# Revisiting Haiti´s Gangs and Organized Violence

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## Executive Summary

Though a preoccupation with organized violence has dominated much of the discourse on politics and development in Haiti, little research exists on Haiti's urban gangs and insurgent groups. This paper examines urban gangs through intensive field research conducted over a number of years with both members of armed groups and residents of areas in which they operate. Drawing on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the paper sets out to examine whether Haiti´s gang-related violence constitutes a "war" using criteria embedded in the Geneva Conventions. Advancing the debate, this study finds that there are surprising convergences in the views and experiences of armed group members and Haitian civilians.

## Introduction

It is difficult to tackle Haiti's complex urban issues, development challenges, or political dilemmas without being confronted with the specter of armed urban gangs. These omnipresent groups are credited with overthrowing governments, silencing the political opposition, preventing foreign and local investment, creating a nascent kidnapping industry, and terrorizing entire cities.[2] While many narratives have been advanced about the origin of Haiti's armed gangs, most are similar in form and content to Becker (2010):

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2 See Becker, 2010; Cockayne, 2009; Dorn, 2009; Dziedzic & Perito, 2008; Kovats-Bernat, 2006; Lacey, 2007; Lunde, 2012; Marcelin, 2011; Reed, 2011; Willman & Marcelin, 2010.

> "[President] Aristide resorted to distributing weapons to youth groups (known as bazes or bases) in exchange for their support. Weapons provided to defend Aristide also gave the groups the wherewithal to commit crimes and dominate neighborhoods. With his departure, these gangs (which at that point were fully involved in criminal activity) quickly established control." (p. 137)

This narrative, as well as others describing the role and behavior of these groups, has shaped the character of stabilization and development activities. Assumptions about the role and influence of Haiti´s urban gangs have also profoundly influenced the country´s internal politics. To "Political parties and politicians alternate between overtly using armed urban gangs to distancing themselves from the groups entirely (and sometimes doing so simultaneously). As a result, it is impossible to discuss Haiti without addressing the issue of gangs. Yet there is scant empirical knowledge about the groups, their composition, their activities, or their motivations and few researchers have questioned members about their own identities and functions.

This paper constitutes a modest attempt to unpack what is known and what is unknown about Haiti's armed urban groups. It is based on a review of the existing literature as well as qualitative and quantitative analysis of data collected from members of armed groups, their funders, their partisan backers, and residents of the neighborhoods in which they operate. The paper starts by examining how armed urban gangs are defined by outsiders and how they define themselves. Next the paper presents findings from qualitative interviews with members of armed groups including discussions about their understandings of the nature and justification for armed conflict. The paper concludes by presenting suggestions for determining the organization and intensity of armed conflict involving urban gangs in Haiti.

Before turning to the subject at hand, it is important to stress that the methods used to collect and analyze the data presented in this paper include both qualitative and quantitative methods. Multiple data sets and studies (both published and unpublished) were used, including those in which the present author served as the principal investigator. An extensive review of the literature in English, French and Haitian Creole was conducted; both publically available and unpublished private documents were examined. In instances where findings from a study, for which some or all of the results of the study have already been published, the paper refers the reader to existing literature rather than re-explaining the minutia of the particular research project.

In all other cases, quotes and qualitative findings were generated by a series of interviews conducted in Haiti beginning under the auspices of the "University of Michigan Study of Health and Harm in Haiti". This initiative consisted of a mixed methods study examining risks and protective factors for various health and mental

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health outcomes in communities throughout the country. As part of this assessment, hundreds of respondents completed in-depth qualitative interviews. Those interviewed included current and former members of armed groups, victims of crime and their family members, community leaders, development workers, and residents of areas in which armed groups operate.

Standard protocols were followed for obtaining consent of those interviewed. Interviews were conducted in a location of the respondent's choosing and in their language of choice. Transcripts and notes were translated into English and analyzed using Nud*ist 6.0. This study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States) and the Ethical Research Committee of the Enstiti Travay Sosyal ak Syans Sosyal (Petionville, Haiti).

## A matter of definition

Though the international community typically defines Haiti's armed urban groups as "gangs" and "criminal networks" (and in some cases the youth members are called "child soldiers"), Haitians see things differently. Indeed, many residents of Haiti's popular zones conceive of gangs as "political associations," "community groups," and most commonly, as "bases". For its part, the specialized unit of the Haitian National Police tasked with monitoring and reducing criminal activity generated by these groups is called the "anti-gang unit". It is specifically focused on armed urban groups in Port-au-Prince's popular zones.[3]

Urban gangs are only one of several armed groups which currently or recently operated in Haiti (see table 1). Other groups include the ex-FADH (a group of disbanded Haitian Army soldiers and their followers), private militias working for businessmen and/or traffickers, criminal networks involved in trafficking and kidnapping, as well as armed insurgent groups based in rural areas which, in cooperation with the ex-FADH, ousted Haiti's president in 2004.

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3 Other police units as well as MINUSTAH, the United Nations Mission in Haiti, have responded to and investigated Haiti's other organized armed groups including the disbanded Haitian army (referred to as the ex-FADH) which re-formed and then occupied government buildings in recent years. In 2002 and 2003, when the ex-FADH groups first began engaging in armed combat against the Haitian National Police, there were at least four different groups of ex-FADH (collectively they were called the "Rebel Army") and most of the members appeared to be former soldiers. By early 2004 the ex-FADH groups had taken over large parts of the country. At that time, though the ex-FADH groups remained separated from each other they appeared to work in cooperation, and their membership had expanded to include recruits from other armed groups, private militias and urban gangs in major cities outside of Port-au-Prince.

More recently, ex-FADH groups have appeared to have coalesced into one united entity with the leaders being former soldiers from the Forces Armées d'Haïti and the bulk of their rank and file membership being comprised of young people who never served in the Forces Armées d'Haïti. Thus, the fact that these groups are referred to as the "ex-FADH" is somewhat misleading since only their leadership and a small percentage of the rank and file are actually former soldiers with the remainder being young people who support the recreation of the Armées d'Haïti.

**Table 1. Armed Groups Currently or Recently Operating in Haiti**

| GROUP | CHARACTERISTICS |
| --- | --- |
| **Urban Gangs** such as Baz Labanye, Lame Ti Machete, Bois Neuf, Armee Sans Tete, Baze Solino, Rat. | Small, geographically isolated groups comprised of (mostly) young men in the urban popular zones. These groups may or may not be politically motivated and are often financially backed by businessmen. They usually engage in small scale crime including violence against those perceived to be a threat to their neighborhood, extortion from local businesses or street merchants, and local sales of contraband. Urban gangs usually provide social services to residents including assisting with medical care and burial costs, paying tuition fees for disadvantaged children, garbage collection, home repair, and the organization of social and musical events. |
| **Ex-FADH** groups such as Front pour la Libération et la Reconstruction Nationale, the Revolutionary Artibonite Resistance Front, Gonaives Resistance Front/Cannibal Army[4], Lambi 12 Grande Saline, Group Zero. | Group size ranges from several dozen to several hundred at each location; groups are nationally coordinated and leadership is comprised of former soldiers. Recently ex-FADH groups occupied former military bases and other government properties throughout the country and operated training programs for new recruits. Rank and file members are considered recruits; they have access weapons and may advance into leadership positions. |
| **Private Militias** | Comprised mostly of men who have worked for private security companies, these groups identify with those who hire them and thus often lack group names and a sense of group identity. Private militias may engage in criminal activities including trafficking, extortion, and union-busting, though many limit their activities to security provision that is similar to - though more extensive than - that provided by private security companies. Rank and file members are regarded as employees; they have access to weapons and occasionally advance into leadership positions. |
| **Criminal Networks** | Also not generally identified by a particular name, criminal networks are usually regional or national and are often associated with wealthy and powerful families. These groups are involved in both legal and illegal business ventures including imports/exports, trafficking of weapons, drugs and people, the lottery, money-lending, protection rackets, and money laundering. Rank and file members are regarded as employees; though they have access to weapons, advancement into positions of leadership appears to be determined by familial ties. |

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4 Though rare, occasional armed urban gangs have joined larger insurgent groups. In this case, the Cannibal Army, an urban gang from the popular zone of Raboteau in the city of Gonaives, made a public alliance with the ex-FADH groups and joined the insurgency against the elected government of Haiti, eventually assisting in overthrowing President Aristide in 2004. The group quickly reverted to criminal activity in mid-2004 and is no longer associated with the ex-FADH.

