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Daring To Care

*Community-Based Responses to Youth Gang
Violence in Central America and Central American
Immigrant Communities in the United States*

Introduction: Communities Confront the Problem of Youth Gang Violence

Youth gang violence in Central America and in predominantly Central American immigrant communities in the United States is a serious problem. "*Clikas*" or subgroups connected to well-known gangs such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13), or *Barrio Dieciocho*, (18th Street Gang), engage in violent competition between each other and in criminal activities including local drug dealing, extortion, assault and robbery. Gangs plague communities in places as disparate as the city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras and the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. Young people, especially boys and young men in poor or marginal communities with relatively few resources, are drawn into these gangs and risk becoming both perpetrators and victims of the violence associated with them.

Youth gang violence is only one part of the spectrum of violent and criminal behavior that people in poor communities in the Americas experience—a spectrum that runs from intra-familial violence to the coercion of organized crime syndicates and to the rivalries of drug traffickers. Gangs are a highly visible part of the spectrum and one that receives significant attention from the media. However, gangs bear only part of the blame for the problems of crime and violence in poor communities. Serious efforts to strengthen citizen security cannot focus their attention on youth gangs to the exclusion of other sources of violence and crime, which, depending on the specific community, may be responsible for as large a share, or larger, of criminal activity. Nonetheless, gangs do present a significant challenge to public security, and the problem should be treated with the seriousness that it merits.

It is important to distinguish between youth gangs and other forms of group-based crime and violence. While definitions vary, most experts describe youth gangs as street or neighborhood-based groups, made up of adolescents—primarily though not exclusively boys, ages 12-17—and young adults—primarily young males, ages into the early 20s—who come together in response to needs for identity and belonging. In these gangs, alcohol and drug abuse are common, as is violent intra- and inter-gang activity. Gang members often support themselves and contribute to the support of the group through criminal activity, including robbery and assault, extortion, and street-level drug sales. Youth gangs can mutate into organized criminal groups, and in some communities in the United States and Central America, particular cliques of youth gangs in the last few years have become more organized and more involved in systematic criminal activity.[1] But the dominant model continues to be one in which violence is expressive, rather than instrumental, and criminal activity is a secondary rather than the central activity of the gang.

To be effective in addressing the problem of youth gangs, it is essential to be clear about this distinction. This is not meant to excuse or diminish the significance of the violent or criminal activity in which youth gangs engage. But an informed understanding of the nature of youth gangs, what they are and why they form, is necessary to formulate effective responses. Responding effectively to gang violence requires a comprehensive approach that includes prevention programs that help young people in difficult situations meet their own needs, intervention programs that offer alternatives for those most attracted to gang life, rehabilitation for those who wish to leave gangs and law enforcement that deters crime and reduces violence.

Researchers believe that the most effective responses to gang violence are comprehensive, involving prevention, intervention, rehabilitation, and law enforcement, and that they are community-based, drawing on the work of local organizations, churches, schools, and community networks. This report focuses on examples in the United States and in Central America that illustrate this approach.

Innovative Practices in the United States and Central America

The programs highlighted in this publication were selected because they are community-based programs and apply innovative prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs in their communities. This publication does not attempt to offer an exhaustive survey of every successful community-based program found in the United States and Central America, but rather, to provide case studies of specific programs that are enjoying success in their communities. Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles and the Center for Formation and Orientation in San Salvador are two of many examples of prevention and rehabilitation programs not profiled here that have successfully reached out to thousands of youth in dangerous areas to provide alternative educational

and recreational opportunities, counseling services, and job training.[2] Small, locally-run programs can have a significant impact in reducing gang violence in specific communities, and often grow into larger models while preserving their effectiveness.

While there is no easy formula for creating an effective program, and different approaches may be warranted in different contexts, there are certain lessons that emerge from the cases profiled in this report. Some of those lessons are:

1 The most successful gang prevention programs are those that are community-led and bring together diverse actors such as schools, local government, healthcare centers, religious institutions and police.

2 Effective programs are usually designed by local or municipal government agencies and by community actors; national government agencies ought to provide technical assistance, guidance, and funding for local initiatives.

3 Communities vary, and gang violence prevention programs must be tailored to the conditions found in specific communities. The root causes of gang membership and their impact on a community differ and require varied approaches. Each program profiled in this publication began by analyzing the situation in its community and developed specific local responses based on that analysis.

4 Effective programs, such as those profiled here, recognize young people's need for identity and belonging. They reach out to youth, and they offer activities, workshops, and discussions that serve as alternatives to gang life. They are built on the belief that young people can become productive members of society with support and encouragement from program staff, from families and from communities, and that young people have tremendous energy that needs positive outlets to be channeled constructively rather than destructively.

Salvadoran youth breakdancing at a local youth violence prevention organization, the Centro de Formación y Orientación, San Salvador.

5 Effective organizations often involve youth who have participated in their programs or who are active in the community as outreach workers and program staff. This peer-to-peer model strengthens the ability of the programs to reach out to and involve neighborhood youth.

6 Effective programs develop strong relationships with a broad range of community organizations and institutions, which can reinforce and support the programs' work with young people. Developing relations with other community institutions can be difficult. Because there is often a stigma attached to working with at-risk or gang-involved youth, prevention and intervention programs frequently encounter prejudice and hostility in their work. But facing this challenge, and building strong community relationships, has a positive effect on young people in these programs.

7 Effective organizations develop constructive relations with local police. This is an especially difficult challenge. Community activists and young people tend to be deeply suspicious of the police, and police often see community programs that work with young people as protecting criminals. Most of the programs cited here have developed working relationships with the police, despite high levels of skepticism both on the part of police and civil society. Overcoming these hesitations and building trust can be a lengthy process, but doing so contributes significantly to the success of prevention and intervention efforts.

Many of these programs demonstrate that successful community programs addressing problems related to gangs can be created and implemented with limited resources and government support. That said, concerted and continued local and national government support for these kinds of programs is essential for their continued growth and success.

Endnotes

[1] Washington Office on Latin American and Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, *Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico and the US: executive summary*, March 2007.

[2] An evaluation of such programs in Latin America has been done by the Pan American Health Organization: PAHO, Proyecto Fomento del Desarrollo Juvenil y Prevención de la Violencia, *Documento de Evidencias Sobre el Estado del Arte de la Prevención de la Violencia en Adolescentes y Jóvenes Usando los Medios de Comunicación—Radio, Televisión, Impresos—y las Nuevas Tecnologías de la Comunicación*, 2006. http://www.paho.org/CDMEDIA/FCHGTZ/ INFORMACION%20REGIONAL/DOCUMENTOS/comunicacion.pdf. In the United States, work by specialists, Cheryl Maxson (University of California at Irvine) and Malcolm Klein (University of Southern California) have highlighted programs and policies that are effective in dealing with the root causes of youth gang violence, and their impact on a community.

Daring To Care: *Community-Based Responses to Youth Gang Violence*

Common Elements to Successful Anti-gang Strategies and Programs

by Caterina Gowis Roman

Caterina Gouvis Roman is a senior research associate studying youth gang issues at the Urban Institute, a non-profit research center in Washington DC. She has evaluated community-based anti-gang initiatives and comprehensive crime prevention and intervention programs in the United States for many years. She participated in a 2006 conference in El Salvador on youth gang violence in Central America and visited several community-based youth violence prevention and intervention programs there.

In the introduction to this brief, WOLA identifies some of the common themes underlying the variety of anti-gang programs highlighted in this report. I am pleased to see that they are similar to the successes and challenges I have witnessed over the years while studying gang problems and associated interventions in the United States. In particular, I want to draw attention to the importance of two promising strategies or principles mentioned in the profiles of the various programs. These are ***community-driven programming*** (the establishment of programs that respond to the self-identified needs of a particular community) and ***community capacity building*** (that is, efforts to strengthen a community's own ability to develop and support programs that work with its youth). I believe these two principles are at the foundation of solid anti-gang programming, whether the program is focused on prevention, intervention, or is comprehensive programming that includes a variety of strategies and target populations.

In other words, I believe that community-driven programming (sometimes called community mobilization because a community becomes mobilized to identify and address its problems) and the development of community capacity to carry out programs focused on anti-gang efforts are two central (and related) principles in what works. In the United States, gang problems often appear intractable—and these problems are magnified in Central America. But community mobilization against gangs, in concert with the strengthening of the community's capacity to carry out programs, has laid the groundwork for successful anti-gang efforts in the United States. I believe these same principles can work in Central America and other regions, even those experiencing economic and family instability, or with limited resources to launch coordinated and comprehensive anti-gang efforts. Below, I discuss these principles in more detail and how they are relevant for gang intervention and prevention programs.

