Understanding Gang Recruitment in Medellin, Colombia

Slums and poor neighborhoods around the world are occupied by powerful criminal organizations that increasingly recruit young people. What factors lead people to join these groups, and how can governments prevent recruitment? In Medellin, Colombia, a city characterized by a high presence of gangs, researchers are conducting a study to understand the process of recruitment, identify youth at risk of recruitment, and test different interventions to prevent youth from joining gangs.

Policy Issue

From Brazil to El Salvador and South Africa, slums and poor neighborhoods are occupied by powerful criminal organizations that increasingly recruit young people. Joining a gang poses a risk of physical violence and death. Data on this issue is very limited, but a study in Brazil by Carvalho and Soares (2016) shows a mortality rate of 20% in a two year period for a group of gang members aged 11 to 24 years old in Rio de Janeiro. Despite the risks involved, the number of young people joining criminal organizations continues to grow. What factors lead people to join these groups, and how can governments prevent recruitment? To shed light on these issues and contribute to the very limited body of evidence available, researchers in Colombia are conducting a study to understand the recruitment process and develop and test new programs aimed at preventing recruitment of youth at risk.

Evaluation Context

In Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city, gangs pose a growing threat to peace and development. These groups generate high levels of violence, operate illegal economies, and corrupt various levels of politics and public administration. Medellín's gangs mainly recruit young boys in large numbers, usually around the age of 12-16 who live in the same neighborhood the gang controls. Preliminary estimates point to 8,000 to 12,000 children and youth being part of one of Medellín's 350 combos. In order to prevent young people from joining criminal groups, it is fundamental to have rigorous data that can help policy makers understand the motivation and circumstances of young people and then develop effective policies.

Details of the Intervention

In partnership with Medellín Mayor's Office, researchers are conducting a study to understand the process of recruitment from the youths perspective and to ultimately develop and evaluate policy interventions. The research will be divided into three stages.
**Stage one:** The research team will implement a study in Medellín including questions and games that simulate real-life situations to inquire about income and other associated benefits of joining gangs, career paths that exist for children and adolescents, their perceptions of their abilities and future prospects as well as the systemic obstacles that they are facing in developing their future. This descriptive study will help shed light on a phenomenon we know very little of and give voice to the protagonists of this story, the youth.

**Stage two:** With the help of partners' expertise, and using administrative data from government agencies and NGOs, as well as IPA data from a previous study and field expertise, the research team will identify young people with the highest risk of joining gangs. The results could potentially help to target future policies that can help prevent young people from joining gangs. Moreover, in view of limited data on gang recruitment, insights from this phase have the potential to help understand these phenomena.

**Stage three:** The research team will develop and pilot various policy interventions to prevent children and adolescents from joining gangs. The interventions tested will be designed using the findings from previous stages and in close collaboration with government partners.

**Results and Policy Lessons**
Project ongoing. Results forthcoming.

**Sources**
Blattman et al., 2021, “Gobierno criminal en Medellín: panorama general del fenómeno.”