Armed groups that are *not* from urban popular zones are treated in a markedly different way by the international community and the Haitian government. For example, over the last two years groups affiliated with the erstwhile army have openly held armed marches, called well-attended press conferences denouncing the existing government, and were allowed to present various demands to representatives of the international community and the Haitian government, some of which (including demands for cash payments) were granted by the current administration. Despite some high-profile arrests of leaders, the ex-FAHD and the other insurgent groups involved in the 2004 overthrow of the elected government are widely viewed as politically motivated insurgent organizations while urban gangs are seen as criminal entities. Interestingly, the rank and file membership of these two types of armed groups is similar in some ways, notably their reason for joining the organization and childhood experiences of family violence (see figures 2 and 3).[5]

**Figure 2.** **Demographics of Rank and File Membership in Armed Groups**[6]

|  | **ARMED INSURGENT GROUPS (N=88)** | **ARMED URBAN GANGS (N=432)** |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 25.70 (SD: 9.44) | 22.06 (SD: 8.31) |
| Gender | Male: 96.59% | Male: 95.83% |
| Mean years of education | 11.13 (SD: 4.22) | 6.95 (SD: 2.36) |
| History of crime during childhood[7] | Experienced interfamilial violence: 54.80% | Experienced interfamilial violence: 48.72% |
|  | Was a victim of a violent crime by a non-family member: 2.5% | Was a victim of a violent crime by a non-family member: 38.7% |
| Reason for joining the group | To serve my **country**: 30.4% | To serve my **community**: 28.8% |
|  | To improve my life: 58.7% | To improve my life: 31.6% |
| Locus of Control Score | 8.15 (SD: 2.50) | 6.98 (SD: 2.90) |

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5 This data is based on qualitative and quantitative data collection in 2009 and 2010. Based on media reports during the armed conflict in 2003 and 2004, it appears that the average rank and file member of an insurgent groups during those years were older, better educated, and from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Both types of groups were overwhelmingly comprised of male members. Similar to that seen in militias and insurgent groups worldwide, within armed urban gangs, women played limited roles in support positions and often engaged in romantic or sexual relationships with gang members (CIDA, 2006).

6 Whether a person was a rank and file member of an organization was self-defined. During interviews and surveys, respondents were asked if they were a leader in their community and/or a leader in the group. Those who responded that they were not, but did state that they were a member, were classified as "rank and file" members. Interestingly, leaders of armed urban groups tended to be highly educated (with an average of 2.7 years more than other residents of the same age group) while members of armed urban groups were much less educated than those in their age group.

**Figure 3. Place of Origin of Members of Armed Groups**
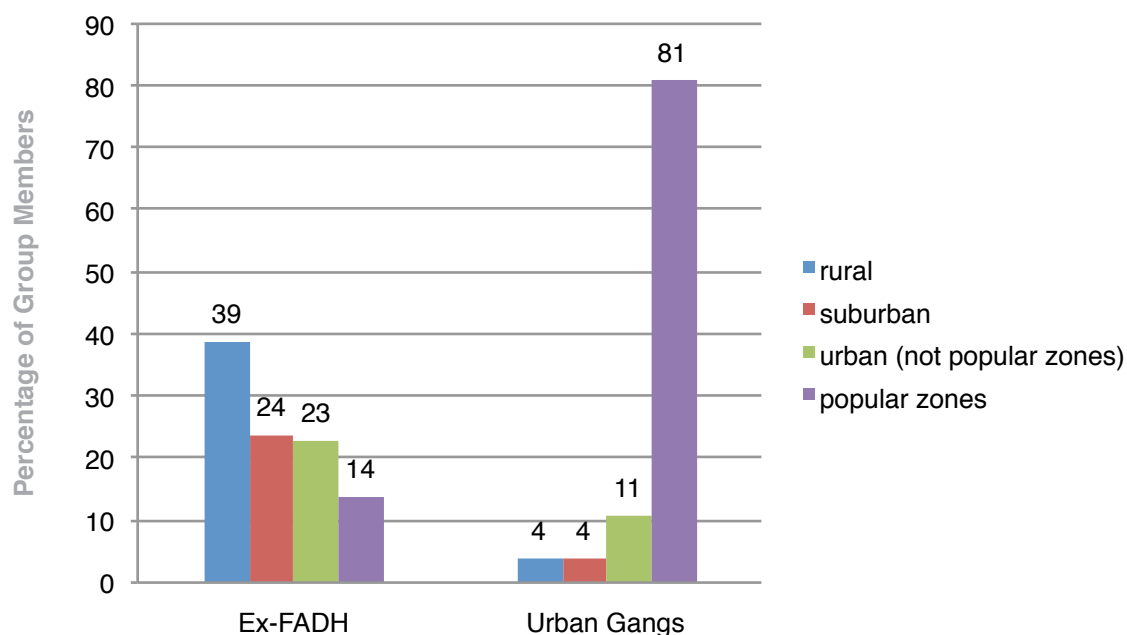


Additionally, the attitude that group members exhibited about their ability to influence events in their own lives, was measured using the Rotter Locus of Control (LOC) scale. An individuals' *locus* (Latin for "location") ranges on a scale from internal to external with "internals" believing that their actions determine what happens and "externals" believing that outside forces such as a higher power, chance or an authority has control over what happens to them. The concept of LOC emerges from social learning theory which proposed that a combination of both environmental (social) and psychological factors influence individual behavior.[8]  An internal locus of control is linked to engagement in political behavior such as demonstrations, voting, joining community organizations, and engaging in other forms of political and social change.[9]  In this case we see that members of ex-FADH groups were more likely to be externally motivated while members of armed urban gangs were more likely to believe that their actions could impact the world around them.

7 Research has found that residents of popular zones are more likely than other urban residents to experience serious human rights violations such as crimes against persons (sexual assault, murder and the like) committed by state actors. Not surprisingly, crime -- by all perpatrators -- is also more frequent in these areas (Hertz, et al, 2010; Kolbe & Hutson, 2006; Kolbe & Muggah, 2011; Kolbe & Muggah, 2012; Kolbe, Muggah & Puccio, 2012).

8 Though personality and individual beliefs can influence the decision to be violent, support the use of violence or join a violent group, there are multiple other factors including social support, trauma and religious extremism, among others that can play a role (Canetti-Nisim, et al, 2009; Cohen, 2001; Cummings, et al, 2012; Gerber, et al, 2011; Hutson et al, 2009; Krosnick, Visser, & Harder, 2010; Laor, et al, 2010).

9 See, for instance, Baker & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999; Rotter, 1966; Sanger & Alker, 1972.

*Internal locus of control is linked to voting, joining community organizations, and engaging in other forms of political and social change. Members of ex-FADH groups were more likely to be externally motivated while members of armed urban gangs were more likely to believe that their actions could impact the world around them*

**Figure 4. Locus of Control of Ex-FADH Group Members**[10]
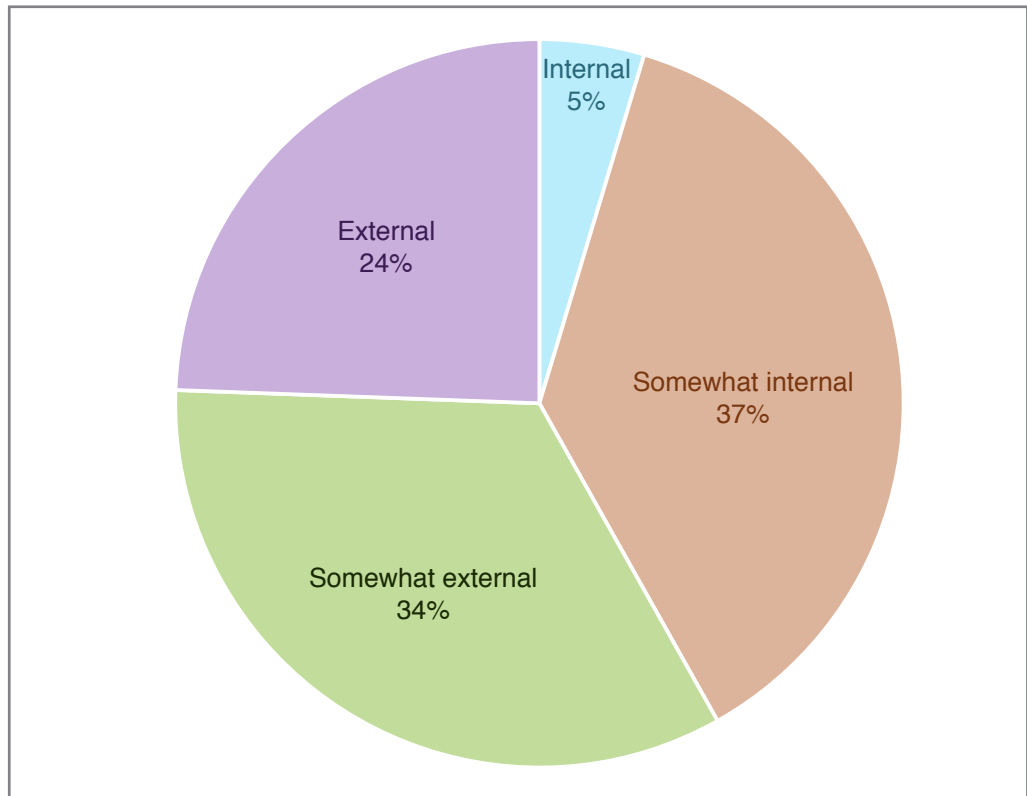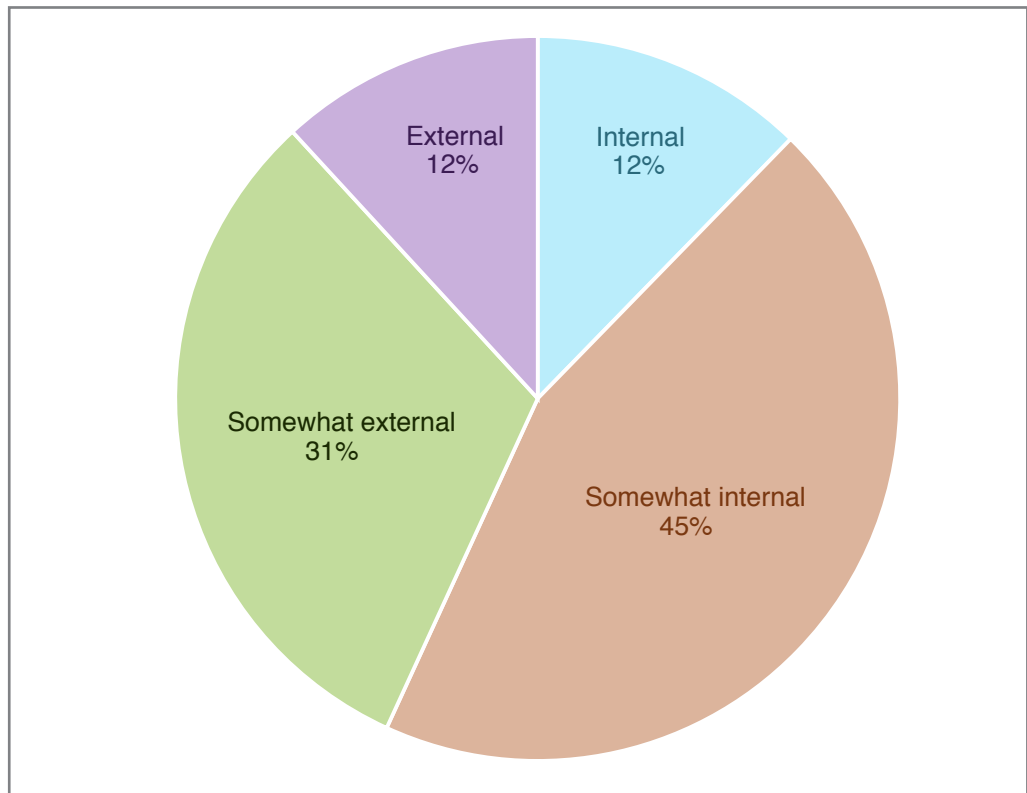


