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HND43076.E

Honduras: Incidence of tattooing among criminal gangs; description, meaning and images of tattoos commonly used by such gangs; significance ascribed by state security forces to the different types of gang tattoos

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Tattooing is a common practice among Honduran street gang members, who do so for reasons such as initiation (El Heraldo 19 May 2004), self-identification (UN 14 June 2002; Christian Science Monitor 18 Aug. 2004; CNN 29 Oct. 2001) and the commemoration of criminal accomplishments, slain comrades and other significant events in the member's life (El Heraldo 25 May 2004; UN 14 June 2002). However, gang leaders have reportedly responded to the crackdown on organized crime launched by the government in 2003 by ordering members to refrain from tattooing themselves in ways that facilitate their identification by police (El Heraldo 6 Oct. 2004). Furthermore, street gangs have reportedly begun using non-tattooed, normally dressed youth to collect a "war tax" (impuesto de guerra) from bus drivers operating in the Tegucigalpa region (ibid.).

Several sources provide descriptions of tattoos, all of which have a particular history and meaning (UN 14 June 2002), used by Honduras' two largest street gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) and Mara 18 (M-18) (El Heraldo 25 May 2004; ibid. 27 May 2004; Miami Herald 8 Apr. 2003; CNN 29 Oct. 2001). Gang-specific tattoos include the letters "MS" or the number 13 in the case of Mara Salvatrucha (El Heraldo 25 May 2004; ibid. 27 May 2004), and the numbers 18 or 666 (signifying 3 times 6) in the case of the M-18 (ibid. 25 May 2004). Additionally, the Tegucigalpa-based newspaper El Heraldo stated that the latest police investigations showed that the principal tattoo associated with the M-18 is made up of three points in the form of a pyramid, whereas the principal MS tattoo is made up of three points in the form of an inverted pyramid, signifying the three main elements in the life of a gang member, namely women, money and vice (mujeres, dinero y vicios) (ibid.). The three points are usually tattooed on the hand (ibid.).

Many of the other tattoos used by gang members are focused on themes of death or Satanism (CNN 29 Oct. 2001; Miami Herald 8 Apr. 2003; AP 5 Aug. 2003), gargoyles (El Heraldo 25 May 2004), black serpents, inverted crosses and the face of the devil (CNN 29 Oct. 2001). Also allegedly common are images of spider's webs, signifying that one had been incarcerated (El Heraldo 19 May 2004); tear drops, said to commemorate the death of friends (ibid. 25 May 2004; UN 14 June 2002); and clown's faces that are half happy and half sad (El Heraldo 25 May 2004). Some gang members are also reportedly tattooed with Chinese characters, friends' names (ibid.), and the saying "forgive me mother" (perdóname madre mía) (ibid. 19 May 2004).

Street gangs have also reportedly adopted the practice of allowing members to tattoo dots on their skin in recognition of their involvement in noteworthy crimes, with the number of dots dependent, for example, on the victim's importance or profile (ibid. 25 May 2004). Other tattoo-related protocols adopted by street gangs include restrictions on the size of tattoos, with drawings larger than 10 centimetres in size limited to the most committed (más comprometidos) members (ibid.). As well, only gang leaders are reportedly allowed to tattoo their faces, while novice members are limited to tattoos on their chest and arms in the case of the M-18, and the neck and back, in the case of the MS (ibid.). According to David La Buda, a Roman Catholic priest who runs a tattoo removal program in Chamelecón, north of Tegucigalpa, typical locations for gang members' tattoos include the neck, chest, arms and legs (CNN 29 Oct. 2001).

No photographs of tattoos borne specifically by Honduran street gang members could be found by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

No specific information on the significance, if any, state security forces ascribe to the different types of gang tattoos could be found among the sources consulted. However, police reportedly associate tattoos with gang membership (UN 14 June 2002; Christian Science Monitor 18 Aug. 2004), which has led to the arrest of tattooed individuals under the terms of anti-gang legislation (ibid.; El Heraldo 11 Jan. 2004). Furthermore, security forces have been allegedly carrying out extrajudicial executions of suspected gang members, using their tattoos to
identify them (La Opinión 9 May 2004).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


Miami Herald . 8 April 2003. Mark Stevenson. "Vicious 'Maras' a Bane for Prison; Gang Riot Killed 69 in Honduras." (NEXIS)


Additional Sources Consulted

Oral source: Unsuccessful attempts to contact the Jóvenes Hondureños Adelante-Juntos Avancemos (JHA-JA)

Internet sites, including: Children in Organized Armed Violence (COAV), ConexiHon.com, El Nuevo Diario [Managua], La Prensa [San Pedro Sula]
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