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Conflict **News feature** 14 February 2022

Can Haiti's gangs help build a better future for the country?

'The question today is not which Haiti we will leave to the new generation, but which new generation we will leave to Haiti.'

Jess DiPierro Obert

Freelance journalist based in Port-au-Prince



A street mural in Port-au-Prince that has become a meeting point for Haitian protesters angry over claims of government corruption and lack of economic opportunities. (Ricardo Arduengo/TNH)

PORT-AU-PRINCE

On the outskirts of Haiti's capital, gunfire crackles in the seaside shantytown of Cité Soleil. Children playing soccer freeze for a moment. Down the street, a teenager bandages the hand he injured during a gunfight with a rival gang.

The number of gangs in Port-au-Prince has grown from roughly three dozen in 2004 to more than 200 today – a worsening situation that could rob the Caribbean country of its future and prolong the need for long-term aid, according to civil

society members, youth advocates, political groups, and humanitarian
organisations. **The New Humanitarian** | Journalism from the heart of crises

Gangs have been part of the Haitian political landscape for decades – often deployed by leaders to rally support or quell opposition – but violence and kidnappings have reached unprecedented levels in recent months, making it harder for the government and aid groups to tackle the country's overlapping humanitarian crises. Persistent street protests have also thwarted business activities in the capital since 2018, largely involving restless youths angry about alleged government corruption and the lack of economic prospects.

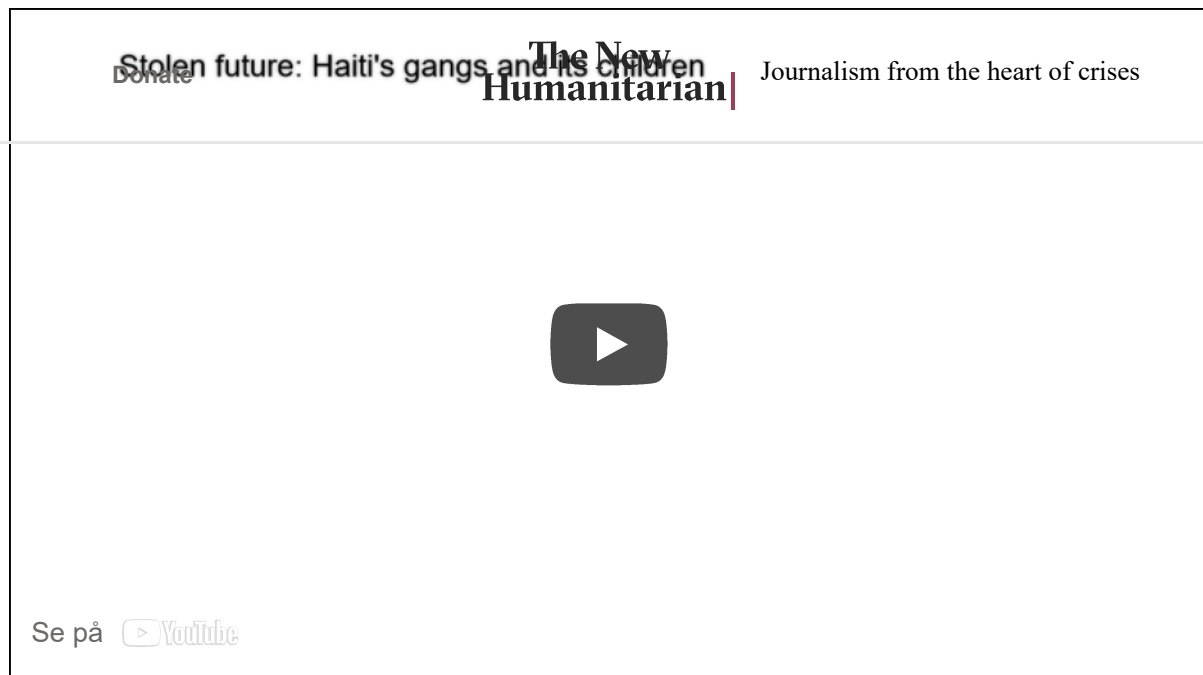
[Read more → In Haiti, gang violence strains aid operations and demands new approaches](#)

Nearly half the population is under 24 – a young demographic with the biggest stake in Haiti's future, and one that has a profound influence on everything from security issues and political stability to how the country copes with climate change risks.