To lay the groundwork for this discussion, it is important to emphasize that I am not advocating replication of specific US efforts or programs, but instead, an awareness and understanding of the principles embedded within effective community efforts against gangs. Both scholars and community-based practitioners working with youth in gangs and those at risk of joining gangs recognize that one cannot simply translate successful models utilized in the United States to areas outside of the US. Even within the United States, projects that were developed and effectively implemented in one setting cannot simply be transferred to another. For instance, the program so successful in cutting gang shootings and youth homicides in Boston in the mid 1990s did not transfer effectively when researchers attempted to replicate it in Los Angeles or Washington, DC. The successful anti-gang strategy implemented in the Chicago neighborhood of Little Village between 1992 and 1997, was tested (and heavily funded) in five emerging gang communities nationwide, and appears to have worked in only two of those five sites (and in those two sites, the

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strategy was less effective than it had been in Little Village).

In fact, the successes *and failures* of anti-gang programs and strategies provide important slices of information that, when put together, generate essential lessons for cities big and small, and suburban and rural communities seeking advice or best practices with regard to preventing youth from joining gangs or combating gangs already wreaking havoc on communities. In all the research I have conducted on anti-gang programming and other research on successful elements of crime prevention partnerships, community mobilization and focused capacity building appear to be present in successes and absent in failures. These principles—clearly present within the programs discussed in this brief—can provide the foundation for success in any area dealing with gangs.

Community Mobilization

Researchers and practitioners alike surely have heard gang experts advise over the years that anti-gang strategies must take into account the community context and be tailored to address the underlying root causes of gang violence in the targeted communities as well as the particular nature of gang crime. In response, communities interested in combating gang violence usually attempt to cobble together information on the level and types of violence being committed and the demographic characteristics of the youth and young adults participating in gangs and gang-related crimes. Yes, these "data gathering" steps are important, but community mobilization is more than an understanding of community context.

Community mobilization for gang prevention is a dynamic process that involves the community as an active agent in anti-gang efforts. Interested community members and groups can include residents, parents and young people, churches, schools, local businesses, social groups, and others. The key is having the community

involved not just in identifying the problem, but in designing responses. Community mobilization around gangs can have a range of possible objectives— such as building community awareness of the problem, developing grassroots strategies to prevent at-risk youth from joining gangs, or providing known gang members with jobs or the skills necessary to obtain legitimate jobs. My research has found that strategies that arise internally from the community level are often more likely to foment trust between partners in a community, gather appropriate resources, and in turn, succeed in accomplishing objectives, than are anti-crime and gang initiatives that arise through external or extra-local pressure or incentives. This is evident in the Gang Intervention Program (GIP) in the District of Columbia and in Paz y Justicia in Honduras. The unrelenting involvement and dedication of local community leaders, combined with careful outreach to gang and at-risk gang youth in these sites, have built trust and eased long-standing tensions between the police, youth and residents.

Community Capacity Building

Community capacity building is connected to, and in fact, inherent in successful community mobilization. A community's capacity is its ability to organize itself to take *collective action toward defined community goals*—in this case—toward a coordinated anti-gang strategy or program. Community goals, by definition, are more than a collection of individual self-interested goals, and collective action entails individuals acting together with a common concern for a particular problem. Mobilization will not succeed without buy-in and a focused commitment from community members to fight the gang problem in a concerted manner.

A common myth is that communities either have capacity or they don't, and those that don't will have trouble

developing it. But capacity can be *developed*—through the cultivation of the informal community (e.g., neighbors and residents) and connections to formal organizations and institutions both inside and outside the community. Community members and groups not on board can be educated about the issues related to gangs and the consequences of remaining inactive, which will help galvanize commitment. In turn, this will lead to increased ability to mobilize financial, human, and technological resources for gang prevention, intervention and suppression efforts. Thus, the community's capacity to mobilize itself to fight gang violence can be developed over time.

Strong Leadership

Not surprisingly, community leaders play a key role in successful community mobilization and capacity building. Strong leaders can articulate the community's voice through identification and development of core values and a unifying purpose. Strong leaders can generate consensus by leading the community through the process of deliberation around community priorities and providing the public with information about the local gang problem and the far-reaching consequences of gang violence, as mentioned above. As a result, new on-the-ground interest and information are generated about gangs as a social problem and the capabilities of government and the community to solve them. This is a method of getting all community stakeholders interested, but more importantly, ready to tackle the problem of gangs. Stakeholder buy-in means partners are willing to provide needed skills or resources and to be held accountable if there is no follow through. Community leaders can also set the tone for anti-gang strategies, for instance, by advocating for respect for youth's rights, opposing unduly repressive measures or punishments, and advocating for just and balanced procedures. Strong leaders can help assure diversity so that any coordinated coalition or partnership represents all members of a community.

Community Involvement

The importance of broadening the variety of actors involved and committed to addressing gangs in a community cannot be overstated; the broader the constituency fighting the gang problem, the more likely any programmatic efforts can be implemented on a broad scale—or at least on a scale large enough to make an impact. Having a range of stakeholders—community leaders, social service and faith-based agencies, businesses, schools, youths, even local and federal government leaders—brings the varied expertise needed to tackle the tough multi-dimensional problems associated with gangs.

I would caution, however, that large anti-gang partnerships or coalitions often are fraught with problems such as turf battles, lack of accountability for inaction, and unwillingness to share information. To overcome these issues, all community stakeholders must be dedicated to a common mission and committed to achieving the same goals. Anti-gang strategies or programs with clear mission statements (and strong leaders) will be better able to determine which partner agencies and organizations should be involved, including which public government agencies are needed to expand community capacity to achieve intended goals.

Moving Forward by Looking Back

The concepts of community mobilization and capacity building are not new. They are embedded within anti-gang programs and strategies implemented throughout the United States. For instance, community mobilization is an explicit strategy of the model known as the comprehensive, community-wide gang program model (the "comprehensive" model). The model, developed in the late 1980s by University of Chicago sociologist Irving Spergel, was first implemented in the Little Village neighborhood in Chicago. As early

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successes came to light, the US Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) used the model as a prototype in its sponsorship of gang programs in five sites across the country between 1995 and 2000.[1]

In addition to community mobilization, the comprehensive model also involves capacity building, at the level of the community, and among and across the participating organizations. Giving residents a voice in the development and the maintenance of the gang intervention strategy is heavily promoted, as is the development of coordinated goals and activities across a broad range of stakeholders. The intent was for the initiatives to be jointly sustained through inter-organizational capacity building across all levels of the criminal and juvenile justice systems, schools, community organizations, and other government agencies (Spergel, Wa and Sosa, 2006).

As stated earlier, evaluation of the five sites found some successes in two of the five jurisdictions—Mesa, Arizona and Riverside, California. In examining the programs that did not succeed, the evaluators noted the programs did not develop the community capacity to offer a wide range of program activities that could foster positive youth development (Spergel et. al. 2004). Furthermore, grassroots involvement—a strong component in Little Village—was not an element relied upon in the five replicated sites. Community mobilization was highest (but not high) in the two sites that witnessed the most success.

A major limitation in the federally-funded comprehensive models in the five sites was that these programs were externally directed and funded. They tended to be large cross-agency endeavors with multiple strategies and goals embedded in the model. This is a difficult mandate with which to begin. The cities had a model imposed on them from the outside without careful on-the-ground cultivation of grassroots networks or community mobilization.

This illustrates my point that programs that arise internally and slowly develop focused capacity to fight gangs will have fewer hurdles achieving long-term goals compared to programs that come from outside the community. The work of Identity in Montgomery County, Maryland provides a sound example. Identity's executive director and co-founder, Candace Kattar, has been a persistent force in developing and sustaining capacity for prevention and intervention programs in Latino neighborhoods, and her capacity-building work predates the founding of Identity.

As this brief points out, grassroots efforts that want to be effective on a larger scale must build the capacity to communicate with government agencies. The capacity to obtain extra-local resources from public agencies such as the police or the court system ultimately will affect a community's overall stability and social control with regard to crime and violence. In other words, it is okay to keep programs small if the goals are devoted only to one youth at a time, but programs that aspire to greater successes, such as reductions in community levels of violence, should aim to achieve their goals both through internal capacity building *and* external capacity building.

Second, programs that make their efforts visible to the public and that reward small and large successes will provide the community with the knowledge that efforts can be effective, that the strategy is devoted to increasing the quality of life for residents, and hence, that it is worth the risk to invest time and effort. It is true that success—even small successes such as turning one gang member's life around— will breed more success.

Third, local and national governments should reward strong community-based and grassroots anti-gang efforts through both formal and informal support. Support does not necessarily mean designating financial resources, but it could include training, information sharing, leadership, or simply the provision of a dedicated

space for programming or meetings. Indeed, government resources can go a long way to increase a community's capacity to expressly target the youths most in need of supports.

Finally, jurisdictions that believe they have few resources to tackle gangs should not be discouraged. Every jurisdiction has inherent internal resources—human capital—that can be cultivated. These human resources are real assets that can be mobilized to develop the social capital that provides the baseline for effective anti-gang strategies. Finding one person or one leverage point may be all that is needed.

In the end, strong local leadership, community mobilization and building community capacity over time are the tools that lead to successful gang violence reduction efforts. These are the same tools that bring positive, sustainable returns to communities even after some stakeholders lose interest. Local and national government support will buoy community-based anti-gang efforts, and dedicated government funding provides the solid footing for innovative ideas to blossom. But the initiative has to come from community leaders and groups themselves.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Endnotes

[1] Other currently-operating federally-sponsored programs rooted in the comprehensive model include the Gang Free Schools and Communities program and the Gang Reduction Program (GRP).