**Figure 5. Locus of Control of Gang Members**[11]



10 Only rank and file members were included in this calculation. No surveys were conducted with leaders of ex-FADH groups.

11 This graph shows only the results from rank and file members of the urban armed gangs. Leaders of armed urban gangs were more likely than members to be internally motivated (mean score of 3.11, SD: 2.09).

Membership in Haiti's armed urban gangs has vacillated over the years. Figure six demonstrates how the percentage of young men aged 18-29 who are in gangs in the capital's impoverished neighborhoods has ebbed and flowed in a similar pattern over time.[12]  In the early 2000s when armed ex-FADH groups launched an insurgency against the government of Haiti led Jean-Bertrand Aristide of the Lavalas political party, many urban gangs took sides in the conflict aligning themselves with the pro-democracy/pro-Lavalas movement or the anti-Lavalas/rebel movement. After the insurgency was successful in early 2004, leaders of the interim Haitian government hailed the ex-FADH and their allies as "freedom fighters" and a period of increased political repression against the Lavalas movement began.
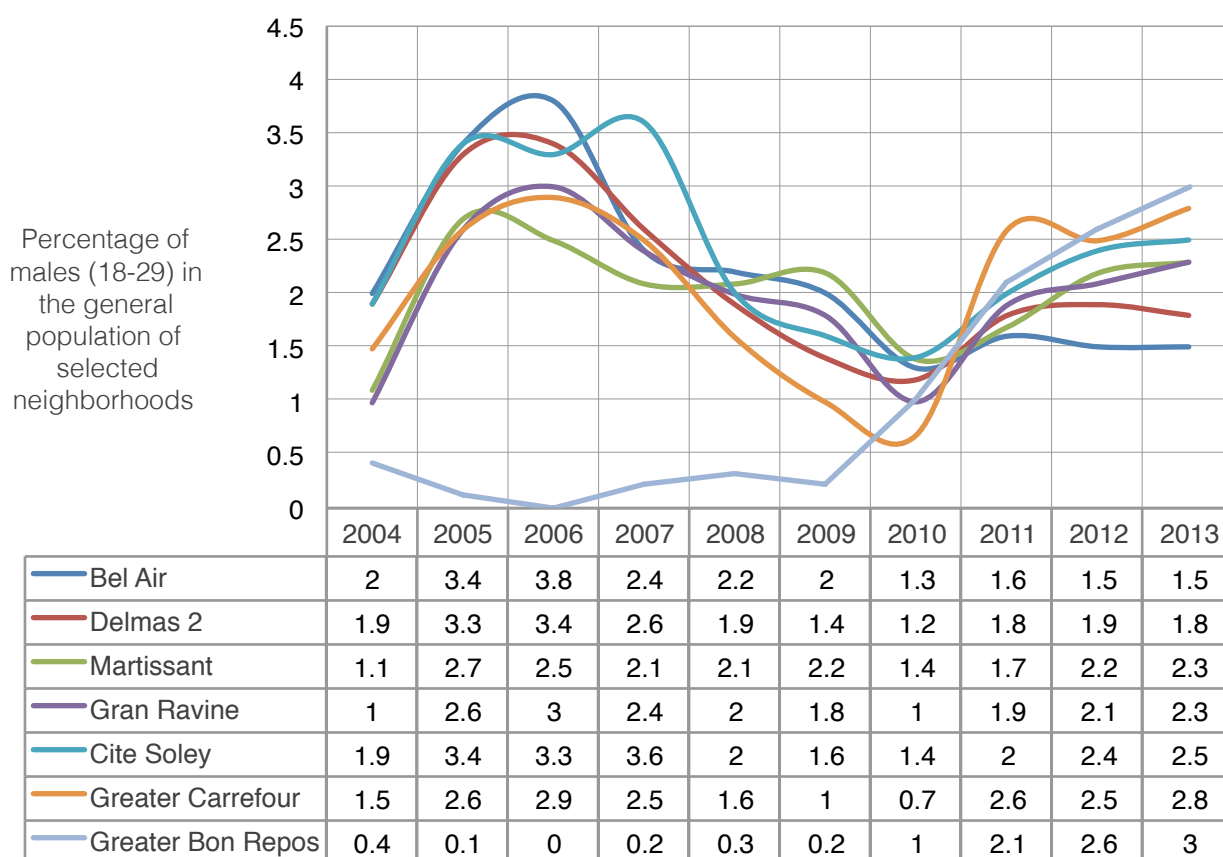
During this three year period of political repression, membership in armed groups across the spectrum increased. Both pro- and anti-Lavalas gangs actively sought funding and members.  When ex-FADH supported anti-Lavalas gangs and attacked pro-Lavalas gangs, it only fueled the membership drive and accelerated violence. Crime, both that committed by both political actors and crime committed by opportunistic criminals, increased. As shown through observations of Haitian politics and empirical evidence demonstrated through survey research, periods of democratic crisis are frequently associated with increased crime more generally.[13] One exception to this pattern is Greater Bel Air (including Delmas 2): between 2007 and 2013 the relative risk of gang involvement for young men (aged 18-29) in this area decreased considerably.[14]

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12 Bel Air and Delmas 2 are exceptions to this pattern. Both neighborhoods were targeted by a Viva Rio, a Brazilian NGO which led an intensive pacification and anti-gang intervention beginning in 2005. Working with members of gangs, the intervention built on community assets to create incentives for non-violence while using social action to improve the quality of life for residents and address institutionalized marginalization of people from popular zones (Moestue & Muggah, 2009).

13 See Kolbe & Hutson, 2006; Kolbe et al, 2010; Kolbe & Muggah, 2010; and Kolbe & Muggah, 2012.

14 A notable exception to the pattern also includes Greater Bon Repos. The demographics of this area, which includes parts of Croix-des-Bouquet, changed dramatically after the January 2010 earthquake when 400,000 displaced people were relocated to the nearby Corail IDP camps. Between December 2009 and December 2011, the mean income for this area dropped to a quarter of its pre-earthquake level, unemployment of men aged 25-50 rose from 33.4% to 80.3% and the percentage of school aged children enrolled in school dropped from 54.7 to 26.5% (Kolbe & Muggah, 2012).

