



## **“Everyday Life is Fear” Violence Against Children and Youth in Honduras**

**Background:** In August 2019, Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) traveled to the Honduran cities of El Progreso, San Pedro Sula, and Tegucigalpa to learn more about the violence affecting children and youth.<sup>1</sup> KIND met with over 80 individuals including youth, families, teachers and representatives of non-governmental organizations living and working in areas affected by violence to hear about their first hand experiences and perspectives on the forms of violence affecting children and youth. This report outlines our principal findings and recommendations for the U.S. and Honduran governments.

We would like to thank Casa Alianza Honduras, ERIC/Radio Progreso, Comisión de Acción Social Menonita (CASM), and Association for a More Just Society Honduras for their assistance in coordinating this fact-finding trip and the incredible work they do every day to support and protect children and youth in Honduras, and defend their rights.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

#### **1. Violence by gangs and other organized criminal groups has reached epidemic levels in Honduras, and the primary victims of this violence are children and youth**

“It’s sad because the young people are disappearing because they are being killed.” Student in Honduras

Marginalized neighborhoods of Honduran cities, and increasingly smaller towns and rural areas of the country are dominated by gangs, including the maras MS 13 and Barrio 18, as well as a plethora of smaller local gangs. These gangs sell and traffic drugs and arms and engage in human trafficking. They use violence, including widespread sexual violence, to control the residents in the neighborhoods where they operate. They forcibly recruit children and youth to join the gang or to perform menial labor for the gang, threatening to kill them and their families if they refuse. They also extort families and threaten them with violence or death if they are not able to pay.

The presence of gangs in neighborhoods impacts young residents in many ways, but perhaps one of the most meaningful is the loss of safe places for them to play and socialize. In one neighborhood we learned about, children cannot play soccer because the field has been taken over by gangs and is being used for the distribution of drugs. In another neighborhood KIND visited, gang members control the local youth soccer team and use it as a vehicle to recruit children into the gang as they get older. Girls and boys, parents, grandparents, and teachers emphasized that children outdoors are at risk and they must remain at home during their free time for their own safety. One young person explained: “The gangs have killed the joy of youth in this country. They can’t go out, they can’t play, the soccer fields are empty.”

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<sup>1</sup> KIND visited Honduras August 5th through 10th, 2019.



## 2. Gangs target girls and young women for sexual violence

Girls and young women are extremely vulnerable to multiple forms of violence in their homes and communities. According to one adolescent girl we spoke with, “Women are more exposed because society sees them as weak. They are abused.”

KIND learned from multiple people that gangs and other organized criminal groups target girls and young women for sexual violence, including girls as young as 12 or 13. In some cases girls are forced to become the “girlfriend” of a gang member and in others they are kidnapped and raped. One girl explained the situation that adolescent girls face in her neighborhood: “They [the gang members] use them to make money, they prostitute them, they do whatever they want with them.” We spoke with a family whose daughter was kidnapped, beat up, and raped by multiple gang members, and then dropped off at their house the next day. She fled to Mexico where she is seeking asylum.

According to a public school teacher who lives and works in a gang-dominated neighborhood, “Girls are most affected [by gang violence]. If a gang member likes a girl, he approaches her. It doesn’t matter how young she is. If she isn’t interested she’ll go and tell her family and they’ll send her to another area of the city to live with other family members [to hide from the gang.] If they don’t have this option she has to become the “woman” of the gang member, and she could be killed.”

## 3. Gangs and other organized criminal groups make it unsafe for children to go to school

“We are educating in a context of violence.” School director in El Progreso

Schools are one of the primary sites of gang control and violence in Honduras, preventing many children and youth from safely going to school. In some cases, schools in marginalized neighborhoods are controlled by gangs that use schools as a site to forcibly recruit children and youth, sell drugs, and extort students and teachers.

Gangs also enter schools freely to recruit, intimidate, and in some cases kidnap or kill students. Teachers feel powerless and afraid to intervene. We spoke to a teacher who saw gang members enter his school and kidnap children, but he was powerless to stop them. The children were later found dead. The same teacher had a colleague at another school who was shot and killed by a gang member in a school building for refusing to give the gang access to the school. Violence is a major cause of students dropping out of school in Honduras. One teacher in Tegucigalpa explained that after the first time the gang killed a student in his school, 500 students dropped out within the following week.

Children frequently face danger on their way to and from school, where they are approached by gang members and forcibly recruited or subjected to sexual harassment, violence, extortion, or threats simply for crossing the territory of a gang. A school director in El Progreso explained that his school is located between territory controlled by two rival gangs, MS 13 and Barrio 18. A 12-year-old student was warned by gang members not to cross between gang territories and when he did he was killed, his body was dismembered and found in a bag.