Gangs and Youth Violence in the United States

In the United States, youth violence and criminality associated with gangs based in Central American immigrant communities have received growing attention from the news media and politicians. As noted elsewhere in this report, gangs such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (or MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang emerged in Central American immigrant communities, particularly in Los Angeles, in the mid-1980s. They had a national and ethnic character, being made up mostly of Central American immigrants or the US-born children of Central American immigrants. They were distinct from other gangs based in Mexican-American, Puerto Rican or other Latino communities. As the Central American immigrant community has grown in the United States and spread from major urban centers including Los Angeles, Houston, metropolitan Washington and metropolitan New York, to other cities, gangs like MS-13 and 18th Street have moved with them. Today, according to the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Association (NAGIA), there are an estimated 38,000-40,000 members of MS-13 and 18th Street in the United States.

The case studies of youth violence prevention programs that follow focus on the Washington, DC area, where WOLA has conducted research in the past on the emergence and nature of Central American youth gangs.

The Washington metropolitan area has seen a rapid influx of Latino migrants, both from Latin America and from other parts of the United States. According to a 2008 report from the Pew Hispanic Center, of the top 25 counties with the largest Hispanic population growth from 2000-2007, 4 are in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area. In addition, the Migration Policy Institute found that in 2006, 20.6% of the District of Columbia's foreign-born population was from El Salvador. This makes the Salvadoran community in Washington, DC one of the largest communities of Salvadoran nationals living abroad, second only to that of Los Angeles.

Central American migrants face numerous obstacles to their integration into US society. Language barriers, along with limited access to health care, education and employment contribute to their marginalization. Anti-immigrant sentiment is strong in the Washington area as it is throughout the country, evidenced by campaigns against day-laborer centers and public support for the use of local police to enforce federal immigration laws. This undercurrent of hostility can further marginalize Central American youth and increase the likelihood that they will seek youth gangs as a source of identity, safety and support, both financial and social. This is not to say that all, or even most, children of immigrants are gang members, but such youths are at increased risk of becoming involved or coming into contact with gangs in their neighborhoods and schools.

By some accounts, MS-13 is the most organized and most violent of the Latino gangs in the Washington metropolitan area. At the same time, authorities generally view MS-13 and other Central American immigrant gangs as relatively minor public safety issues in their jurisdictions. Research suggests that most youth involved in so-called Central American gangs are not involved in organized crime, drug trafficking, or even in street-level drug sales, but rather spend most of their time "hanging out" in the street engaged in non-criminal activity.[1]

Because the majority of gang members or youth at risk of joining a gang are not

involved in serious criminal activity, it is important to reach out to these individuals with positive alternatives that respond to the needs that often drive them to gangs. The three Washington-area prevention programs described in the next section have been successful because they offer a collaborative, coordinated response to the problem of youth gangs, and most importantly, provide Latino youth with opportunities and support that encourage a healthy gang-free lifestyle.

Endnotes

[1] Washington Office on Latin American and the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, *Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico and the US*, March 2007. http://www.wola.org/media/Gangs/washington_dc_gang_research.pdf.

Identity's experience demonstrates that a successful gang prevention program can emerge from the efforts of a small community organization. Having started as a modest HIV outreach program, Identity has developed into an effective youth development organization with a strong gang prevention component that has maintained its roots in Montgomery County, Maryland. Identity's ongoing responsiveness to the needs of at-risk youth in the community, and the organization's ability to establish trust with service providers, law enforcement and school officials, have allowed it to ensure that local youth are offered the support they need to lead lives free of crime and violence.

IDENTITY
Montgomery County, Maryland

Youth often describe feeling scared and unsafe walking around the community due to racially motivated threats and choose to join a gang for protection.

Identity, a Latino youth development organization in Montgomery County, in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC, was founded in 1998 by community members Candace Kattar and Diego Uriburu to respond to the needs of the area's burgeoning Latino population. Its first program focused solely on HIV, offering instruction on prevention, counseling, and testing services to Latino youth. Soon, it became clear that the needs of the Latino community were far more extensive and that reaching out with a more comprehensive range of services would be more effective.

Identity's founders assessed the broader needs of the Latino population and worked to connect the community with various existing public services such as health, education and legal services. As more people began to see Identity as a valuable and trustworthy resource in the community, Identity staff developed after-school programs, fitness and recreation activities, parent education and support, case management and referral services—all of which target Latino youth and their families in Montgomery County. As youth gang violence worsened in the Latino community, the issue became a higher priority.

The overall mission of Identity is to empower Latino youth to reach their full potential through youth and family-based initiatives that are culturally and linguistically sensitive to the needs of the Latino community. Identity works to provide services that focus on youth

development in the promotion of a strong and healthy Latino community.

There are twenty-nine full or part-time employees at Identity, many of them youth who have participated in the programs themselves and have gone on to hold leadership positions in the organization. The annual operating budget is $3 million, which is provided by the federal government, Montgomery County, the city of Gaithersburg, various foundations and small individual donations. Identity has no religious affiliation.

Community Context

Identity has found that Latino youth who are active in its programs and services are challenged by a number of common experiences. One of the biggest is family separation, most often seen in youth whose parents, guardians or elder siblings migrated to the United States without them and who were reunited years later. In these situations, youth may have joined a gang in their home country in response to the lack of family or they may join a gang once they arrive in the United States due to feelings of estrangement or if their family life fails to meet their expectations or does not provide support.

Racial tensions, low levels of education and isolation are other common issues facing youth. In Montgomery County, as elsewhere, there can be significant friction between young people in the Latino and the African-American communities. Youth

often describe feeling scared and unsafe walking around the community due to racially motivated threats and choose to join a gang for protection. Educational success can also be elusive as schools tend to channel their resources towards students they perceive as having the potential to achieve. Those students who arrive with poor academic backgrounds or are failing at school have a tendency to slip through the cracks and often drop out. Feelings of isolation due to language barriers and cultural misunderstanding, not only in school but in the greater community, can put youth at great risk of joining a gang.

In order to address these problems, Identity's programs seek to create a community in which youth feel they can be successful while engaging in positive activities. In this setting youth are able to embrace their Latino heritage and demonstrate that they are valuable, contributing members of society.

Identity Programs

Identity offers a series of prevention programs through the schools and through retreats and activities that it organizes itself. It also coordinates a youth center, the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center, for Montgomery and Prince George's counties. To participate in a program or receive services from the center, interested young people must meet individually with a staff member, for an "intake" appointment. The intake is a thorough process in which the staff member assesses the major issues the youth is facing that will need to be addressed. Attention to detail is imperative during the intake as youth will often come to Identity focused on one problem without realizing the many other factors affecting them.

Other Identity programs include an after-school program, parent education and support, fitness and recreation activities, and programs to help refer young people and their families to other agencies—health care centers, training

programs, etc.—that can provide help with particular issues. In addition to these prevention-based programs, Identity also runs a rehabilitation and reintegration program for adolescents in a local correctional facility.

After School Program

The After-School Program is offered to Latino students at 10 of the county's public middle schools and high schools. The program consists of 30 interactive sessions where facilitators talk with students about leadership and community building, self-identity, communication skills building and conflict resolution, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, sexuality and relationships, and goal setting. High school youth are trained as peer educators and conduct individual and group outreach and education activities with other youth in their schools and communities.

The program is offered during both the fall and spring terms of the school year. Two facilitators, female and male, meet with 20-25 youth twice a week for two hours at a time. All programs are offered in English and Spanish as a means of allowing Latino youth to reconnect with their cultural identities. Participants are often referred by teachers or counselors and permission for the youth to participate is always requested from the parents. Recently, Identity began working in its first elementary school, providing after-school activities as well as tutoring for Latino students.

Retreats

Organized at the end of the after-school programs, retreats take place for three days at a retreat center, usually a conference center or meeting place out of the city, and focus on team building and leadership development. School personnel are invited to participate in the retreats as well as Identity board members. Retreat activities range from physical team-building exercises to introspective sessions where participants are able to

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IDENTITY

A group of young people spend an afternoon fishing during an Identity retreat.

share more personal details of their lives. The retreats can often be emotional experiences, and it is important for the youth to have a safe, supportive environment where they feel they can express themselves openly.

Parent Training and Support

Workshops are provided for parents of youth enrolled in the after-school program. These sessions are available two to four times per semester and focus on parenting skills, including supervision, discipline and communication. Communication skills training includes joint sessions with parents and children. Some sessions are also dedicated to helping parents better understand the importance of their involvement in their children's school life to help them achieve more academic success.

Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center

In 2004, Identity took on a new responsibility—it became the coordination agency for the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center, a new youth outreach project sponsored by Montgomery and Prince George's County governments. The project was created to help existing social services and community youth programs reach out to gang-involved youth and youth at risk of gang involvement while building stronger families and better communities. Initial funding for Crossroads came from the federal government's Office of Juvenile

Justice and Delinquency Prevention, at the Department of Justice, and from local government agencies in the two counties (in Montgomery County, the Department of Health and Human Services, and in Prince George's County, the Office of Youth Strategies.) Members of the Maryland congressional delegation also helped in the effort to gain both federal and local funding.