Much of Haiti's workforce is without formal work – employment prospects made gloomier since the pandemic. Frustrated by the absence of opportunity and a political malaise that began long before the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, young Haitians have increasingly turned to gangs as a way of earning cash or power.

In December, The New Humanitarian gained rare access to current and former gang members in the capital. Three Haitian journalists were key in reporting the story but their names are being withheld out of precaution for their safety.

Recalling gang life



Some former gang members spoke to reporters about lasting trauma from their deeds – another challenge for many entering adulthood. Others claim to have stepped in where the government has failed, filling a power vacuum and building an alternative future for the country.

“Gana Ti Zile”, whose nickname roughly translates to “small island”, joined a gang when he was 14. Now 35, he has become one of the leaders of G-Pèp, or People’s Gang, which controls part of Cité Soleil’s Brooklyn neighbourhood.

Unlike other gangs that have turned to kidnappings for ransom – even against Haiti’s poor, who can barely pay for food – Ti Zile said G-Pèp is helping the community, for example when the streets flood or to ease deliveries of international aid.

“It’s not normal to have young kids hold guns, but Haiti offers nothing.”

However, like so many other gangs in Haiti, G-Pèp still uses young children and teenagers for everything from running errands to fighting rivals. “There are young guys who fight with us... some die [and] some new ones come up,” Ti Zile said as he surveyed water marks from rising sea levels on some of the houses around Cité Soleil – climate crisis-driven risks that Haiti faces each year. “It’s not normal to have young kids hold guns, but Haiti offers nothing.”

Haiti's many humanitarian problems are acute in Cité Soleil, a sprawling marginalised community of some 400,000 people, where it's international aid groups and local NGOs – not the government – providing the majority of basic services, such as water, electricity, and education.

Some Cité Soleil residents, however, don't view the gangs as saviours.

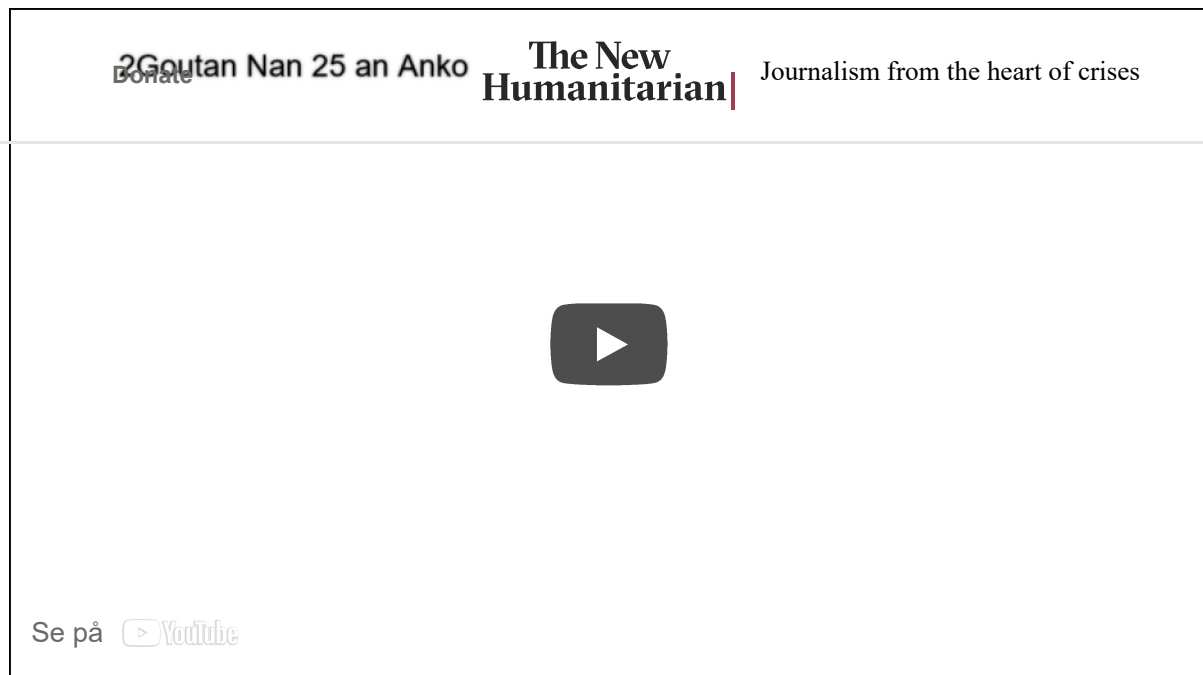
"The reality is that we residents of Cité Soleil are trapped," one 20-year-old told The New Humanitarian, asking, out of security fears, that his name not be used. "I personally lost friends, killed just because they were passing particular neighbourhoods. Sometimes I can't go to school; my mother can't go to [work] because of the clashes. Every day, we risk death in one way or another. We should all leave here, but where to go?"

