employment – lead to the general adoption of less violent behaviours. At the same time, these trends can be linked to a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsically, violence very obviously constitutes a comparative advantage for irregular economic activity, professional criminality and political activism. These can therefore be said to inherently promote violence (although in the latter two cases, it could be argued that there is something of an endogeneity effect insofar as recruitment is clearly partly dependent on former gang members' previous status as 'violence specialists'). On the other hand, regular informal employment and formal employment inherently promote

non-violence either due to the nature of the activity, as in the case of Milton's tortilla business (even if its – non-violent – 'just-in-time' model was inspired by his previous drug dealing), or because they actively promote more peaceful patterns of behaviour in the case of formal employment due to the fear of losing one's job.

Extrinsically, however, both individual factors and the particular temporality of the evolution of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang dynamics over the past two decades and a half are important for explaining how and why specific individuals end up engaging in a particular occupation. At a more micro-level, individual personality traits clearly play a role in how different former gang members engage with particular occupations. Take the contrast between Aldo and Jhon, for example, with the latter incapable of holding on to his cycle-rickshaw job. While it might be speculated that that has to do with the fact that the two were gang members during different phases of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang dynamics, with Jhon a gang member in the early 2000s, when the gang was more violent, and Aldo during the early 2010s, the fact that Aldo has subsequently been imprisoned for violent assault suggests that this might not be the determining factors. Perhaps more important, however, is the moment at which an individual leaves the gang, as this has an impact on their particular know-how and opportunities. Gang members from the mid-1990s who left the gang right at the end of the 1990s had the opportunity to become *púsheres*, while gang members from the early 2000s became integrated as *muleros* in the newly emergent drugs trade. This is something that was not the case before or subsequently, although the generation of gang members in the early 2000s, whose drug dealing careers were interrupted by the rise of the *cartelito*, were able to become independent drug dealers in the early and mid-2010s, once the *cartelito* had collapsed. Certainly, it is striking that few of the generation of gang members who emerged in the early and mid-2010s – who had no drug dealing know-how – have become independent drug dealers. To this extent, there was arguably something of a 'contingent compatibility' between drug dealing and having been a gang member at a particular moment. A similar analysis also applies more broadly to political activism, insofar as this was dependent on general political developments in Nicaragua.

When seen in this way, the elements drawn from the 20 life histories that constitute the empirical base of this article arguably offer us not just a window on individual life experiences, but also on the dynamics and influence of the social setting within which these lives are lived. The interaction between micro and macro factors is obviously not surprising, as ultimately human lives are always constituted through the interaction of structure and agency. But it is particularly interesting in relation to the question of whether leaving the gang leads to a reduction in an individual's violent patterns of behaviour or not, insofar as the occupation that a former gang member ends up engaging in seems to impact in a relatively consistent manner on whether or not they continue to engage in violence. This clearly has important ramifications for the coherent formulation of violence reduction policies. In particular, it suggests two things. Firstly, that programmes that simply seek to persuade individuals to give up the gang life – which effectively constitutes the aim of the majority of non-repressive anti-gang programmes around the world⁵⁷ – can only ever be part of the

⁵⁷See, for example, Alistair Fraser, *Gangs and Crime: Critical Alternatives* (London: Sage, 2017), pp. 195–216.

answer, and sustainable violence reduction requires establishing measures that will encourage former gang members not only to leave the gang but also facilitate certain post-gang trajectories (occupational or otherwise).

Secondly, however, the underlying reasons why certain post-gang trajectories are associated with individuals engaging in increased or sustained forms of violence clearly has to do principally with broader structural issues linked to the lack of economic opportunities, deficient rule of law and conflictual politics. These constitute exogenously constraining factors, especially when compared to the post-gang occupations of regular informal employment and formal employment, where individuals' potential recourse to violence is reduced by the existence of particular hegemonic norms and processes that are endogenous to these occupations. The fact that these are rarer than irregular informal activity, professional criminality and political activism – all of which promote, in different ways, different forms of violence – suggests that, in the final analysis, the real issue in Central America is less the fact that individuals have been socialised into practices of violence by being in a gang, but rather that certain wider social, economic and political factors articulate together and create conditions that promote an enduring recourse to violence. Until these basic structural issues are tackled coherently, it is unlikely that violence in the region will decline any time soon.

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Después de la pandilla: Desistimiento, violencia y opciones ocupacionales en Nicaragua

Las pandillas son ampliamente consideradas como grandes contribuyentes a los altos índices de violencia afectando a Latinoamérica, particularmente a Centroamérica. Al mismo tiempo, sin embargo, la vasta mayoría de los individuos que se integran a la pandilla terminan dejándola y, se asume, se vuelven menos violentos. Sin embargo, no han sido entendidos del todo ni los mecanismos detrás de este proceso de 'desistimiento', ni las determinantes que influyen en las trayectorias individuales posteriores a la pandilla, en parte porque el desistimiento pandillero tiende a ser visto como un evento en vez de un proceso. Basado en investigación de campo de largo plazo llevada a cabo en el barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, una colonia pobre en la capital nicaragüense de Managua, y más específicamente en historias de vida 'arquetípicas' de pandilleros que ilustran las opciones ocupacionales abiertas a antiguos pandilleros, este artículo ofrece una perspectiva longitudinal del desistimiento y sus consecuencias, con referencia específica a los determinantes alrededor del continuo involucramiento con la violencia (o no).

Palabras clave: pandillas; desistimiento; violencia; Nicaragua; ocupación; trayectorias de vida

Depois da gangue: Desistência, violência e opções ocupacionais na Nicarágua

As gangues são amplamente consideradas as principais contribuintes para os elevados níveis de violência que afligem a América Latina, particularmente a América Central. Ao mesmo tempo, porém, a grande maioria dos indivíduos que se juntam a uma gangue também a deixará em algum momento, tornando-se menos violento. Contudo, os mecanismos subjacentes a este processo de ‘desistência’ não são bem compreendidos, nem os determinantes das trajetórias pós-gangues dos indivíduos, em parte porque a desistência tende a ser vista como um evento e não como um processo. Baseando-se em pesquisas etnográficas de longo prazo realizadas no bairro Luis Fanor Hernández, um bairro pobre na capital nicaraguense de Manágua, e mais especificamente em um conjunto de histórias de vida ‘arquetípicas’ de membros de gangues que ilustram as opções ocupacionais abertas a ex-membros, este artigo oferece uma perspectiva longitudinal sobre a desistência e suas consequências, com referência específica aos determinantes do envolvimento continuado (ou não) dos indivíduos com a violência.

Palavras-chave: gangues; desistência; violência; Nicarágua; ocupação; trajetórias de vida