



## El Salvador Youths Choose Fighting Fires Over Gang Life: Report (/news-briefs/youths-choose-fighting-fires-over-el-salvador-gangs)

Written by David Gagne Friday, 26 February 2016



El Salvador's Comandos de Salvamento rescue squad

A Wall Street Journal report documents how youths in El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news>) are choosing to become firefighters in order to avoid gang life, a unique case that may nonetheless contain important lessons about preventing violence in the world's new murder capital.

In a special report, the Wall Street Journal talked (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/fighting-fires-is-a-form-of-salvation-for-youth-in-gang-ridden-el-salvador-1456355312>) with several youths about their involvement in the volunteer rescue squad known as Comandos de Salvamento. In addition to the adrenaline and the pride they feel for helping people, their work has helped them stay away from deadly street gangs, such as the MS13 (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/mara-salvatrucha-ms-13>) and Barrio 18 (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/barrio-18>).

"I like that she's [with the Comandos] because she keeps busy and isn't involved in something illegal," the grandmother of one youth firefighter told the Journal. "There are a lot of lost youth in our neighborhood."

The Comandos have reportedly earned a certain degree of respect from the gangs, since the group does not discriminate when attending to victims. The Comandos are maintaining a tradition that stretches back to before the country's civil war (1975-1992), when the rescue group provided first-aid care to both soldiers and guerrilla fighters as well as civilians, according to the Journal.

## InSight Crime Analysis

Youths electing to fight fires during their free time is extremely noble, but in El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news>) it's also a form of self-preservation. The small Central American nation registered a staggering homicide rate of over 100 per 100,000 inhabitants last year, which according to World Bank data is the highest of any country (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/01/07/el-salvador-homicide-rate-honduras-guatemala-illegal-immigration-to-united-states/78358042/>) during the last 20 years. And the gangs, which are at the center of the violence, are often the only form of extra-curricular activity on offer for youths from gang-dominated communities.

**SEE ALSO:** El Salvador News and Profiles (</el-salvador-organized-crime-news>)

Programs such as the Comandos demonstrate how strategies to lower violence must include a social component that provides youths with opportunities beyond gang life. Although authorities in El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news>) have taken a highly repressive approach (</news-briefs/el-salvador-police-commander-green-light-gangs>) to combating the gangs in recent years, there are also examples of promising social programs aimed at reinserting former gang members back into society. Factory owners have provided jobs (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/22/world/americas/at-salvadoran-factory-helping-troubled-youth-makes-business-sense.html>) to former MS13 (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/mara-salvatrucha-ms-13>) members, while one mayor has established technical schools and set up a bakery ([http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/12/world/americas/el-salvador-cracks-down-on-crime-but-gangs-remain-unbowed.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/12/world/americas/el-salvador-cracks-down-on-crime-but-gangs-remain-unbowed.html?_r=0)) for former gang members.

But given the difficulty of leaving gang life (<http://www.elheraldo.hn/alfrente/834339-209/dios-es-el-%C3%BAnico-que-lo-puede-sacar-a-uno-de-la>) once initiated, as well as the complicated politics of reintegrating gang members (</news-briefs/el-salvador-proposes-gang-rehabilitation-law>) into society, initiatives that prevent youths from joining criminal groups in the first place may offer the best chance for success. Indeed, a 2014 study by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project found community-based crime

prevention programs had a significant positive impact (/news-analysis/usaids-study-centam-community-crime-prevention) on neighborhoods experiencing high levels of violence in Central America.