**Figure 6. Percentage of males (18-29) in selected neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince claiming affiliation with armed urban groups**[14]

Percentage of males (18-29) in the general population of selected neighborhoods

| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bel Air | 2 | 3.4 | 3.8 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 2 | 1.3 | 1.6 | 1.5 | 1.5 |
| Delmas 2 | 1.9 | 3.3 | 3.4 | 2.6 | 1.9 | 1.4 | 1.2 | 1.8 | 1.9 | 1.8 |
| Martissant | 1.1 | 2.7 | 2.5 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 2.2 | 1.4 | 1.7 | 2.2 | 2.3 |
| Gran Ravine | 1 | 2.6 | 3 | 2.4 | 2 | 1.8 | 1 | 1.9 | 2.1 | 2.3 |
| Cite Soley | 1.9 | 3.4 | 3.3 | 3.6 | 2 | 1.6 | 1.4 | 2 | 2.4 | 2.5 |
| Greater Carrefour | 1.5 | 2.6 | 2.9 | 2.5 | 1.6 | 1 | 0.7 | 2.6 | 2.5 | 2.8 |
| Greater Bon Repos | 0.4 | 0.1 | 0 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 1 | 2.1 | 2.6 | 3 |

Overall, the policy and research literature on armed groups in Haiti tends to be methodologically weak and analytically imprecise. There has been little field-based empirical research conducted with members of armed urban groups in Haiti. As we can see from above, even the definition of what is and is not such a group is in dispute. This reflects a larger debate among policy makers and academics about how to define gangs.[16] Competing definitions impact how and where policing as well as violence prevention and reduction interventions are carried out, they complicate measurement of violence over time and they obscure the evaluation of public policy interventions. It is difficult to compare the few studies which have been conducted on Haiti's gangs when no common definition has been established. Moreover, most assessments do not adequately account for the fast-changing social and political dynamics or the impact that outside political forces and funder priorities have on the location, targets and parameters of anti-gang interventions.[17]

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15 Men claiming affiliation ex-FADH groups were excluded from this calculation. Data was gathered during households randomly sampled and surveyed by the author; sample sizes ranged from 600 to 3,800 households with response rates ranging from 82.4-95.1%.

16 Covey, 2003; Hagedorn, 2008; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Quirk, 2008; Ribando, 2007; Shewfelt, 2009; Sullivan & Bunker, 2003; Thompson et al, 2000; Vigil, 2003.

17 See, for instance, Cockayne, 2009; Dziedzic & Perito, 2008; Hoffman, Knox, & Cohen,2011; Kovats-Bernat,2000; Kovats-Bernat,2006; Lunde,2012; Marcelin et al,2009; Marcelin,2011; Moestue

The overwhelming negative perceptions of Haiti's gangs as described by Becker in the introduction is reinforced by the Haitian government, multilateral and bilateral agencies, the media, and practitioners involved in providing security and development support. Yet the stereotypes of gangs and gang members featured in the daily narrative often conflict with reality.[18]  In 2010, when 245 foreigners working or volunteering full time in Port-au-Prince on community development and social welfare projects were asked to define "gang" their answers varied considerably.[19] Another similarly composed group of 250 foreign development workers interviewed in 2005 gave wildly different answers, reflecting the push, at that time, to vilify members of the political opposition by accusing them of "gang activity". Though the demographic composition, political affiliation, and basic characteristics of gangs changed little between 2005 and 2010, the perception of gangs among those whose opinions influenced policy changed considerably. The word clouds below (figures 7 and 8) represent the words and phrases commonly appearing in transcripts of qualitative interviews with development workers, with the increased font size representing increased frequency of mentions.

**Figure 7. Words commonly used by development workers when describing Haiti's gangs (2005)**



& Muggah,2009; United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services,2004; Willman & Marcelin,2010.

18 For an interesting take on the influence that media has on how gangs are viewed in North American, see Moore,1993.

19 Qualitative interviews were completed with 245 non-Haitian individuals affiliated with NGOs, charities, USAID and CIDA-funded projects, UN agencies, and missionary organizations while evaluating the efficacy of an intervention to reduce vicarious trauma experienced by development workers in highly insecure environments. All participants lived or worked in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area at least 50% of the time and all had been in Haiti for at least 90 days prior to the interview. (Kolbe, 2009; Kolbe & Muggah, 2010)

Figure 8. **Words commonly used by development workers when describing Haiti's gangs (2010)**



Uncritical representations of the severity of violence in Haiti can reproduce hard-handed policing responses and severe peacekeeping interventions. As a result, heavy handed interventions can inadvertently harm innocent bystanders, alienate residents, and contribute to marginalization of a given neighborhood within the wider society. Likewise, sensationalist reporting of supposedly gang-led campaigns of violence and beheadings dubbed "Operation Baghdad" by the media and false allegations of terrorist connections with pro-Lavalas groups led to increasingly aggressive tactics by special policing forces and peacekeepers between 2005 and 2007.[20]  Though "Operation Baghdad" and reports of beheadings were later revealed to be rumor rather than an actual event, it is still widely believed by some to have occurred and has even been the subject of an admittedly simplistic academic study.[21]

A similar situation has occurred, albeit on a much larger scale, with the *Mara Salvatrucha* (commonly known as MS, Mara, and MS-13), a street gang that originated in Los Angeles and, as members were deported for the United States, spread throughout Mexico and Central America.[22]  This group differs from Haitian street gangs in the severity and  use of force, access to firearms and sophistication of organization, but it has also experienced a similar shift towards organized crime that is seen in Haitian gangs. Poorly conducted journalism and weak analytical studies of MS-13 has led to misconceptions about the true nature and extent of its activities. In particular, journalists tend to see the group as an ultra-violent criminal

20 For a detailed description of this policing and peacekeeping tactics used in this and related anti-gang operations, see Dziedzic & Perito, 2008; and Becker, 2010. Additional background information can be found in Dupuy, 2007 and Hallward, 2008.

21 Lunde, 2012.

22 Demoscopía, 2007; Hume, 2007; Jutersonke, Muggah & Rodgers, 2009; Logan, 2009; Muggah, 2011.

organization while some scholars have produced unsupported claims of an Al-Qaeda connection.[23]   These misconceptions have led to heavy handed or "mano dura" policing tactics that have, overall, been counterproductive instead increasing social exclusion of marginalized persons and, paradoxically, fuelling the growth of gangs.[24]

One of the challenges with defining Haiti's gangs is due to the evolution of armed urban groups over time. When asked to describe how gangs differed from insurgent groups, respondents encompassing members of armed groups, residents, community leaders and development workers were in dispute about some things (such as which groups were more violent and which groups existed legally) but a common set of criteria nevertheless emerged (see figure nine). These characteristics can be used to (loosely) determine if a group is an ex-army insurgent group or if it is an urban gang, but they don't  fully resolve the problem of definition.

**Figure 9. Characteristics of Armed Urban Gangs versus Ex-FADH Groups**

|  | **EX-FADH GROUPS** | **ARMED URBAN GANGS** |
|---|---|---|
| Location | Primarily rural with some urban and peri-urban presence; not tied to one particular base | Urban, almost entirely in the popular zones; based in a neighborhood with clearly defined boundaries |
| Leadership | Military structure with clearly defined leaders | One main leader who has trusted assistants |
| Current Activities | Training, patrolling the streets, demonstrating, policing | Provides protection for neighborhood, crime including extortion, solves local problems for residents |
| Origin | Created by members of the disbanded Haitian Army | Emerged naturally in poor neighborhoods where people felt threated and marginalized |
| Higher Authority | Wealthy elite from a particular political background who fund the groups | The group itself, the leader of the group, residents of the area, funders |
| Physical Appearance | Army uniforms or civilian clothes with some elements of an army uniform; tend to be between 20-40 | Similar in physical appearance and dress to others of the same age group and socioeconomic background; tend to be between 15-30 |
| Weapons | Some arms, carries weapons openly at times | Few arms, weapons rarely carried openly |
| Remuneration for members | Small stipend paid to rank and file members, unknown payment to leaders | Members receive what they need from the group and are sometimes allowed to keep the spoils of conflict |

23 Arana, 2005; Brevé, 2007; Diaz, 2009; UNODC, 2007; Wolf, 2012.

24 For a history of M-13 and a discussion of the impact of misperception on policy making, see Wolf, 2012.

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Another problem impacting definition relates to the use of violence. Violence committed by armed groups in Haiti is not necessarily attributed to exclusively political or economic motivations. Rather, it is often informed by a complex fusion of the two, in addition to social factors. It is important, however, to recognize that "politicized" actors – whether aligned to state or non-state interests – are often the key proponents of community violence. As Figure 9 demonstrates, reported membership in armed groups varies considerably over time and geographic location. During periods of decreasing repression, membership in armed groups drops as individuals move on to other forms of political participation, leaving leftover members to turn to less ideologically-motivated activities, including crime. While crime overall decreased between 2006 and the present, it was also more frequently committed by criminals, neighbors, non-political gangs, and unknown individuals.[25]

This reflects the larger body of research on sporadic community violence. In most cases of violent outbursts worldwide, the majority of individuals in a high-risk community never actually turn to violence. However, the complex interaction of risk factors concentrated in a particular geographic area is what leads to violence amongst subsets of the population. In a modest attempt at examining why the youth of Citè Soleil engaged in violence after 2004, Willman and Marcellin (2010) conducted a household survey (N=1575), 10 of focus groups, and 15 ethnographic interviews. Qualitative findings indicated that conflict is fueled by the propensity of residents to give up on trying to change things (i.e. parents reforming children and residents simply moving away). As a result, the fragmented community is unable to hold violent youth accountable. Second, some youth see violence as their only option for acquiring things they want or need. Third, youth in the survey pointed to violent behaviors learned from adult role models as a contributing factor for their actions. Ultimately, the authors conclude by pointing out that the line between being any agent of violence and being a victim of circumstance prone to violence is very thin.