The Crossroads initiative brings together a wide variety of actors in the community, including schools, law enforcement, the state attorney's office, public defenders' offices, and county libraries and health departments, to respond to the needs of youth and families in the area.

Intended to serve all youth and families, not just Latinos, the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center is located on the boundary between the two counties, in an area where gang violence is a serious problem. Outreach counselors, most of them former gang members, spread information about services offered by the center and other community centers in the area. Crossroads coordinates outreach to youth and offers a range of one-on-one support such as mental health services, assistance in getting services from other agencies, and legal assistance for youth and their families who are at very high risk for joining a gang or currently involved with one. The center also coordinates supervised recreational activities for youth such as soccer, hiking, camping and white-water rafting.

Youth mostly come into contact with Crossroads through referrals by probation officers, police officers, school officials, Health and Human Services street outreach workers and other community centers. During the intake process for a youth, Crossroads tries to have the parents present as well, if they are available. Identity attributes the volume and success of referrals to the reputation that Crossroads has developed in the community as a trustworthy and effective organization.

MANUEL WAS TWO YEARS OLD when his parents left him behind with relatives in El Salvador and migrated to the United States in search of better-paying jobs that might support the family. Eleven years later, Manuel himself migrated illegally to Los Angeles in hopes of reconnecting with his parents. When he arrived, he found that his parents had divorced, his mother had remarried and that he faced life in a strange city with a culture and lifestyle completely foreign to him. In El Salvador, he had suffered serious physical abuse at the hands of relatives; in the United States, his new stepfather regularly beat his mother. His mother and stepfather had two young children of their own, and between them and his mother's two jobs, she had little time for the adolescent Manuel. He soon joined a gang. It gave him protection and a sense of family and belonging that he had never known.

After a few years in Los Angeles, Manuel moved to Maryland and continued his gang involvement while attending high school. An English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) counselor took notice of him one day and put him in touch with Identity. During the 60 hours of after-school program work, he was disruptive and Identity staff believed he was trying to get himself expelled from the Identity program. He had only ever known failure and did not know what it was like to have someone demand better and refuse to give up on him.

Despite the odds, Identity staff did not give up on Manuel. They worked with him, offering him repeated opportunities. Eventually, Manuel left the gang that had been his life because his involvement with Identity programs filled the void he had felt for so long. He began to believe in himself as a person with potential in a context outside of the gang. Over time, Manuel grew increasingly active in Identity's programs, and he began reaching out to other youth in the community, speaking to them about his experiences, sharing the realities of gang life so they would not make the same mistakes and getting them involved in Identity.

This was not an easy transition for Manuel. In fact, he was threatened by his former fellow gang members and had to relocate for his own safety. Identity staff and others in the community who knew Manuel from his outreach work helped him resettle and work out his legal residency status, and connected him to the support services he needed. He now has a work visa and a regular job in a new location and is in the first steps of living a more regular life, free of the grip of his past mistakes.

The Re-entry and Support Program

Apart from the Crossroads initiative, and the prevention-oriented programs, Identity also participates in a re-entry and support program. This rehabilitation and reintegration service is located at the Clarksburg Correctional Facility in Montgomery County. The detention center is primarily for adults, but youth who have been convicted of serious crimes are housed there as well. Most of those crimes are gang-related.

An Identity staff member visits the facility twice a week to work with Latino youth inmates. When a new inmate arrives, the Identity staffer first explains the procedures of the facility and translates the orientation manual containing the procedures for inmates who do not speak English. Later, the staffer serves as a liaison between the youth and his or her family and as a support person in the inmate employment center, which can be difficult for Spanish-speaking youth to use. Finally, when an inmate is about to be discharged, Identity and

representatives from the public defenders office, the housing authority, various social services, and probation officers meet as part of the Facility's reentry program to ensure that adequate services will be in place upon the youth's release. These meetings are essential to ensuring that the participating agencies are prepared and committed to assisting the youth in the process of re-entry. It is important for youth to develop relationships of trust with service providers whose support they will need as they reintegrate into society.

Collaborative Strategies

Identity has numerous important partners who come from a variety of sectors of the community including the health departments of Prince George's and Montgomery counties, the public defenders offices, the Montgomery County Correctional Facility and the officers of the county police department gang unit.

Building a strong collaborative relationship with the police has helped Identity's work with Latino youth in the community. While Identity staff have sometimes not seen eye-to-eye with the practices of police gang intelligence units, they also believe that some of their greatest allies are those police officers who are willing to listen and share information. Establishing a relationship with the gang unit of the police department and gaining their trust took time but has allowed Identity to collaborate with the police department when safety issues arise. Often youth confide in Identity staff when a criminal or violent act is being organized, and police can thus be warned in time to patrol the area. Having credibility with the police ensures that Identity can count on them in return. Police officers regularly visit Identity with concerns and observations about what they are seeing or hearing in the community, a practice which keeps Identity up to date with the pulse of the community. Through this dialogue with Identity, many police officers have come to see youth in a different light and understand aspects

of the local Latino community that may not have been previously known. This is beneficial to youth, their family, the police and the community.

Safety

Identity has never had a security problem related to its work with gang-involved youth. Staff say that they do not tolerate gang identity symbols (clothing, colors, etc.) that might create tensions between youth or with employees. Youth must sign off on very clear rules before participating in the programs. These rules stipulate that participants will not reveal any gang identity through dress, hand signals, paraphernalia or other means, nor will they engage in any form of gang recruitment at the center. Based on a desire to have a safe place to hang out, youth respect the rules at Identity, and there have been no reports of youth or staff on the premises feeling threatened.

Impact and Limitations

Identity has served more than 325 youth at the Youth Opportunity Center since its inauguration. As of September 2008 there were 91 active cases, or current clients, in the organization's system. Identity measures its success based on base-line and exit surveys which assess factors including self-esteem, identity, knowledge, support, conflict resolution, and association with gang members. A professional evaluator from George Washington University was originally hired to provide data analysis and Identity now has a full-time evaluator on staff.

Needs assessments are carried out as often as possible to help guide all of Identity's programming so that it responds to the ever-changing needs of youth. In 2006 Identity conducted its biggest needs assessment to date, involving over 1,000 Latino youth. The needs assessments also serve as a mechanism for other agencies to identify needs in the community to which

they should respond. Data collection is extremely important to their work. The results of all evaluations are shared with staff members, donors, the advisory board and the community.

As a short term goal, Identity hopes to improve its curriculum, train staff more thoroughly with a focus on management training, and finally to increase individual donations from the local community and involve them in Latino youth development efforts. In the long term, Identity hopes to improve upon its capacity as a research-based agency and become an organizational model that could be replicated. With the dramatic growth rates of the Latino population, new concentrations of Latinos are appearing in different areas all the time. With greater resources, Identity staff would hope to expand its advocacy efforts to reach more people who need help creating and developing their own outreach and youth development organizations.

Conclusion

Identity has grown from a small community group to a major organization running youth violence prevention programs. With increased coordination among private and public community groups and additional funding, the organization will be able to continue increasing its impact on youth. There is still a great deal of work which must be accomplished in order to raise awareness about the growing Latino population in the United States. Equipped with a greater level of understanding of the needs of the Latino community, groups could begin to define best practices and create model programs that could be replicated, something which Identity aspires to be.

The Community Mobilization Initiative is a prime example of the role that governments can and should play in working with civil society to create collaborative prevention programs that work with young people and effectively curb crime and violence. Federal government funding and the involvement of both local and federal government officials in developing and supporting the program have been essential to the Community Mobilization Initiative's success. In this case, government officials believed that prevention was an important component in effective anti-gang programs, provided the funding necessary to get a program off the ground, and succeeded in encouraging police and civil society actors to work together toward a common goal.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION INITIATIVE (CMI)
Herndon, Virginia

CMI is formally considered a "gang reduction" program, that is, a program designed to reduce the number of young people joining gangs. But the staff prefers to think of it as a "program for youth at risk who have a lot of unused assets," as one CMI official said.

In recent years, gang-related violence has plagued the town of Herndon, Virginia, in the western suburbs of Washington, DC. Noting this increase in gang-related violence, community leaders and law enforcement officials felt the problem could not be addressed by the police alone and that a comprehensive approach was needed. In 2005, Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA), who represents Herndon and the 10th congressional district, successfully lobbied for federal funding to support local and regional initiatives aimed at confronting the area's burgeoning gang problem.

The Community Mobilization Initiative (CMI), a project of the group World Vision, was founded in Herndon in 2006. Due in part to an already established relationship between Wolf and World Vision, when local officials agreed on the need for a coordinated, collaborative response to the gang problem, the congressman enlisted World Vision's help in designing the intervention and prevention component.

