



[Home](#) > [Research](#) > [Responses to Information Requests](#)

RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

[New Search](#) | [About RIR's](#) | [Help](#)

20 October 2004

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
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

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), for example drawings of skulls (*Miami Herald* 8 Apr. 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

Associated Press (AP). 5 August 2003. Freddy Cuevas. "Grenade Explodes at Honduran Prison Killing 2 Prisoners, Injuring Two Others." (Dialog)

Christian Science Monitor [Boston]. 18 August 2004. Raphaele Bail. "Marked Men with no Place to Hide." <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0818/p12s01-woam.html>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

CNN. 29 October 2001. "American Priest Helps Honduran Street Children Shed Tattoos." <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/honduras/tattoos.htm>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

El Heraldo [Tegucigalpa]. 6 October 2004. "Metamorfosis de las maras." <<http://www.elheraldo.hn/series.php?nid=6&idse=5&fecha=2004-10-06>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

_____. 27 May 2004. "Ley Antimaras desintegra pandillas." <<http://www.elheraldo.hn/detalle.php?nid=13145&sec=12&fecha=2004-05-27>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

_____. 25 May 2004. "El tatuaje y el grafitti, el lenguaje de la muerte." <<http://www.elheraldo.hn/detalle.php?nid=13032&sec=2&fecha=2004-05-25>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

_____. 19 May 2004. "La MS, una historia de terror y violencia." <<http://www.elheraldo.hn/detalle.php?nid=12706&sec=2&fecha=2004-05-19>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

_____. 11 January 2004. Rodolfo Isaula. "Un tatuaje no es prueba para capturar a alguien." <<http://www.elheraldo.hn/detalle.php?nid=6681&sec=12&fecha=2004-01-11>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

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

La Opinión [Los Angeles]. 9 May 2004. W.E. Gutman. "El ciclo infernal de las pandillas." <<http://www.laopinion.com/primerapagina/?rkey=00040508172701140537>> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

United Nations (UN). 14 June 2002. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). *Ejecuciones extrajudiciales, sumarias o arbitrarias . Informe de la Relatora Especial, Sra. Asma Jahangir, presentado en cumplimiento de la resolución 2002/36 de la Comisión de Derechos Humanos. Adición . (E/CN.4/2003/3/Add.2)*. <[http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/d40ca4f92862ff4ec1256c450054e84e/\\$FILE/G0214029.pdf](http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/d40ca4f92862ff4ec1256c450054e84e/$FILE/G0214029.pdf)> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2004]

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]

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.