While the groups themselves evolve and the dynamics within and between groups shift over time, so does the understanding of the groups and their role in society. As Haiti experiences economic, political and social change it is not surprising that the definition and perception of gangs also changes. At times it is difficult to distinguish gangs and gang-related activity in Haiti from organized crime and criminal networks – a problem encountered in other countries as well.[26] It may very well be that in Haiti, gangs and organized criminal networks are not mutually exclusive and can only be distinguished by their current complexity and degree of integration within a geographically specific community.

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25 Kolbe & Hutson, 2006; Kolbe et al, 2010; Kolbe & Muggah, 2012.

26 Kelly and Caputo, 2005; Kenney and Finckenauer, 1995; Spergel, Ross, Curry and Chance,1989.

*in Haiti, gangs and organized criminal networks are not mutually exclusive and can only be distinguished by their current complexity and degree of integration within a geographically specific community.*

## How do gang members define themselves and their conflict?

During 2009 and 2010, 432 members of armed groups participated in a series of qualitative interviews examining their role in the development of their community and their relationship with residents, the government, international bodies and one another. A focus of the discussions was on whether or not hostilities during the post-coup period (2004+) had reached the level that they could be considered a "gang war". Facilitators began part of the discussion by explaining how social scientists determine if an armed conflict tips over to war. Participants were then asked to reflect on current and recent conditions to evaluate whether the situation had at any point approximated a gang war.

War was defined for participants as the contentious use of lethal violence by "combatants" composed of at least two organized groups, states or other organized parties. The use of war is strategic and instrumental; actors that engage in war have specific aims that they believe are most expediently achieved through armed conflict with another organized group or state. War is not new or accidental. War is a learned behavior deliberately used to achieve a particular end. When human beings are able to develop peaceful alternatives to war, it will cease to be used to resolve political problems.

## War as violent activity with participants

War has alternately been described as a "state of being", a "contest of wills" and as a period time after which the intention to war has been declared.[27]  Interviewees discussed whether in order for a situation to be considered a war, it must involve actions or whether periods of political repression or a "war of words" that preceded periods of intense fighting were also considered war. Are all wars comprised of a series of events, some of which involve armed combat or the use of weapons against combatants or both combatants and the civilian population? If there is no fighting, can it be said to constitute a war? If weapons are not used, is it war?  If armed violence is only carried out against civilians, is it a war or is it a massacre? The discussions included, but went beyond, international legal norms such as the Geneva Conventions, that are used to define war.

All interviewees agreed that wars needed to involve a high degree of violent activity. While they agreed that the use of the term "war" to characterize ideological and social campaigns is useful to raise political awareness. For example, when the "political opposition is waging war against a group in the media by spreading rumours and making fallacious allegations, such actions are not actually wars. There was some dispute over whether armed violence against those who were unarmed, unable to defend themselves or unwilling to respond with violence (including non-violent urban gangs), constituted war. As one 19-year-old said:

27 Musah and Kayode Fayemi, 2000; Scherrer, 2002.

"At different periods we decided not to fight back [when we were attacked]. That doesn't mean that the other side wasn't at war with us. They were at war. They were waging a war on us. But we didn't have the political capital to fight back so we rested and waited until another time to respond… We can't say that that year was a year of peace. It was still a year of war."

Other participants pointed out that urban gangs are often unarmed because guns and ammunition were difficult to obtain in Haiti and that during times when groups were unarmed, state actors still engaged in violence against the gang and their communities.

"In 2003 and 2004 we didn't have any guns. But the foreign military, the police, everyone was doing a war on us. They came here, shooting all over the place. Many, many people were killed. They said we had guns when we didn't and they used it as an excuse to massacre us."

Other respondents agreed:

"I can say that for the year or two after [the February 2004 coup] we were defending ourselves with rocks. I didn't have a gun. None of us did. A rock was my weapon. It might not have been a war, but it felt like it." A 25-year-old from Martissant put it this way: "When I don't have weapon with which to defend myself, if my zone is attacked it is still a war. It's just a war that we're going to lose."

## Are gang members combatants?

An oral translation of the Third Geneva Convention was provided to interviewees. This document defines a combatant as a person who conducts military operations according to the laws and customs of war, is part of a chain of command, wears a fixed distinctive marking visible from a distance, and bears arms openly. There was disagreement over whether gang members were combatants or not. Some gangs followed a strict chain of command while others stated that their groups were more loosely organized. Every participant agreed that gangs had leaders and those to whom they were accountable (these included funders – usually wealthy businessmen – and communities as well as "ideals" such as democracy or patriotism).  Both leaders and members of armed urban gangs pointed out that the chain of command is often porous and that in all armed groups – both state and non-state ones – the rank and file may answer to more than one authority. One low level gang leader put it this way:

"We have always gotten money and political support from [name of wealthy business owner]. So we are accountable to him. You can say

*"Sometimes we don't follow the customs or laws of war. Sometimes we steal. Sometimes we don't respect the rights of the residents [of this zone]. But that doesn't mean that we aren't fighting a war… We are more likely to violate the laws of war by doing crimes against the population when we are in war than during times of peace."*

that he's at the top of our chain of command because all he has to do is call my cell phone and [closing phone] that's it! I do what he wants. I send my guys out to take care of the problem. He has an issue with his employee, someone is stealing from him, or there is someone in competition for his business, we take care of it.

"But I'm still the boss and I still have a boss. Maybe my boss and [the businessman] disagree and [the businessman] wants us to take out someone, but my boss doesn't want to do that because it's someone we know or have an agreement with. Then my boss gets his way and we lie [to the businessman] or suggest another solution… In the army they had the same thing. A soldier answers to his commander but the commander might be friends with this general or that other politician and so even though the President thinks he's calling the shots, he isn't really at the top of the chain of command."

Another member put it this way:

"A man is not a dog. We don't have just one master. We answer to our boss but we also answer to God. We answer to our beliefs. The conflict happens with the guy above you says to do something and you have another master. Maybe your master is the Church. Or your family. Or your beliefs, like you want democracy or you are patriotic. If one order violates the order of the other master, what do you do?  Who do you follow? This is a dilemma we all face, even the police, MINUSTAH [UN peacekeeping] soldiers and the [disbanded Haitian army] – everyone has this problem."

Interviewees did cite a number of problems with the criteria listed in the Third Geneva Convention. Many noted that this criterion defines combatants as those who follow the laws and customs of war while some "combatants" in Haiti do not.

"If the police rape our women, that's not following the laws of war. But the police are the same as soldiers."

"Sometimes we don't follow the customs or laws of war. Sometimes we steal. Sometimes we don't respect the rights of the residents [of this zone]. But that doesn't mean that we aren't fighting a war… We are more likely to violate the laws of war by doing crimes against the population when we are in war than during times of peace. Sometimes this is just what the circumstances call for and we are forced to steal from the people."

"MINUSTAH [The UN Mission in Haiti] and the PNH [Haitian National Police] those are the combatants we were at war against in 2005.

So when the foreigners and the police killed children. Killed women. Raped people. Kidnapped people. Tortured people. When they did this, wasn't it against the laws of war? So what do we say about this? Do we say they are not combatants even though they have uniforms and they follow command?"

"When the customs of war violate the laws of war, then I say it is still a war."

"Instead of saying it is a war because the soldiers meet this criteria, we should say it is a war when the soldiers are doing military operations. Because you can have an army that is in reserve for when you are attacked. Right now we are not at war, but I say that [name of gang] is our army."

One interesting discussion which came up with more than half of the interviewees was whether private security companies hired by businesses and wealthy families, and sometimes deployed as private militia, meet the definition of combatants. Participants agreed that although individual people may be the ones engaging in violence, they must be doing so on behalf of an organized group, party, nation or state. Lone individuals committing acts of violence, no matter their motivation, are terrorists or criminals, not soldiers. The debate emerged about whether individual private security guards engaging in violence were combatants, even if they were not acting within a group.

"A private security guard is a mercenary. He does whatever the guy who hired him wants, even if it's illegal. He is part of a chain of command. He wears a uniform and he acts on behalf of the bourgeois."

"When a company turns their private security into a militia to protect their business interests, it is a crime. For a business to do violent acts to protect the interests of the business, this is against the laws of our country."

"If we say that the private security hired by the business is not made up of combatants what do we say when the business gives money to [name of an urban gang] to protect their business? Then is [the gang] comprised of combatants while the private security workers are not defined as combatants? For me, I would say that if they are killing people then they are both combatants."