World Vision, founded in the United States in 1953, is an international, Christian-based relief and development organization. World Vision's stated goal is "the well being of all people, especially children." In the United States, World Vision operates 11 sites, in both urban and rural settings. The focus of these programs is generally poverty alleviation. CMI is the first gang-related initiative launched by World Vision.

World Vision founded CMI with a two-year grant of $500,000 provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the U.S. Department of Justice. Although Christian-based, World Vision is not affiliated with a specific denomination and abstains from religious activity in the program because it receives public funding. OJJDP has extensive experience with youth violence prevention programs around the country and believes that successful programs depend on coordination between community groups, schools and the police. Thus OJJDP provided funding on the condition that CMI coordinate its work with other community service organizations in Herndon and the local schools and police. To ensure communication and coordination right from the start, the Herndon Chief of Police and World Vision worked collaboratively to recruit and hire the first CMI director, Henry R. Pacheco, who had been counseling and mentoring gang-involved youth for about 18 years. Pacheco was then free to hire his own staff. He named a longtime youth and community organizer, Juan Pacheco, who is no relation, as his community liaison.

CMI is formally considered a "gang reduction" program, that is, a program designed to reduce the number of young people joining gangs. But the staff prefers to think of it as a "program for youth at risk who have a lot of unused assets," as one CMI official said. Their overarching goal is to help enable youth to make smart life decisions and to survive the bad decisions.

Community Context

Before it launched any work with young people, CMI's staff consulted with a diverse group of community coalitions and stakeholders on developing its programs. CMI reached out to and established relationships with a variety of community groups, coalitions and schools, gathering information on existing programs and learning from the experiences of others. CMI felt it was important to build positive relationships with both public and community partners from the beginning.

This process also helped CMI identify the larger needs of youth in the community in order to connect them with existing services and foster positive dynamics with community actors in the future. Participation from the Herndon community and relevant organizations has been vital to the success of CMI's work.

CMI, in its consultations, identified a number of factors prevalent in the Herndon area that put young people at risk of becoming involved with a gang. These common problems include: experiencing abuse and violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental health issues, truancy, feelings of disaffection, low sense of attachment to the community, family reunification issues, immigration issues, acculturation and assimilation issues, educational problems, emotional trauma, teen pregnancy, runaways, negative peers, loneliness and the experience of being "parachute children" or children who have been sent to this country without their families.

The activities developed by CMI broadly cover these issues. CMI seeks to provide a positive alternative to youth through group settings, while one-on-one mentoring provides more tailored attention to the particular needs of the individual. Outreach programs involve street outreach, community outreach and communication with schools, parents, juvenile corrections facilities, social service agencies and churches. Most of the young people who come to CMI are recruited through active outreach activities, including on streets in neighborhoods where gangs are known to have a presence.

Programs

Based on consultations with community groups, local officials and police, CMI developed a program that now includes intervention services to help address youth problems and concerns, provides alternatives to gangs, and offers adult mentors to young people. CMI offers these services through a culturally sensitive staff that assists youth in making more positive life decisions. A distinguishing characteristic of CMI's work is an emphasis on the importance of family. Through its programs and work with youth, CMI outreach workers attempt to incorporate family members into the process and operate under a holistic view of each individual youth's situation.

Youth Outreach and Youth Education CMI's initial outreach was done through the local school system. CMI approached local administrators for permission to give presentations on school campuses. Staff members (some themselves former gang members) give regular presentations aimed at informing high school students about the realities of gang life as well as communicating a message of hope that individuals can change the course of their life.

To make their message more credible with students, staff dress in typical "street clothes" and share personal accounts of their experience confronting gangs or involvement with a gang. Their stories recount the various reasons they joined a gang, the violence they were exposed to and how they were eventually able to transform themselves. Their testimonies serve as both deterrents to at-risk youth and as examples to those already in gangs that getting out is possible. The presentations can also establish trust with youth on dilemmas in their lives related to ethnicity, culture, language and other issues. The

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presentations are often followed by a "shout out session" in which CMI staff make themselves available to students interested in sharing their thoughts and concerns either in a group or one-on-one setting.

The Survivors Youth Group

CMI does outreach to middle school students through an after school "DJ club," where students express themselves through music and learn public speaking skills by performing in front of their peers. In order to be part of the club, students must also participate in the Survivors Youth Group, which focuses on teaching youth conflict resolution, anger management, rumor control, getting them involved in community service and helping youth see the world in a different light where they focus on their strengths and opportunities rather than their fears and weaknesses.

"Unidos" Youth Group

This program is a youth leadership development initiative at the high school level. Members of the group concentrate on setting goals for graduating high school, attending college, scholarship attainment, community service, and personal development, among other goals. This group used to be called "Latinos Unidos" but youth changed its name to be more inclusive to the whole school community.

Parent Workshops

CMI also provides parenting workshops which focus on equipping parents with communication skills to improve their interactions with their teenagers. The parents are also taught how to assess changes in their children's behavior which could indicate possible gang involvement. CMI has provided these workshops for Parent-Teacher Associations, churches, government groups, and other nonprofits.

Gang Membership Prevention and Intervention Program

When high-risk young people express interest in CMI, the Gang Membership Prevention and Intervention Program encourages them to resist gang involvement and destructive behaviors by connecting them with constructive social and recreational activities. One of the first dynamics the staff identified in their needs-assessment process was the ability of a gang to provide certain types of support, protection and relationships normally offered in a family setting. CMI recognized that any intervention and rehabilitation program would have to provide a positive alternative to these needs.

The program also works directly with current gang members. One component of this work is assistance in leaving the gang through a process known as "flipping out". If an individual gang member decides he or she wants to leave the gang, staff accompany the youth through the process, always mindful that the youth must do so when he or she is ready, independent of any outside pressures. When a youth decides to leave the gang, precautions are taken to make sure the process is well documented as risks are high for both youth and staff involved in the process. Current gang members are encouraged to discontinue violent and illegal activities in favor of constructive, socially acceptable, and enriching activities and positive relationships. It is important to create these opportunities during this time, as leaving the gang creates a vacuum which must be filled with positive alternatives.

Mentoring Program

The Mentoring Program, offered in both English and Spanish provides mentoring services for at-risk youth. Mentors meet individually and in small groups with high-risk youth to try to play a positive role in their individual development and to serve, as needed, as advocates within the education and judicial systems on behalf of youth. Mentoring services are offered to youth between the ages of 9 and 21. Due to a general lack of community services for 18-21 year-olds, CMI has made a conscious effort to extend the upper-age limit on mentoring services.

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Youth participating in one of CMI's outreach programs gather donations for other community-based organizations.

Community Outreach Campaign

In addition to the direct work with young people, CMI, through its Community Outreach Campaign, builds and strengthens relationships between CMI and others concerned with youth violence. Social and economic conditions in the community are continually changing, and staying current is a top priority. To this end, CMI has one full-time Community Liaison whose job is to maintain CMI's community relationships and inform other staff of relevant changes. The community liaison regularly attends meetings of local organizations and coalitions working on issues related to youth violence, as well as schools, churches and other juvenile service providers. CMI also regularly offers gang prevention presentations and workshops to families and community residents.

As part of its efforts to build bridges to the community at large, CMI has fostered a unique relationship with local law enforcement. The CMI team was often invited to "roll call" sessions, at which police officers at the beginning of their work day meet to receive briefings on activities and issues within the community.

These meetings are essential in obtaining useful suggestions from officers and to meet all officers from the Herndon police force that work various shifts. These meetings also allowed CMI staff to tell police of the organization's goals and activities.

During these meetings, police officers suggested that CMI create "outreach cards," or informational materials geared towards at-risk youth, to be given to youth by police officers while on patrol. The police department, in return, provided CMI with access to a direct line to the police dispatch office in case of emergencies, rather than having to call the general 911 operators. Respect for each other's work and a willingness to collaborate are key to the success of this initiative between CMI and local police.

Collaborative Strategies

Community outreach was particularly important due to the stigma often associated with working directly with gang members and potential gang members; CMI wanted to ensure that stigma would not be attached to their work. Many community groups are

> The CMI team was often invited to "roll call" sessions, at which police officers at the beginning of their work day meet to receive briefings on activities and issues within the community.

wary of being associated in any way with gangs, so it was necessary to convey the idea that prevention and intervention programs working directly with gang-involved youth are intended to contribute to the betterment of the community as a whole. Through this essential process of relationship building and consultation, CMI was able to establish itself as a trustworthy and capable organization

The close collaboration that exists between CMI and local law enforcement is particularly noteworthy. The collaboration was initially mandated within the guidelines that accompanied the U.S. Justice Department grant that established CMI called specifically for coordination between the police and the program. In addition, a series of initial conversations between Henry Pacheco and the leadership of the police force significantly contributed to the growth of mutual trust between the police and CMI as well as an understanding for each others' work.