'The kidnapping system is where money can be found'

Gangs are not unique to Haiti. Other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are facing similar challenges with armed groups. But the political dysfunction in Haiti – made worse by decades of outside interference – has allowed them to flourish.

Social media has also helped propel the gangs. They often use live Facebook streams to grow their followers – some of whom told The New Humanitarian they were drawn to wanting the flashy garb gang members often wear. One rap song about Haiti's gang culture asks what the next generation of Haitians will look like in 25 years. Another music video features a group of armed masked men rapping about "Izo 5 segonn" or "Izo 5 seconds" – the gang that rules Village de Dieu (Village of God), a lawless Port-au-Prince neighbourhood.

Nan 25 an Anko by Haitian rapper 2Goutan



Gang violence has displaced some 19,000 people since the beginning of June 2021. At times, it has shut down the main road connecting the capital with the southern peninsula – a region still reeling from a 7.2-magnitude earthquake that killed some 2,200 people in August, as well as from Hurricane Matthew that killed hundreds and caused widespread devastation in 2016.

Haiti now has the world's highest per capita number of kidnappings. Last year, there were 950, including a group of American and Canadian missionaries taken by the 400 Mawozo gang, which demanded a \$17 million ransom. All the missionaries are now free.

“The kidnapping system is where money can be found.”

Many people have also been killed. Two journalists were shot and killed by suspected gang members in January while covering the violence in Laboule 12, another neighbourhood in the capital.

According to Eric Calpas, a sociologist who has studied Haitian youth and gangs for more than two decades, the roughly 35 armed groups in existence in 2004 has now become more than 200, with some gangs having as many as 100 members, although precise data is difficult and dangerous to gather.

“The kidnapping system is where money can be found,” said Calpas, who worked in the UN’s peacekeeping mission between 2004 and 2008 as part of a unit that encouraged armed groups and gangs to disarm.

The cycle of child recruitment

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Haiti was once one of the wealthiest colonies in the Americas, but centuries of colonial exploitation, foreign interventions, government mismanagement, and natural disasters have contributed to more than half of today's 11.4 million population living below the poverty line.

The poverty, power imbalances, and a lack of education have left Haiti's youth particularly vulnerable to gang recruitment.