Interviewees were split over whether private security guards could be considered combatants or not. Most agreed that while historically their groups had been at war, they were not currently at war. This was one justification for rejecting the designation of 'combatant'. However, others pointed out that though the past year

has been relatively peaceful in comparison to previous ones, that the groups are still organized to respond to violence when it threatens their community, making them the equivalent of a "reserve" or "standing" army (one young man defined his group as a "public community security force" in contrast to the private security forces hired by businesses and wealthy families).

*One young man defined his group as a "public community security force" in contrast to the private security forces hired by businesses and wealthy families.*

Accepting the designation of "combatant" is complicated by other issues as well. Interviewees pointed out that some gangs have complicated and formal methods for inducting members while others are more loosely associated. Nearly all agreed that interpersonal relationships and a high degree of trust is necessary for an individual to be a member of a gang, leading to some uncomfortable situations in which individuals whose families are not well known in the area are labeled as "non-members" by both residents and gang members, despite having the same function and responsibility as group members.

If gang members are defined as combatants, another problem emerges as well: how do we define those individuals who are not members but provide essential services for the armed urban groups? All of the gang leaders interviewed stated that numerous non-member residents provided services for the group including support services (e.g. cooking, delivering messages, taxi rides, etc.) and work tasks that were illegal (e.g. collecting protection payments from small business owners and street merchants, being a guard or lookout during a crime, hiding stolen property, etc.).[28] During interviews there was consensus among both residents and gang members that such individuals are not members of the urban gangs, however, under Haitian law simply associating (even as friends) with gang members is an illegal activity and puts these residents who provide support services at risk of arrest.

Another justification for rejecting the term "combatant" was that group members did not agree that they were organized in the same way as an army and that they do not openly bear arms. Some stated that they were organized for political change and that the violence was used against their group, any responses were self-defense and that the group itself was not organized with the purpose of committing violence or crime.

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28 Young boys acting as messengers and helpers were the only non-members whose designation was disputed during interviews. Leaders referred to the boys as non-members and often pointed out that the group was paying for the boy's school fees or helping his mother buy food and defined the relationship as one of mentorship or assistance. Rank and file gang members usually said that the boys were "in training" to be members, that they were "like your little brother", and that they were "future members." Many of these boys had already been given an informal nickname within the group, often beginning with "ti" (Creole for "little").  One gang, whose members were gently teased about this during the interview sessions by other participants, has the habit of naming the boys after its own leaders and adding the diminutive "ti" to the beginning of the existing nickname (eg, Little John, Little Berretta, Little Killer).

## How do residents define gangs?

Residents of popular zones have a complicated relationship with armed urban groups. Those that are more predatory inspire fear and disgust from residents while those armed urban groups which provide protective, advocacy and social services to residents are spoken of with respect and admiration, albeit with some apprehension as well. As one resident of Bel Air put it:

> "The guys from [name of gang] are like the mafia that you see in the movies. You have a problem with your business or some guy is bothering your wife, you can go to them. They'll back you up. They'll help you out. But you don't want to get on their bad side either."

Members of the gangs are defined by residents based on the behavior of the group as a whole rather than on the purported aims of the group or what the group members say about their objectives. Gangs that have a political bent or history are comprised of "militants" while those which engage mostly in crime and intimidation are referred to as "criminals." The term "bandit," widely used in reference to people arrested and accused of gang affiliation during the post-2004 coup period, is eschewed by ordinary Haitian citizens.

"The word 'bandit' is like '*chimere*'," explained one Delmas resident, referring to the derogatory term used against young men in the city's poverty-stricken popular zones suspected of supporting the Lavalas political party, "You say it to defile the person. A 'bandit' in [the government's] eyes is someone from the popular zones, someone from the pro-democracy movement, someone that is a threat to the establishment, or someone you can call a criminal so you can arrest him for malfeasance and keep him in jail without a trial. To call someone a bandit, used to mean they were criminal, but now it's a word that's used so much against people who are not criminals, that it has lost any meaning."[29]

When presented with the same material reviewed by members of urban gangs who participated in qualitative interviews, residents overwhelmingly disagreed with the assertion that gang members are combatants. Most stated that they were ordinary residents who were either criminals or were forced to defend their neighborhood against real and perceived threats.  The organized aspect of urban gangs was minimized by residents who pointed out that gang leaders hold positions of leadership because of interpersonal power relations, not because they are commissioned or authorized by a higher authority. Many residents also noted that though gang members may own weapons they generally own fewer weapons than wealthy Haitians and they are often unable to bear arms openly because they don't have the funds or connections to obtain a gun permit.

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29 For a discussion on the use of "chimere" as a derogatory term, see Sanders, 2007.

## The nature of the conflict

Residents and members of urban gangs were asked to decide what characteristics were important for defining a conflict as a war. During the course of interviews, key themes emerged including the type and severity of violence in proportion the provoking event, the justification for the use of violence, the relative authority of those using violence, and the intention behind the use of violence. Interestingly, all four themes reflect ideas within existing scholarship on just war. The discourse on just war balances two separate but related dimensions: the right to go to war and the lawfulness of conduct in war. These two dimensions are independent, in that an unjust war can be fought in accordance with the rules of just war and a just war transpire in a way that violates the principles of just conduct in war. The justness of a war is usually the burden of the state (or, presumably, the insurgent group initiating the war), the justness of conduct during the war is the burden of the combatants and those leading them.[30]  The criteria used to determine if a war is morally and legally defensible is *jus ad bellum. Jus ad bellum* includes at least six separate criteria, each of which must be met to be a just war – all of which were raised repeatedly during interviews with gang members.

## Types and severity of violence

The type of violence experienced by urban Haitians has differed in recent years, as has the perpetrators. While police and non-state actors including members of ex-FADH insurgent groups were blamed for half of all murders and nearly a third of all sexual assaults in 2005; they were credited with only five per cent of murders and less than one per cent of sexual assaults in 2012.[31]  Port-au-Prince residents were significantly less likely to be arrested without being charged, exposed to tear gas, beaten by state agents, or accidently shot in 2012 than they were seven years earlier.

But when one examines residents of the popular zones where conflict between competing gangs created regular street fights, it becomes clear that residents are actually more likely to be murdered now than they were in 2005. Living in popular zones is becoming increasingly dangerous for residents, in large part because of an increase in homicides tied to gang conflicts which emerged after the January 2010 earthquake.[32]

In order to understand the reasons why this is the case, some context on the post-2010 earthquake is needed. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster the vast majority of residents stopped sleeping inside their homes; those that had yards

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30 Walzer, 2000.

31 See Kolbe & Hutson, 2006, for earlier figures; latter figures calculated from household survey data on file with the author and partially presented in Kolbe, Muggah, & Puccio, 2012.

32 Kolbe & Muggah, 2012; Kolbe, Muggah & Puccio, 2012.

or lived in neighborhoods with lightly traveled streets slept in tents or under the open sky near their own house. But people living in densely populated areas often lacked yards or shared their yard with multiple families. These popular zones also lack sufficient roads with narrow dirt paths forming chaotically organized corridors between buildings. The absence of a yard was one of the strongest predictors of which households ended up moving into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Those without yards were, in general, the city's poorest and most marginalized residents.

*New gangs were formed and old gangs split, created new alliances, and took over territory formerly controlled by other groups. Boundaries which had been solidified by years of fighting, negotiations, threats and alliances became porous.*

As households relocated to new neighborhoods, moved between various IDP camps, and resettled in new homes (often in different areas of Port-au-Prince) existing social networks which provided a protection against crime were disrupted. Individuals who previously were protected from some types of crime by virtue of their residence in a neighborhood where a particular gang was active suddenly became vulnerable to crime. New neighborhoods and "cities" were created, such as the Corail IDP camp where hundreds of thousands now live on an isolated and windy desert plain near the city's garbage dump.[33]  To fill the void, new gangs were formed and old gangs split, created new alliances, and took over territory formerly controlled by other groups. Boundaries which had been solidified by years of fighting, negotiations, threats and alliances became porous.

At the same time, the rapid influx of money into popular zones and IDP camps further disrupted existing social networks. Development efforts spearheaded by NGOs, foreign governments, MINUSTAH, and religious organizations pumped cash and resources into neighborhoods, often with little accountability or thought to how the money might influence the political, economic, and socio-cultural environment of the community.[34]  Many groups, and even some gangs, formed neighborhood associations and applied for funding from foreign entities. In one neighborhood a successful "cash-for-work" program where youth removed rubble and cleaned canals was run entirely by a local gang. A leader of the group, who had previously been deported from the United States and thus wrote in English well enough to complete a grant application, suggested that the gang created an association so they could apply to a faith-based charity for funds. The gang/association was awarded a USD $50,000 contract which they used to employ several hundred youth for five months. Because they used the money judiciously and spent little on administration, the group was able to keep the program going for three months longer than they were required to do in their contract.[35]

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33 IASC, 2013; UNITAR, 2013.

34 Schuller and Morales, 2012; Zanotti,2010.

35 This information came from numerous community members and leaders as well as members of the gang which secured the CFW grant. Given the surprising nature of this arrangement, the author requested a copy of the grant application, progress reports to the donors, and work logs to verify the information.