#### **4. Children and youth face violence and repression by police and military police**

Police have responded to gang presence with a *mano dura* (iron fist) approach to law enforcement, targeting youth in marginalized neighborhoods and subjecting them to discrimination, brutality, and often false accusations of gang involvement. Police regularly profile and harass youth based on the neighborhood they live in or how they dress, accusing youth of being gang members and in some cases demanding bribes in exchange for not arresting them. Youth counselors in gang-dominated communities told KIND about police officers who delivered individuals wanted by a particular gang to that gang for money. They also described how the police would accuse a young person of being a gang member and as “punishment” would forcibly bring them to the territory of the rival gang to risk being found and killed.

Police and military forces commit violence against youth with impunity. KIND spoke with a girl who was particularly vulnerable because of her special needs who was kidnapped and sexually abused by a group of military police. While her family initially reported the violence, they eventually decided to abandon the case because of the high levels of stress the girl was experiencing and the family’s fear of reprisal.

Police have used extreme violence and repression against youth involved in social movements and protests. Over the past few months thousands of Hondurans have taken to the street to protest the privatization of health and education and call for the resignation of President Juan Orlando Hernandez.<sup>2</sup> The protesters, many of them youth, have been met with tear gas, and military police have shot into crowds of students. KIND spoke with a group of adolescents who were arrested following a recent protest and held in police custody for several hours without being informed of the allegations against them. KIND also met with a young man who was a student leader in his secondary school who was shot at by people in a police vehicle on his way to a protest. The young man told KIND that the majority of the members of the student leaders group he participated in have been killed by police or other security forces, or have fled the country.

#### **5. Lack of access to education and economic opportunity make children and youth even more vulnerable to violence**

Young people face a severe lack of access to education and employment in Honduras. Over 800,000 youth in Honduras are not working or studying; these youth are more likely to be targeted by gangs in their neighborhoods. Youth and families who suffer gang violence or threats often lack the resources to move to a safe neighborhood. They can either stay in their neighborhood and risk ongoing violence or move to an equally unsafe neighborhood where they will likely continue to be targeted by gangs.

Children and youth from communities in Honduras that are known to be low-income and gang-controlled suffer discrimination that limits their access to education. Teachers reported that many schools conduct interviews with new students and it is common for schools to decide not to admit a young person because of the way he looks, dresses, and acts, often under the pretext that he may be a gang member. If a young person is denied entry to the neighborhood school he may be forced to travel

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<sup>2</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/honduran-protestors-have-little-cause-for-hope/>;  
<https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/06/americas/honduras-protests-explainer-intl/index.html>;  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/honduras-ejercer-derecho-protesta-tiene-alto-costo/>



a greater distance, potentially crossing boundaries between gang territories, to reach a school that will accept him. This may put him in grave danger or cause him to drop out of school. Young people face similar discrimination when seeking employment. When employers see that an applicant comes from a gang-controlled neighborhood they often assume that the young person is involved in a gang and do not consider his or her application.

## **6. Children and youth who experience violence have nowhere to go for help**

Honduran youth have complete lack of faith in their government's interest or ability to protect them. Gangs prohibit residents of the neighborhoods they control from talking to the police and other authorities. Those who do go to the police face violent reprisal or death. In some cases, police are actively involved in gang activities, accepting payment from gangs to alert them in advance to police raids or to provide information on people who report crimes against them. This lack of confidence in authorities means that the vast majority of children and youth who experience gang violence do not report it to police or seek help from authorities. One young person explained: "If you report you will be at greater risk. Instead of helping you they will help the criminal group."

When children do report violence the government does not protect them. KIND heard from multiple government and civil society sources that DINAF, the Honduran child protection agency, provides little meaningful protection to children who have experienced or are threatened with violence. KIND heard numerous examples of NGOs contacting DINAF to inform them about a child at serious risk of violence. In some cases, they were unable to reach the agency by phone, and in others DINAF said they did not have a vehicle, money for gas, or personnel to go into the child's community and investigate the situation. This reflects both the severe lack of resources and personnel within DINAF, as well as the hesitance of personnel to go into dangerous neighborhoods to provide protection to children who live there.

While DINAF does not directly run shelters for children, it oversees civil society organizations that provide shelter for children at risk of violence and neglect. However, these shelters vary widely in terms of conditions and quality of services. They are free to determine which children they serve, and many children, including those who are being pursued by gangs or have severe mental health challenges, may be rejected by a shelter.

The Honduran agency charged with prosecuting crimes, the Public Ministry (MP) has a witness protection program for families who provide testimony to support a criminal investigation, but, according to former prosecutors we met from the agency, it is ineffective at best and provides families little to no real protection. Any protection provided under the program lasts only as long information from the victim is needed. Once testimony has been taken, for example, families can expect no additional protection or support.

