



Article

# From Gangs to Gods in Guatemala

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A documentary about converting gangs into faith communities

***In Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America, a wave of criminal violence has replaced the politically motivated violence of the 1980s and early 90s. With thousands of members, transnational youth gangs such as MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang now pose a significant threat to citizen security and the country's weak and corrupt institutions. For many of Guatemala's youth, there seems to be no way out of this vicious cycle of violence. Recent research, however, shows that Evangelical churches, particularly Pentecostals, are engaging in ministries aimed at rescuing and rehabilitating gang members and providing them with a community of support as they reintegrate into Guatemalan society.***

## **—Bill Gentile, *Gods and Gangs***

*Gods and Gangs: Criminal Violence and Religion in Guatemala* follows the work of sociologist Robert Brenneman as he interviews four individuals who left the criminal underworld of Central America and converted to Pentecostalism. This documentary, produced and directed by American University School of Communication professor Bill Gentile, is part of the [larger initiative](#) by the research team at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University to explore religious responses to crime in Latin America.

The persistence of organized crime in Latin America is part of the much broader story of Latinx populations fighting for economic and political stability in their communities after decades of economic exploitation, climate devastation, and regime change experiments by the United States. Gangs often fill the power vacuums left by political upheaval. Gentile's three-part documentary gives viewers a glimpse into the effort of Pentecostal ministries to reintegrate disaffected youth into mainstream society

This series of three short films sketches the context of gang violence in Guatemala and highlights the role of religion as a potential source for both individual and social transformation. The first film is an overview of how churches cope with the gang-related violence that has rocked this Central American nation. In the second and third parts, Gentile follows Robert Brenneman as he conducts follow-up research for his book, [Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America](#).

*Gods and Gangs, Part I: The Gangs*

*Gods and Gangs, Part II: The Researcher*

*Gods and Gangs, Part III: The Pastor*

[More on the Religion and Violence project](#)