Safety

Although CMI has never been threatened by gangs and believes that gangs do not see CMI's work in a threatening manner, staff take special precautions to ensure their safety and that of their participants at all times. It is CMI policy for staff to have initial one-on-one meetings with youth at neutral community sites. Even so, CMI takes serious precautions in regard to the personal safety of staff. Outreach workers wear level-two bullet proof vests and ID cards with pertinent emergency information such as their blood type. While doing outreach, staff work in pairs and, as mentioned above, are able to contact the local police through a direct dispatch number should an emergency arise. All members are trained in CPR, first aid, aggression protocols, crisis prevention and intervention, and are accredited by local law enforcement as Certified Basic Gang Specialists. CMI believes that attention to safety and recognition of the inherent danger involved in their work has helped them to establish credibility with local police.

Impact and Limitations

As of September 2007, CMI served 7,986 youth and 2,568 adults. A total of 211 youths met regularly with program staff, 948 youth and 1,078 adults attended workshops, 29 youths were involved in direct mentoring relationships, and 405 parents and family members were participating in structured interactions in the community. A total of 5,479 youth and 1,287 adults have attended presentations.

CMI staffers evaluate the success of their programs through community response surveys (distributed at workshops, presentations, events, activities and awards), notes from outreach done with their clients and weekly staff updates on client progress. The organization also plans to eventually develop surveys for program participants to complete at the conclusion of its OJJDP grant.

The biggest obstacle faced by CMI is the lack of consistent funding. In the future, it would like to increase the depth and breadth of programs and strengthen connections in Central America and Mexico. Given higher and steadier funding, CMI would expand its programs into surrounding jurisdictions, develop an extensive at-risk youth education component aimed at local educators, and increase CMI staff.

Conclusion

Though CMI is a relatively young program, its staffers have managed to reach out to a significant portion of the youth in their community. They have accomplished this by pro-actively reaching out to families, schools, police and other existing institutions to provide support for at-risk youth. Their dedication and willingness to coordinate among these various groups has had a positive impact on the community and has complemented the programs they run which provide youth with concrete alternatives to joining gangs.

The Gang Intervention Program is a model for the principle that a range of community institutions should come together to address the problems of youth violence. Created in response to an alarming upsurge in violence in the Columbia Heights and Shaw neighborhoods of Washington, DC, GIP has proven to be highly successful and can serve as an example for other communities. The model makes use of existing resources in the community (social services, police, schools, health centers) and links them to serve youth in need of help as thoroughly and efficiently as possible. Local government participation has ensured a high level of coordination among the various actors— something which has been effective in the short term and will be necessary for continued results in the longer term. GIP's experience also demonstrates that locally designed initiatives ought to be federally funded.

GANG INTERVENTION PARTNERSHIP (GIP)
Columbia Heights/Shaw Neighborhood
Washington, DC

Portions of this summary draw on an evaluation of the GIP program completed by the Center for Youth Policy Research.[1]

Between 1999 and 2003 a series of gang-related homicides committed by Latino gang members shocked the Columbia Heights and Shaw neighborhoods of Washington, DC, two inner-city neighborhoods with growing Latino populations, including many recent Central American immigrants and their children. Residents were horrified at the violent deaths of several young people which were followed by non-fatal retaliatory shootings. The distress and anxiety caused by the shootings galvanized the community to respond—as a community.

After a gun battle broke out in broad daylight in 2003 on a busy street two miles from the White House, church groups, neighborhood associations, service providers and other community groups decided to take action. More than 200 representatives from law enforcement, community agencies and concerned citizens came together at an emergency meeting to discuss a common strategy aimed at stemming the tide of youth violence. The strategy would include prevention, intervention, and law enforcement. Out of this meeting, several community organizations decided to hire outreach workers to be in direct contact with youth

in the neighborhood and to organize extracurricular activities and sporting events. Local law enforcement decided to increase police presence in the area. Over time, these efforts became more organized. The police department formed a special task force to ensure collaboration and information sharing between police and participating community organizations; school administrators, teachers and parents held regular meetings on the problem; and the city requested federal funding from the Department of Justice to bring all of these efforts together into a cohesive whole.

In August 2003, then Metropolitan Police Department Chief Charles Ramsey and City Councilman Jim Graham established the Gang Intervention Partnership (GIP) in collaboration with several community agencies. The lead agency was the Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative, widely known as the Collaborative. GIP was originally intended to be a six-week program that would respond to the emergency caused by the violence through intensive coordination between various city agencies, private groups and police. As the program developed, those actors developed stronger ties among each other, a process which in turn encouraged financial backers to

extend their support for the initiative. The program is now in its fifth year.

GIP promotes a holistic and comprehensive approach to reducing youth violence in the Columbia Heights/Shaw neighborhoods, particularly among Latino youth. Supported by an annual grant from the District of Columbia Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs, GIP unites various agencies including community service providers, a special Metropolitan Police Department Gang Intelligence Unit, neighborhood schools, the U.S. Attorney's office and others in the judicial system, and local government officials.

GIP is based on five core strategies: providing direct outreach to gang-involved or at-risk youth and their families, educating parents and members of the community, facilitating community members' access to social services, building strong police-community ties, and "capacity building" or strengthening the community's capacity to respond to gang violence in the future by ensuring that all social service providers and government agencies can mobilize quickly in response to an emergency. The program's success is attributed to the commitment of time, personnel and resources of key participating agencies. More importantly, it is the high level of coordination and collaboration between these actors that contributes to GIP's success. The multi-sectoral approach ensures optimal communication, information sharing, strategy development, service provision, and timely response to new situations.

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Community Context

There are a variety of factors that put youth at risk for gang activity in the Columbia Heights and Shaw neighborhoods. Some of the challenges youth face include living in an economically distressed neighborhood; minority status; living in a single-parent family and/or in poverty; a concentration of people in limited space (especially in large apartment complexes); long periods of alone time without supervision; unemployment; inadequate extracurricular activities; weak social controls; frequent association with delinquent peers and a lack of interaction with pro-social peers; and low commitment to school coupled with low expectations for success.

Many of these problems in the community are linked to poverty and social marginalization, both particularly relevant to immigrant families in the United States. To tackle these challenges that put youth at risk of joining gangs, GIP provides support from various angles.

Programs

The five part GIP strategy includes:

1. Outreach
GIP channels its outreach to gang-related youth and their families through the schools. With the cooperation and good faith of school administrators, GIP members provide regular presentations and educate students and faculty on gang-related issues. Also, GIP members identify youth who need support and then put them and their families into contact with social workers and other services.

The Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative assembles a team to work with each individual young person who has been identified as being gang-associated or at-risk. The teams get to know the youth and find a positive figure in his or her life that can provide a mentorship role, such as a teacher, pastor, or family member. The team calls together a family group conference to try to identify the reasons for concern about the youth and to decide together how to address these concerns

2. Public Education
GIP members offer workshops, presentations and trainings in an effort to reach out to media, professionals, and local businesses to eliminate myths about gangs and educate people about what causes

youth to join gangs, or "push factors." The partnership stresses community education—including highlighting how the gang phenomenon is also a mental health issue and an outcome of social marginalization.

Recognizing that many parents know little about gangs or the problems that young people confront, GIP works on parent education to make their programs easy to understand and applicable to daily life. Role-playing is regularly used to convey messages. Because the stigma attached to gang involvement is so strong, a central tenet of the parent education and outreach is to address the guilt felt by parents of gang-involved youth as well as the denial that their child may be involved in a gang. Removing the blame factor increases the chances that parents will recognize if their child is at risk of joining a gang or already involved in a gang and will respond to their child's needs.

3. Increased Access to Social Services

GIP strives to improve and expand young people's access to social services, diversion activities and family strengthening programs. This component involves forming partnerships and helping other agencies gain access to the resources and services they need to serve their community better. For example, key efforts have been made to encourage youth to utilize the YMCA and its services, as Latino youth were not initially comfortable going there. Overall, this component has involved targeting the numerous youth-service programs that existed prior to GIP's founding and helping them to focus on collaborative strategies that target gang-involved youth and engage them in powerful and effective diversion, or positive alternative activities.
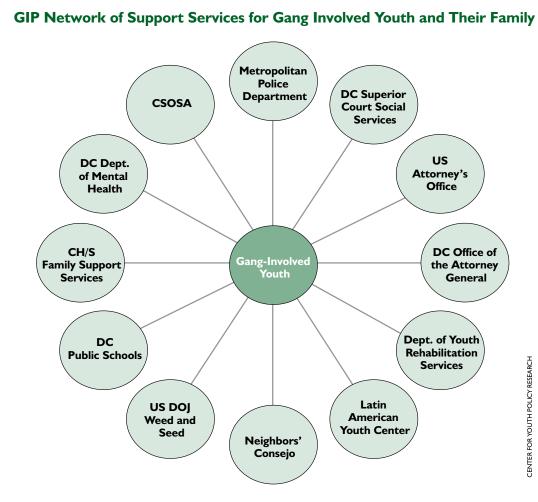
4. Building Police-Community Partnerships

GIP includes close collaboration between units of the Washington Metropolitan

Police Department and the community groups. This level of collaboration is unusual, and it reflects the trust that has been built over time between the police and community groups. GIP holds weekly meetings between law enforcement and community organizations to discuss ongoing cases and their implications for the community. Police officers working with GIP focus on three activities: intelligence gathering, enforcement, and intervention and prevention. While the first two activities are standard law enforcement strategies, the third is an innovative approach requiring coordination between school officials and law enforcement, educating school staff and administration about how to prevent gang-related violence within the school and instructing officers in targeted schools to notify the proper entities when they come across information about gang behavior within the school.