The lack of effective response by the state to violence in Honduras is reflected by extremely high impunity rates. In Honduras, 77 percent of murders are never investigated, and 88 percent do not reach a resolution in the courts.<sup>3</sup> Impunity rates for crimes involving gender-based violence including

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ajs-us.org/content/why-honduras-so-violent?gclid=EAlaIqobChMI2Zz7vc6C5AIVkP\\_iBx0\\_cQ6dEAAAYASAAEgKVifD\\_BwE](https://www.ajs-us.org/content/why-honduras-so-violent?gclid=EAlaIqobChMI2Zz7vc6C5AIVkP_iBx0_cQ6dEAAAYASAAEgKVifD_BwE)



femicide and sexual and domestic violence are about 90 percent.<sup>4</sup> According to women’s rights organizations in Honduras, police and prosecutors do not prioritize gender-based violence and prefer to direct limited resources to more “high profile” cases, such as those related to organized crime.<sup>5</sup> Impunity rates for violence against LGBTI people are also staggeringly high, with only 3 of the 25 murders of LGBTI people recorded in 2018 proceeding in a judicial process.<sup>6</sup>

## **7. Children, youth, and families are forced to displace within Honduras to escape violence, but many are unable to find safety**

Many children, youth, and families are forced to leave their homes and move to another part of Honduras to escape violence. When a family living in a gang-dominated neighborhood does something that the gang disapproves of, the family is often given a period of time, such as 24 hours, to leave the community or they will be killed. If a child or adolescent is targeted by the gang for forced recruitment or sexual violence, the family often attempts to send the child to live with relatives in another part of Honduras as quickly as possible, or the entire family may be forced to move. Violence perpetrated by a family member also forces children and families to leave from their communities, especially when the perpetrator has any connection to organized crime.

Families forced to relocate to a different part of Honduras often continue to face the same risks in their new neighborhood. Gangs and other organized criminal groups use their networks throughout the country to track people and subject them to further threats or violence. Even when this is not the case, families with few economic resources cannot afford to relocate to safer neighborhoods. As a result, they inevitably find themselves in an equally or more dangerous neighborhood that is also under the control of criminal groups and is unprotected by the state.

Internal displacement is often the precursor to forced migration, since people in Honduras are not able to find safety by moving to a different part of the country. More than 80 percent of migration from Honduras is directly linked to violence.<sup>7</sup> Some families whose children suffered violence told us that they had moved two or three times but still felt unsafe, and one family said they would not feel safe until they left Honduras.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**1. The United States should make a long-term commitment to support efforts to address the root causes of Central American migration.** The United States should implement well-targeted assistance in consultation with civil society organizations, focusing on preventing and addressing gang and gender-based violence, combating corruption, reducing structural poverty, promoting decent and fair work, and strengthening human rights and the rule of law in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Funding

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<sup>4</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/honduras/mujeres-hondure-agobiadas-por-la-violencia-el-desplazamiento-forzado-y-la-impunidad>

<sup>5</sup> <https://supportkind.org/resources/childhood-cut-short/>, p25

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cattrachas.org/index.php/es/observatorio>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nrc.org.co/honduras/>



should require participation of civil society organizations in program development and/or delivery, and should be transparent and require accountability mechanisms, and should not be contingent on migration reduction.

**2. The United States must adhere to its obligations to unaccompanied children, and must not take action, or pressure Mexico to do so, in any way that denies them access to the United States to seek protection.** The United States should immediately end all efforts to deny asylum seekers access to the United States, including the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP) program and the practice of metering, which violate U.S. asylum law and international obligations under the Refugee Convention and Protocol, and leave asylum seekers in grave danger along the Mexican border. In addition to harming adults, these efforts make it more difficult for unaccompanied children to access protection at the ports of entry. The United States should also cease pressure on the Mexican government to increase migration enforcement along its southern and northern borders in an attempt to stop unaccompanied children and others fleeing their countries in search of safety.

**3. The United States should rescind the Bilateral Agreements with Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, that deny humanitarian protection to migrants traveling through those countries, as well as the interim final rule that seeks to implement them and should rescind the Third Country Transit Bar.** The bi-lateral agreements between the United States and the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras requiring asylum seekers to seek protection in those countries rather than in the United States, and the third country transit bar place children on the move at extreme risk of human trafficking and other harm. These agreements force children to seek asylum in countries that cannot provide meaningful protection or access to asylum, and where they will be exposed to the same forms of violence they fled. The United States should uphold its commitment to refugee protection to children and should terminate these agreements and policies. The United States should also expand refugee resettlement and in-country processing for children in the region.

**4. The government of Honduras should prioritize protecting its children and ensuring their rights and well-being.** The government should increase funding for the child protection system as well as increased training for protection system personnel in working with children impacted by violence and trauma. It should also increase funding for civil society-run shelters for children impacted by violence. Honduras should not privatize its education system and should instead increase the percent of the federal budget dedicated to education.

**5. The government of Honduras should respect the right to freedom of protest and should immediately end violent response or tactics to suppress protestors, including youth.** Police officers and military police who violate human rights should be held accountable.

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