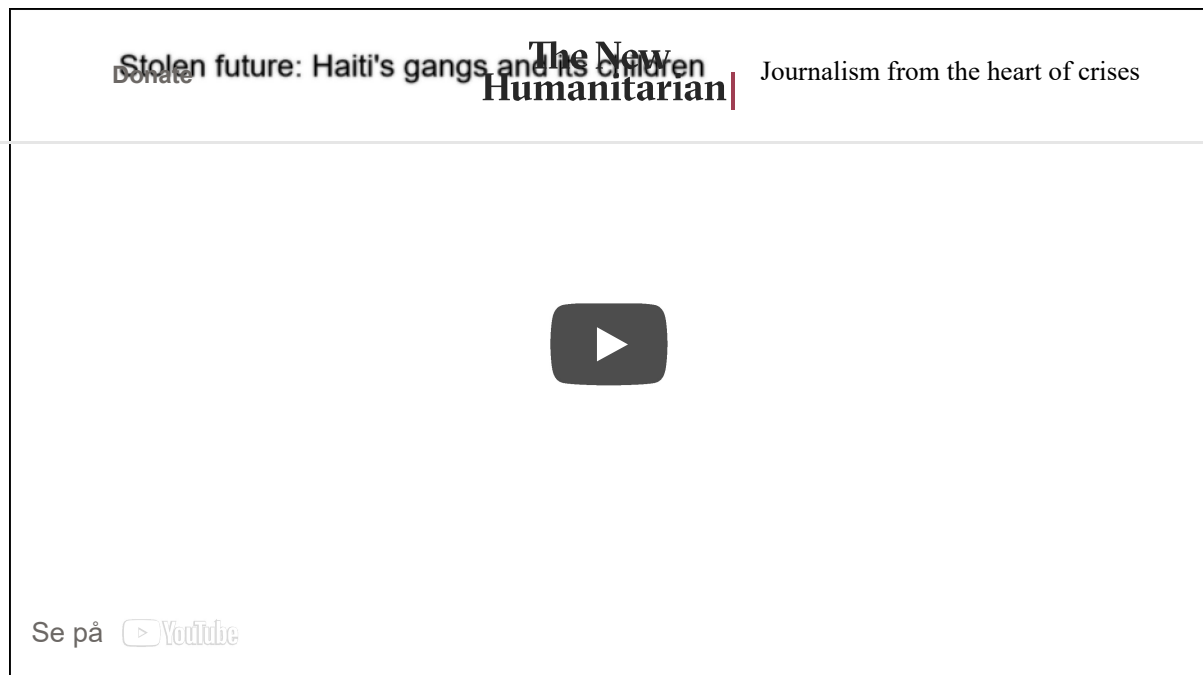
Due to street protests, gang violence, and rising COVID-19 cases, schools have repeatedly suspended classes in recent years. Some 70 percent of the schools in Haiti's southern peninsula were also damaged or destroyed in the August earthquake.

"The urgency is to train a new generation of citizens," Education Minister Nesmy Manigat told The New Humanitarian. "The question today is not which Haiti we will leave to the new generation but which new generation we will leave to Haiti."

High unemployment and a weak healthcare system loom over many families. Parents have often been forced to leave their children, either for work or because they have no means to care for them. Haiti also has one of the lowest life expectancies in the world.

"I had no one to help me, and so I had to look out for myself," a 21-year-old former gang member told The New Humanitarian from inside the CERMICOL juvenile detention centre where he has been since he was 18 for gun possession. Asking that he not be named for security reasons, he said his mother died when he was young, and his father was absent. With little to no help available, he found a home with a gang in Jalousie, an area of pastel-coloured shacks hugging a steep hillside in the capital.

"I'm an orphan in many ways": Why I joined



Children and teenagers can earn anywhere between a few dollars for running errands to roughly \$40 or more a week for other tasks.

One 13-year-old earned more than \$50 – no small amount when most Haitians live on less than \$2 a day – for alerting gang members to a kidnapping target’s whereabouts, according to another former gang member who was sent to the same correctional facility at 14, serving three years for phone theft. He asked that he also not be named for security reasons.

Another gang member who spoke to The New Humanitarian has been at the correctional facility since he was 16. He’s 19 years old now. He was lured into gangs after the murder of his father, a wharf worker in Jérémie, one of the southern towns worst hit by the August earthquake. He said he had been doing well in school until anger took root. “I said I had to avenge him, because they killed him in front of me,” he told The New Humanitarian.

“We can’t replace the state and do their jobs for them. That’s not our job.”

Although facilities like CERMICOL provide schooling and counselling, they are also breeding grounds for reinforcing gang systems, according to Kettly Julien, executive director for the Institut Mobile d’Education Démocratique (IMED), a human rights organisation that works in correctional facilities.

Some children at the centre wait more than five years before seeing a judge, she said. A single cell sometimes houses between 40 and 60 children. Many youths try to replicate the same gang hierarchy within the correctional facility.

Julien's group tries to continue helping gang members after they leave the facility, working with NGOs to provide them and their families with food, but sometimes it isn't enough. "We can't replace the state and do their jobs for them. That's not our job," she said.

Long links between gangs and politics

Haiti's political leaders and elites have long used gangs and paramilitary groups to exert control.