GIP believes that an initial focus on prevention is imperative and that law enforcement is an essential component of these efforts. For this reason, law enforcement officers have collaborated closely with schools and service organizations. They monitor certain at-risk youth and regularly share information gleaned while on patrol with school staff, students and service providers who are in the best position to prevent gang violence. This sharing of information is a two-way street as schools and service providers provide useful information to law enforcement to help them prevent crimes and appropriately target criminally involved youth.

5. Building Community Capacity to Respond

The GIP has taken several steps to build community capacity. It has coordinated existing community youth workers to create a "Cool Down" group that represents approximately 15 different agencies. These youth workers are intensively trained for deep intervention with gang involved youth and work to resolve specific problems and respond to crises. Capacity building

Removing the blame factor increases the chances that parents will recognize if their child is at risk of joining a gang or already involved in a gang and will respond to their child's needs.

GIP Network of Support Services for Gang Involved Youth and Their Family

This graph depicts the government agencies and community partners that individually and collectively impact gang-involved youth through the Gang Intervention Partnership.

In working with different community support agencies, GIP often finds that its greatest task is helping these agencies refine and improve their services.

also focuses on training key community and faith-based agencies, maintaining documentation and tracking system to assess the impact of gang intervention efforts, and establishing better relationships of trust between the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) GIP Unit and youths and their families.

Collaborative Strategies

GIP counts on strong community support for the success of its partnership between gang-involved youth and their families, police and government agencies, community groups and schools. In working with different community support agencies, GIP often finds that its greatest task is helping these agencies refine and improve their services.

Washington is fortunate in having a range of educational, social and community service programs for young people, some funded by local or national government programs, some funded by foundations, and some supported by local churches or community groups. In the Columbia Heights and Shaw neighborhoods, the Collaborative is the co-chair of the GIP program along with the Metropolitan Police Department. Together, the police department and the Collaborative convene regular meetings, develop new strategies, and facilitate cooperation between all parts of the program.

The Collaborative's mission is to help protect children and families from child abuse and neglect and to promote healthy families in the communities. CH/S FSC serves families with children that live in

the Columbia Heights and Shaw areas in addition to working with Latino families without access to Spanish speaking providers. The Collaborative has 40 staff members and operates on an annual budget of about $6 million.

Safety

Although GIP works directly with gang-involved youth, security has never been a problem for the organization. Eliminating the gang is not the focus of GIP's participating agencies. The partnership focuses, rather, on targeting certain specific activities of the gangs (e.g., skipping parties) and on strengthening families and neighborhood institutions that are best equipped to prevent youth from joining gangs in the first place. Because eliminating gangs is not a stated goal, gangs do not see GIP as a direct threat.

GIP does, however, take precautions to avoid gang retaliation. It keeps a low profile after serious incidents occur and abstains from responding to media requests asking for comment on specific acts of violence. GIP maintains a focus on the needs of the individual youth it works with and does not allow gang identity to factor in to its work.

Impact and Limitations

At the time of the evaluation completed by the Center for Youth Policy Research in September 2006, 16 local organizations, government offices or schools had been incorporated into the GIP initiative, relationships with over 200 families had been formed through the parent outreach program, and 50 families received intensive intervention services. According to Graham's office, there has been only one Latino gang-related homicide in the District of Colombia since October 2003.

One successful and unusual element of GIP has been the close collaboration between the Washington police department and community groups. This cooperation reflects the trust that has been built over time between police and community groups.

To measure the impact of its services in the community, GIP regularly administers surveys to its clients. Team members meet monthly and report on activities in relation to yearly goals, which are defined at the beginning of the fiscal year. The evaluations are done quantitatively, using benchmarks and subsequent strategy reassessment if needed.

GIP staff note that while their programs have been largely successful, many challenges remain. Limited financial resources are a constant obstacle and the program is understaffed and for the level of work it carries out. When their budget is broken down, GIP staff estimate that they are able to spend only $5 per month per youth. GIP staffers also note that because their work is supported by annual grants, they can tackle only year-long strategies, making it difficult for them to create and carry out more long-term goals.

In addition, staffers believe the public schools could do more to support GIP's work on a city-wide level. Specifically, the public school system is not yet mandating that all DC public schools participate in the GIP initiative, and those that are participating could further the program's impact by assigning more senior staff to GIP as representatives. Outside the public school system, GIP staff says it would be helpful to have more regular contact and coordination between participating organizations, as well as greater participation from local law enforcement.

While GIP staffers believe they have achieved impressive and visible progress in reducing gang violence, they feel they have only begun to scratch the surface. Deeper problems need to be addressed. New gangs with younger members are still appearing, and the partnership has much work ahead of it to reach its goal of reducing gang membership and halting the proliferation of new gangs. Deep-rooted social problems

While GIP staffers believe they have achieved impressive and visible progress in reducing gang violence, they feel they have only begun to scratch the surface.

such as poverty, disenfranchisement, lack of affordable housing and deteriorating schools will need to be addressed.

Conclusion

The Columbia Heights and Shaw neighborhoods have seen a sharp and lasting decrease in the number of violent and criminal acts perpetrated by Latino gangs since 2003. The improvements in public security are primarily attributed to the coordinated efforts of the agencies participating in the Gang Intervention Partnership. While the problems of gang violence faced by other cities and countries are not identical to those of Washington, and the programs developed by individual agencies will differ based on local circumstances and cultural differences, the collaborative model developed by the GIP participating agencies is one that can be replicated elsewhere provided that there is a genuine commitment on the part of all actors involved.

Endnotes

1 Center for Youth Policy Research, *Evaluation of and Recommendations Regarding a Program to Reduce Criminal Activity of Latino Gangs in the District of Columbia*, September 16, 2003.

Gangs and Youth Violence in Central America

In the 1980s and the early 1990s, El Salvador, Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, Honduras were torn by civil wars that pitted right-wing armed forces and paramilitary squads against leftist guerrillas and their purported allies, which often included unarmed popular organizations. The vast majority of those killed were civilians. The wars led to the displacement of millions of people to major cities, contributing to rapid urbanization in all three countries, and significant emigration, mainly to the United States. In El Salvador alone, about 20% of the population is estimated to have fled the country during the 1980s.

Those migrants included many children and teenagers. In Central American immigrant communities in the United States, especially in Los Angeles, many of those young people were exposed to long-established U.S. youth gangs. The two most-widely known gangs in Central America today, the *Mara Salvatrucha*, or MS-13, and the *Barrio Dieciocho*, or 18th Street Gang, emerged first in Los Angeles in immigrant communities. As the wars ended and people began migrating back home or were deported, young people who had become involved in gangs in the United States brought the gang culture and experience from U.S. cities back to Central America in the early and mid-1990s.

Youth gangs have been documented as existing in Central America since at least the 1960s. Poverty and the failures of development policy, along with the cultural and economic marginalization of youth in Central America, led to the growth of gangs in some poor neighborhoods. These gangs were highly differentiated and local. Youth were drawn to the gangs in search of protection, respect, identity and support that was often lacking in their lives. It was the combination of these pre-existing local gangs with the gang culture and style

brought back by young people returning from the United States in the 1990s, that led to the gang violence problem that emerged in Central America in the late 1990s and the early years of the 21st century.

Violence and insecurity grew throughout Central America beginning in the late 1990s. Homicide rates, which had always been high by world standards, dipped in the mid-1990s as the region's wars came to an end and police and justice systems underwent reform. Murder rates then began to climb again and today are among the highest in the world. Gangs are one factor in this rise, but not the only factor. The growth of drug transshipments through Central America has contributed as well, as have other forms of criminal activity.

Although there are many forms of crime in Central America, youth gangs have been a particularly visible form, with their territorial graffiti and tattoos. In response to growing insecurity over the past decade, governments sought to appear "tough on crime" and focused on youth gang violence. Beginning in 2003, various Central American governments embarked on anti-gang policies that focused narrowly on suppression. In El Salvador, anti-gang legislation and police practices targeted youth. El Salvador's president called the first phase of these policies the *Mano Dura* plan, or "heavy hand"; the second phase was known as plan *Super Mano Dura*. A similar approach in Honduras, including both legislation and police practice, was known as "*Zero Tolerancia*" or zero tolerance. Guatemala did not pass repressive legislation, although it did implement heavy-handed police practices known as *Plan Escoba*. In El Salvador and Honduras, legislation made it a crime to belong to a gang; in all three countries, repeated police sweeps rounded up young men who had tattoos, wore gang colors, or

> Poverty and the failures of development policy, along with the cultural and economic marginalization of youth in Central America, led to the growth of gangs in some poor neighborhoods.

sometimes dressed in what police judged to be gang styles. In most cases, those arrested were released without charge after several days in detention.