*Some gangs that had been weak before the earthquake became stronger due to covert relationships with corrupt NGOs and development workers, emboldening their members to engage in violence aimed at expanding the group's reach.*

However, not all groups and leaders were as responsible as the abovementioned gang. Corruption, nepotism and exploitation (sexual and otherwise) of residents were rife. Many international organizations wanted to do work in poor neighborhoods but lacked the necessary contacts or language skills to navigate the process. More often than not, mobilizing funds to people who used them well occurred by default rather than design. The sudden surge of cash and access to resources gave some groups -- both gangs as well as other community groups -- and individuals new forms of power; community leaders who had previously been able to advocate for the neighborhood or were a bridge between gangs and the rest of society were suddenly voiceless. Despite official positions by many international organizations prohibiting interaction with gangs, most NGOs and development projects did end up negotiating, working, or forming informal relationships with gangs. Some gangs that had been weak before the earthquake became stronger due to covert relationships with corrupt NGOs and development workers, emboldening their members to engage in violence aimed at expanding the group's reach.

## Proportional use of violence

According to *jus ad bellum*, conflict should be waged only if there is the serious likelihood that it will be successful. War should not be used for futile causes. Any armed conflict should have reasonable probability of success without the use of disproportionate force. If disproportionate force must be used to assure a likelihood of success, than the war doesn't meet this criteria. Macro-proportionality is also important. The benefits that will emerge from war must be greater than whatever costs the war will generate for the civilian population. And war should only be used as a last resort, after all efforts at peaceful settlement have been exhausted and negotiations breakdown. This can be an arduous process involving threats, promises, and intervention by multiple actors. Strategies such as economic sanctions and blockades should, in principle, be used before war.[36]

In interviews, members of armed urban groups overwhelmingly agreed that while the use of violence should be in proportion to a threat against the group or its community, the amount of force used and the severity of violence with which conflict is waged in Haiti is rarely proportional to the reality of the situation. One gang leader discussed a 15-month armed conflict between the police, foreign troops acting in concert with the police anti-gang unit, and the gangs in the area of Bel Air. Reports from journalists and human rights workers indicated that U.S. marines and Haitian National

They are on file with the author. The program officer from the NGO distributing the CFW grants (which asked that the name of their organization not be disclosed) stated that they were not aware that the group was a gang when the application was submitted but that they became aware after the funds had been disbursed. The donor agency decided to continue working with the group despite their status as a gang because their program was "popular, successful," and they "used the money they were given well."
36 Walzer, 2000.

Police engaged in unprovoked attacks against civilians in this neighborhood while attempting to find and arrest suspected supporters of the Lavalas, the political party to which the overthrown president belonged. After a number of bystanders were shot by U.S. marines in early 2004, Haitian radio stations began reporting that weapons and ammunition caches used by gang members against the police were hidden in the neighborhood.

At the time, gang leaders publically stated that they were in possession of few weapons and no ammunition:

> "Looking at the events I see all the steps that the Americans, [President] Latortue, and then MINUSTAH took in their war against Lavalas. Their response was an overreaction to the reality. But by overreacting, they created a new reality so that the threat looked greater than it was and this justified the level of their violence…. In turn, [another armed group] responded with violence and that started a cycle that went on for, I don't know, a year?

> "The foreign military blocked our neighborhood. You couldn't get in or out. They made threats against us in the media. They also made promises of peace and municipal services if we turned in our weapons. The problem was that in justifying the initial violence against [Bel Air] and making an excuse for shooting our women and children, they created an illusion that the benefits of violence against us out-weighted the costs of accidently shooting a few market women. It was a no-win situation for us. So we had to fight back, even if we were just fighting with rocks."

Other members interviewed agreed that disproportional response is often linked to cyclical violence by armed gangs:

> "When we fight [another armed urban group], the violence we use against this is a lot more than they used against us. Say, for example, that I come into your zone. And don't have good relations. So you beat me up. And then my guys go and use a knife to cut someone in your zone. Then you come back and shot my girl. So I send my friends out and they kill two of your friends. It keeps going and going."

> "I think that all confrontations using guns involve more violence than is necessary. The Americans didn't need to invade the whole Middle East to kill Sadaam Hussein. The PNH [national police] don't need to shoot everyone in a house when they come to make an arrest. We don't need to go after everyone in neighborhood when we have a problem with one person. When someone has power and they can use as much

force as they want, that's what they do. They have the strength to do it so that is what they choose. Then, when the other side responds they will use the maximum violence possible."

## The authority of those using violence

*Jus ad bellum* requires that those waging war must have the proper authority to do so. This authority is often established through international institutions. An institution such as the United Nations passes resolutions which authorize intervention by member states, though there is debate about how much support within the UN is needed for action to be taken (some have argued that if the security council passes a resolution with key members abstaining or opposing then proper authority hasn't necessarily been established). States should avoid taking unilateral action, as this can be construed as an attempt to circumvent establishing proper authority before intervening.[37]  But how does this apply to the Haitian context? Do insurgent groups such as the Cannibal Army have the right to initiate a war?  And what about an armed urban gang?

Residents and members of armed groups were in marked disagreement about who has the authority to initiate a violent conflict. Two thirds of the members of armed groups interviewed were in favor of non-state actors such as gangs, having the right to initiate a war as long as they were organized and politically motivated while less than 3 per cent of residents agreed with this assertion. Where the two types of interviewees did agree was in relation to the authority that a gang exerts to protect its neighborhood. Nearly all gang members and two thirds of all residents interviewed thought that if a neighborhood is attacked by a state actor or foreign peacekeepers than the gang has the authority to respond on behalf of the neighborhood.[38]  Some residents went so far as to call defense of the neighborhood a "duty", and said

"I don't like the behavior of those guys [in the gang] but if the police come in here shooting, [name of gang] has an obligation to protect us."

One resident explained the difference in gang's authority to engage in armed conflict on behalf of the neighborhood like this:

"If the government comes to hurt us, then [name of gang] is like our security guards. They have to protect us. But if [name of gang] gets into a conflict with [another gang from a different area] then their conflict is likely personal or it is regarding their crime. So when [that other gang] attacks us to punish [the gang in our neighborhood] we get resentful. They don't have the right to force us into a fight between

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37 Lazar, 2010.

38 Only half of gang members and less than five percent of residents agreed that gangs have the authority to defend the neighborhood when it is attacked by rival gangs rather than state actors.

thieves. But they do have the right to defend us if we are targeted by [the government]."

## Intention behind the violence

According to *jus ad bellum*, the use of violence must be done with just cause; action should be taken if it is to save innocent human lives that are in immediate danger whose lives would be lost without an intervention.[39] Intimately related to "just cause" is "right intention". Just wars are not for economic interest or out of revenge. Though it is possible for a war to be waged for a just cause, but without a right intention, for instance, when human life is in danger, but the intervening actors would not intervene unless they received some other benefit.[40] But ideally armed conflict should be initiated when the intention is to save innocent lives.

> "I only hurt people to protect my own people."

> "Some [gang members] delight in violence. They like the smell of blood. We don't want those kind of people in [our gang]. If you kill someone it should be a rational decision. You shouldn't kill someone because you get hot and you want revenge."

> "We can say that when [there was armed fighting in 2005] this was a war because it was for defense. Wars are about defending yourself, your family. When people start something because they want [to expand the geographic boundaries of the gang's territory] that is not defense, so it's not a war. It's greed."

> "It is only a war if you do it to better the lives of the people. A crazy person does a war just to make others suffer."

## Weapons of war

Schelling (1966) points out that an essential component of war is the power to hurt, basically the ability to use lethal force against your enemy. Similarly, for Cicero (1913), the acts of war are those in which weapons (axes, swords, pikes and the like) are used to kill. The weapons used in war are not limited to firearms; other weapons which have the power to hurt are also included under this definition. Bombing, even when no solider ever sets his foot on enemy soil, is still war. So too was primitive warfare where battles were fought with sharpened sticks, rocks, or by hurling fire at ones opponent.[41]

Weapons need not directly and immediately kill in order to satisfy this definition. For instance, the use of gas that disables and potentially kills, or poisoning the water

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39 McMahan, 2009; Walzer, 2000.

40 Walzer, 2000.

41 Keeley, 1997.

supply used by your opponent's military would also be an acceptable "weapon" under this definition. Similarly, the weapons used must be capable of killing; if only flash grenades and Tasers are used in battle then it's not a war.

Contrary to the assumption that members of armed urban gangs are actually armed, individual gang members often lack weapons and gangs as a whole possess fewer weapons per member than those owned by upper income Haitian families.[42] Rocks, knives, fists and feet were the most commonly used weapons in physical altercations initiated by gang members.[43] Many gang members noted that the perception that the group is armed is what gives them an advantage in conflict. Interviewees noted that toy, water, paintball and airsoft guns (with the orange safety cap pried off) were commonly carried by members to give the impression of being armed.

> "I'm one of the old guys here. I'm 35 and I haven't had a gun in ten years. I lost my gun when I got arrested. I haven't had once since. I don't need one because I have the reputation of carrying a gun in my pants… If I ever did need to shoot someone, I could go get a gun. But for right now, why do I need a gun?"