One of the best known paramilitary groups in Haitian history was the "Tonton Macoute". The group, named after a mythical bogeyman who reportedly ate children, formed in 1959, shortly after a coup attempt against François "Papa Doc" Duvalier.

It was under Duvalier, and later his son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, that the area near the capital's main port and airport – now known as Cité Soleil – began to swell. Two fires in Port-au-Prince and a migration boom saw rural Haitians flock in looking for work.

Many of those jobs, however, were short-lived as unrest drove away investment, and several factories were damaged or destroyed. Other efforts have also floundered, due largely to insecurity and political instability. Many Haitians rely on remittances from the diaspora.

The rise – and fall – of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who saw himself as a champion of Haiti's poor, represented a turning point for gangs in Haiti, particularly those in areas such as Cité Soleil where the grinding poverty contrasts sharply to that of the wealth found in Pétienville, a plush suburb home to many of the country's elite.

Many of the gangs, particularly in Cité Soleil, rallied behind Aristide's support of the poor, as well as his criticism of Haiti's elite and foreign meddling. Before he was ousted from power for a second time in 2004, Aristide was linked to armed groups called "Chimè" or "ghosts".

The associations between political leaders and gangs have continued since.

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Stolen future: Haiti's gangs and its children



Se på  YouTube

Three men who had supported Moïse and were reportedly close to him before his death were sanctioned by the US Treasury over their alleged involvement in a 2018 attack against anti-government protesters in which at least 71 people were killed, 400 houses destroyed, and at least seven women were raped. One was Jimmy “Barbecue” Cherizier, a former police officer who has since become leader of the “G9”, a federation of gangs in Haiti’s capital.

Like some armed groups who sided with Aristide, Cherizier has railed against the huge economic and power disparities between the poor and Haiti’s elite – often lighter-skinned business owners and politicians who control much of the country’s wealth.

Cherizier has also called for the resignation of Haiti’s current prime minister, Ariel Henry, who narrowly escaped an alleged assassination attempt himself in the northern city of Gonaïves on 1 January.

Elections are meant to take place this year, but no date has been set – largely because of the gang violence, and due to infighting between Henry and civil society groups who want a transitional two-year government to assume power.

Henry, a neurosurgeon, has vowed to crack down on the gangs, but the police say they don’t have enough resources to tackle the problem.

“We are very concerned about the insecurity and the hotbeds of gangs that are growing across the country,” Garry Desrosiers, spokesperson for the National Police of Haiti, told The New Humanitarian.

“Obviously, security is expensive in all countries of the world,” he added. “But we don't just need money, we also need logistical [support] and human resources. It is not up to the police to seek these means. The state defines security policy and allocates resources to the police.”

‘There wouldn't be war if there was work’

Given the long history of gangs in Haiti and their rising numbers, some say it's inevitable that they need to be part of the solution – especially since many of their young members have so much to lose if the country's social, economic, and political problems don't improve.

“This isn't a military solution; the solution is social, economic, and it's about justice,” said Clarens Renois, a former journalist who is now with the National Union for the Integrity and Reconciliation, a political party that is calling for non-violence and reconciliation in order to spur investment and stability in the country.

“Give [gang members] work and they will leave the gangs,” Renois said.

Ti Zile has the same views.

“Most of our friends didn't make it to their 18th birthdays.”

“There wouldn't be war if there was work,” he told The New Humanitarian. “The youth would wake up to work – not fight – because they are making money. But when there are no jobs, the guys wake up, they sit with their guns, they finish drinking and smoking and... they want to shoot in Brooklyn.”

One former gang member said he joined the “Soley 19” gang when he was just 14. Now in his 40s, he works with charities to help register children for school. He also said he volunteers to help with infrastructure projects in Cité Soleil. He declined to be named for security reasons.

“Most of our friends didn't make it to their 18th birthdays,” he told The New Humanitarian. “This is why I'm proud, because I survived. Now, I have a house with three rooms where my kids can grow. I have real beds now.”

Jess DiPierro Obert reported from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Three Haitian journalists, who asked not to be named for security reasons, also reported from the heart of crises edited by Paisley Dodds in London, UK. Video footage edited by Ciara Lee in London, UK.

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