> "You don't have to actually have a weapon; you can just make then think you have one. If you put your cell phone in your pants like this [demonstrates] then they think it's a gun and that intimidates people."

> "The only weapon I have used is a rock. I didn't like using it because it makes the violence too intimate. I would prefer to use a gun but I don't have the money to buy one."

> "Once I pointed a [toy gun] at this guy and he handed me his wallet. I was just joking around. I gave it back. But I didn't forget that incident because I see that the belief I am armed is what makes me strong."

> "I have a gun. It's an old one that I got from my father. I knew that [name of another gang] was invited to this [interview] so I brought it to show them. [laughter] The guy at the door made me lock it in the closet before I could come in. [laughter] It isn't loaded. The bullets are pricey! I have to pay for my boy's school fees so I can't buy any bullets. But when he grows up I want to teach him how to shoot and give him my gun. When you have a gun you just feel like a man."

Gun ownership in general is remarkably low in Haiti. When asked in 2009 whether or not they held a weapon, 1.9 per cent of Port-au-Prince area households reported owning firearms. This increased to 2.3 per cent in 2010 but dropped to 2.1 per cent

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42 Kolbe, 2009; Kolbe & Muggah, 2010; Kolbe et al, 2010; Kolbe, Muggah & Puccio, 2012.

43 Kolbe & Hutson, 2006; Kolbe, 2009.

*Though there will continue to be debate about the definition and characteristics of Haiti's armed groups, it is still possible to try to understand causes, effects of and alternatives to armed urban conflict.*

by 2013.[44]  This is considerably less than the percentages given by MINUSTAH and other international actors in 2009 and 2010 who estimated that 8 to22 percent of all households are gun owners.  Poor households and those in popular zones were much less likely to own a gun than wealthier households and individuals from other parts of Port-au-Prince.[45]

There is no statistically significant relationship between political involvement, a family history of gang membership, and current membership in any armed group, and gun ownership. People who are politically involved or have a family history of gang membership are not necessarily more likely to own a weapon. And, surprisingly, gang members were no more likely to own a weapon than other residents of their neighborhood. In fact, gang members are significantly less likely to own a gun than a middle or upper-income person of the same gender.[46]

## How do we understand the scope and intensity of the conflict?

Though there will continue to be debate about the definition and characteristics of Haiti's armed groups, it is still possible to try to understand causes, effects of and alternatives to armed urban conflict. Creating a model for measuring the scope and intensity of the conflict is one step towards the experience of what Cicero (1913) called "contention by force." A common definition for these groups and their conflict is still essential, but towards that end, so is an understanding how we can quantify the nature of the conflict created by such groups.

One place to start is with the themes noted in this paper. Residents, community leaders, development workers and members of armed groups all identified common themes which can shape a model of conflict scope and intensity: the structure of the group and its relationship to the community and other groups, the types and severity of violence used, the intention behind the violence and its proportion in relationship to provoking events, and lastly, the nature of the battles and weapons themselves.

## Comparing murder rates

One easy way to determine the scope of the conflict is to look at how many people have died, how they died, who killed them, and where they were killed. In Haiti, murder rates are clearly associated with increased gang activity during some key

43 There is, obviously, the possibility that some gun owners were not truthful. Survey respondents may be reluctant to discuss sensitive topics or may appear cooperative but be dishonest when responding. To increase accuracy interviewers repeatedly reminded respondents that the survey was confidential. Because respondents were forthright in other segments of the interviews when providing sensitive information, it is assumed that the figure is reliable.

45 Kolbe & Muggah, 2011; Similar findings were evident in a 2012 study on file with the authors and partially presented in Kolbe, Muggah & Puccio,2012.

46 Ibid

periods. As groups engage in street battles, the number of those killed (intentionally or unintentionally, as in the case of bystanders) goes up, so too do criminal murders as the focus on the gang's conflict (gang vs. gang or gang vs. state actors) consumes much of the group's time and energy, opening the space for opportunistic crimes by non-members against residents who are normally protected by the gang. Household survey research has been successfully used to estimate crude murder rates as well as to establish the frequency of perpetration by various groups, the methods used for killing and the place of the murder.[47]   However, it is unclear how many deaths are necessary to tip the scale from ordinary levels of crime to a state of emergency or from a state of prolonged conflict that is not war to a state of something that is war.

Small and Singer (1970) set the bar at a thousand battle deaths.  But this creates two serious and related problems. First, it defines war in such a way that the measure of the cost of war is intrinsically linked to its definition. This creates an inferential problem if a scholar wanted to research what causes wars to be more or less costly as the inclusion criteria for wars will be armed conflicts that have a particular cost. Secondly, Singer and Small only included battlefield deaths in their definition. Not only did they limit the deaths to those occurring among soldiers, but they also limited the deaths to those as a direct result of combat.

Wars are messy. Rousseau (1762) was one of many who pointed out that combatants are not the only ones killed in war. In fact civilians frequently bear as much or more of the costs of war as do soldiers. Some estimate that as many as 100,000 civilians have been killed thus far in the Iraq War. An estimated 10 million civilians, half of the population, were killed during war in the Congo. Nine million civilians or more were killed in the First World War.[48]   In Haiti, 8,000 people died in the capital in the 22 months after the main events of the 2004 civil conflict, far more than the several hundred who were killed on the battlefield in the years of rural fighting by insurgent groups which preceded the overthrow of the government.[49]

Combat isn't the only way that soldiers die. Combatants are killed in accidents, friendly fire incidents, and by preventable illness. In 1918, half of the American soldiers who died in Europe were killed not by a bullet or a bomb, but by influenza. In 2010, for the second year in a row, more American soldiers committed suicide (n=468) than the number of those killed in battle (n=462). It is clear that war kills both civilians and soldiers and it kills both on and off the battlefield.[50] Taking all of this

*It is unclear how many deaths are necessary to tip the scale from ordinary levels of crime to a state of emergency or from a state of prolonged conflict that is not war to a state of something that is war.*

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47 Kolbe, et al, 2010; Kolbe, 2009; Kolbe & Hutson, 2006; Kolbe & Muggah, 2012; Kolbe, Muggah & Puccio, 2012; Moestue & Muggah, 2009.

48 Zbigniew, 1997.

49 Kolbe & Hutson, 2006.

50 Hoffman, 2011.

into consideration, any discussion on the definition of war cannot simply be based, battlefield deaths. Though war is violent and through it people are killed, the definition of war proposed in this paper only requires one death of a combatant. This opens the door to further study of the true costs of war, study that won't be limited by the bias in Singer and Small's definition.

## Conclusions

This paper explores the complicated and contentious issue of gangs in urban Haitian society, making a modest dent in the empirical research void on gangs and insurgent groups in Haiti's social and political life. This paper set out to examine whether Haiti´s gang-related violence constitutes a "war" using criteria embedded in the Geneva Conventions and found that this question is impossible to address without establishing clear definitions and a shared vocabulary for understanding the complex motivations for urban violence.

Clearly, the narrative that has dominated the discourse on Haiti's gangs is overly simplistic. Intensive field research conducted over the past ten years in more than a dozen studies demonstrates the complexity of gang identities, roles, functions and the impact on stabilization and development activities. The role of the media, political groups, financial backers and the international community further complicates efforts to understand and address gang violence. In highlighting the scale and dimension of armed conflict, innovative research methods were used including qualitative field work with members of armed groups, which could be duplicated in other conflict settings as researchers strive to unpack how conflict tips the scale from "ordinary" violence to war.

This paper finds that Haiti's armed groups are heterogeneous and despite similarities among the rank and file membership, motivation and relationships – both personal and historic – play a large role in motivating individuals to be active with and within armed groups. Differentiating between groups is key for policy makers and development workers alike as the motivation and relationships influence both the success of community violence reduction efforts, as well as the success of security and policing efforts. The lines between groups are not always easy to distinguish and in the past, misunderstandings about the political affiliation, financial backing and access to resources of particular gangs has hampered stabilization and development efforts.

The paper also notes that the perceptions, functions and activities of armed groups change over time in Haiti. Efforts to establish democratic governance and the presence of foreign peacekeepers have had a profound impact on the development of gang violence in urban Haiti, with membership in gangs and other armed groups increasing during times of government repression. It is important to note the shift in

*Haiti's armed groups are heterogeneous and despite similarities among the rank and file membership, motivation and relationships – both personal and historic – play a large role in motivating individuals to be active with and within armed groups.*

how armed groups are viewed by residents and development workers as well as also how they viewed themselves. The use of generic and all-encompassing concepts such as "gangs" may obscure rather than reveal underlying motivations.

Armed groups in Haiti have comparatively sophisticated understandings of the basic rules of war, even if not described as such. Indeed, there are established understandings about the use of force, proportionately, authority structures and other factors. The experience of such groups in Haiti forces us to revisit our understandings of "tipping points" from conflict to war. Indeed, there are many insights from the Haiti experience that may apply more broadly to other settings described as "other forms of violence".

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