This enforcement-based approach was designed to accomplish several objectives: disrupt and deter gang activity, gather information and detain serious criminals. In practice, the impact on gang violence has been very different from what was anticipated. The enforcement-based approach may have enabled police to gather information about gang membership and gang activity from those arrested and certainly led to an increase in the number of individuals arrested and eventually sent to prison for gang-related crimes. But the tough, suppressive approach has not reduced overall homicide or gang-related crime rates in the five years since it began. Most experts believe that the broad police pressure applied under these tactics did little to weaken gangs and, instead, contributed to the gangs organizing and structuring themselves in more sophisticated ways to avoid police pressure. Meanwhile, the approach has raised serious concerns about due process and the human and civil rights of youth, stretched already frail judicial systems, and increased the arbitrary authority of police.

The focus on these repression-heavy approaches has drawn attention and resources away from critically needed prevention and intervention efforts. Though all three countries maintain government agencies charged with developing and implementing youth gang violence prevention, intervention and rehabilitation programs (the National Council of Public Security in El Salvador,

the Presidential Commission for Human Rights in Guatemala, and the National Program for Prevention in Honduras) the agencies are limited in their scope, poorly funded and depend largely on the financial support of international donor agencies. In all three countries, most youth gang violence prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs have been implemented by church groups (Catholic, Protestant and evangelical), community organizations, or local governments in conjunction with civil society. The sections that follow will describe the work of three of those civil society efforts.

Striking the right balance between prevention, intervention, and law enforcement is always difficult for governments when dealing with gangs. Local governments in the United States still struggle to find that balance, and prevention and intervention programs frequently must compete for funding and political support with law enforcement efforts. In Central America, prevention and intervention programs are at even greater disadvantage, with less funding and support from the region's crime-weary public. Governments in Central America must begin to develop prevention efforts— including community building, education and cooperation, needs assessments, and collaboration with law enforcement—on both the local and national levels if they are to make long-term progress against the gang phenomenon. This means creating policies that reflect a better balance between prevention and suppression and offer technical support and financial resources to groups focused on comprehensive approaches to youth violence.

Grupo Ceiba recognized that communities vary and that gang violence prevention must be tailored to the needs of specific communities. It conducted community assessments and designed its programs to respond to the needs identified. Grupo Ceiba embodies the principle of peer-to-peer work. It empowers youth by teaching them job skills that will allow them to discover their strengths, reach out to other youth, and become leaders in the community. These new leaders contribute a deep understanding of the neighborhood, its needs and its resources, and can help create programs that bring the community closer together. In turn, the community will develop a healthy environment that keeps youth away from gangs.

GRUPO CEIBA
Association for Community Promotion and Development
Guatemala

Grupo Ceiba is a Guatemalan non-governmental organization that operates a prevention program focused on at-risk youth in and around Guatemala City. While Grupo Ceiba started with a focus on drug and gang prevention, it has now expanded its mandate to include youth violence and security more broadly.

Grupo Ceiba was founded in the outskirts of Guatemala City in a neighborhood called El Limón, which had been settled by people displaced during the civil war. The majority of its original inhabitants were small farmers and indigenous people who fled violence in rural areas. Marginalized from its foundation, the community has long suffered from extreme poverty, lack of community services and tenuous family structures.

It was in this context that an Italian priest, Father Pedro Notta, worked as the pastor of a local church, Christ our Peace, in the 1980s. As pastor he became acutely aware of the problems facing Guatemalan youth and the lack of support mechanisms available to them. In 1989, he started a community youth mentoring program based on the idea of accompaniment, a key concept of Ceiba's work that means helping youth resist the lure of gangs by supporting them as they face the daily challenges of poverty, violence and alienation. With the assistance of Grupo Abel, an Italian organization which had done similar work in Asti, Italy, Father Notta conducted a community needs assessment which led to the development of Grupo Ceiba.

In 1995 Ceiba attained legal status as a non-governmental organization and continued to grow and establish itself in other marginal neighborhoods on the outskirts of the capital. As of 2008, Ceiba has five sites in Guatemala and one in Bogotá, Colombia and employs approximately 100 people. About three-quarters of these are salaried employees with the remainder serving as volunteers in Ceiba's educational centers. In addition, it receives about 400 volunteers annually.

The organization operates largely through the assistance of international donors from countries including Canada, Germany and the United States and foundations such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Soros Foundation-Guatemala. Ceiba has also received support from TROCAIRE (the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), among others.

Ceiba also receives funding from the Guatemalan government, although this amounts to only 10 percent of the organization's annual budget. An additional

The community youth mentoring program, established in 1989, is based on the idea of accompaniment, a key concept of Ceiba's work that means helping youth resist the lure of gangs by supporting them as they face the daily challenges of poverty, violence and alienation.

10 percent comes from private individual donations, profits from various Grupo Ceiba ventures and the organization's own savings. For fiscal year 2006, Grupo Ceiba's budget was about $300,000.

Since its foundation, Ceiba has served some 50,000 people. Currently, the organization serves about 1,500 youth regularly, and 5,300 on a more variable basis. About 60% of the youth it serves are male. Ceiba attributes this imbalance to stronger social stigmas that prevent women from joining gangs but is actively seeking equal gender representation within its programs.

Community Context

Grupo Ceiba is active in some of Guatemala's most marginalized communities, which are characterized by poverty, violence and unemployment. The group's programs are designed to respond to these needs and have a presence in the following locations:

- *El Limón:* the inaugural Ceiba center now serves more than 400 individuals.

- *Brisas de San Pedro:* this neighborhood suffers from particularly high levels of poverty as it is home to many displaced families who were forced to leave the capital city as a result of overcrowding. This location serves approximately 250 youth.

- *San Juan Comalapa:* Ceiba's presence in San Juan Comalapa was prompted by a local youth who, at the time, was involved in a gang. After hearing about Ceiba's work in El Limón, the young man repeatedly approached the organization to ask them to open a center. This location now serves approximately 500 youth.

- *Lomas de Santa Faz:* this settlement, located on the outskirts of Guatemala City, is extremely impoverished and is the location of the newest Ceiba center.

- *Mezquital:* In the neighborhood La Esperanza (Hope), this location boasts a

center for computer training along with alternative schooling for middle-school-aged youth.

- *Bogotá, Colombia:* Ceiba opened its first location outside Guatemala in late 2007. Located in the neighborhood of Fontibón, this center offers schooling, language and art courses, recreational activities, family counseling as well as technology training.

Programs

Group Ceiba has several programs to reach out to young people. These outreach programs are based on consistent, direct intervention in affected communities to earn the trust of at-risk youth. The programs are aimed at developing "organic" local youth leaders and fostering peer-to-peer mentoring. Along with this outreach to youth, Ceiba does broader community work to strengthen community awareness about the root causes of youth violence and to break down negative stereotypes of gang-involved youth.

Street Accompaniment and Street University

This program was Ceiba's initial outreach effort and is directed both at young people and the broader community. The aim of the program is two-fold: a) to cultivate organic youth leadership, and b) to strengthen the social fabric of local communities.

Street Accompaniment

Street Accompaniment uses a peer-to-peer outreach model to instill hope and build trust between participants and their peer leaders.

The first step is to reach out to youths at risk of joining a gang to develop a relationship of trust with them. Ceiba outreach workers begin by walking the streets of the target community, as this is where at-risk youth spend much of their

day. Through these regular *caminatas*, or walks, Ceiba staff also gain a better understanding of the community's needs. Once a relationship is built between the outreach staff and an individual youth, the youth is invited to participate in certain Ceiba activities such as a soccer game. These activities serve as a stepping stone to becoming further involved in Ceiba's other programs.

Regular contact with the community allows Ceiba to develop an assessment that identifies the unique problems faced by the area's local youth. This helps Ceiba staffers address the community's needs and develop a baseline that can be used later to evaluate their work.

The next step of the Street Accompaniment program is to cultivate youth leaders from within the community. In selecting these individuals, Ceiba staffers look for natural leaders and, once they are identified, offer them education and training on civil rights, political analysis, positive citizen participation techniques and methods of interacting with other community groups. Under the guidance of a Ceiba professional, the leader later facilitates group sessions with other young people to discuss issues such as gangs and violence as well as personal and familial problems. The groups are tasked with organizing community activities such as sporting events, trainings, and informational meetings. Youth leaders are also involved in monitoring their own communities to keep abreast of individuals who may be at risk for involvement with gangs, drug traffickers or organized crime.

A third step in the program is a Youth Parliament, which brings together young people from throughout Central America. The parliament convenes on an annual basis, providing a space for its delegates to address their concerns as Latin American youth. It was conceived in response to the lack of opportunities for young people to be heard by regional and international policy makers.

GRUPO CEIBA

A group of young men meet with a Grupo Ceiba staff member who visits their neighborhood as part of the organization's Street Accompaniment program.

Street University

In an effort to incorporate the community into their outreach, Ceiba created the Street University program to complement its Street Accompaniment work. The Street University consists of a Center of Studies and Documentation which collects data on the communities in which Ceiba works, and includes a library and internet center open to the public. The libraries are home to traditional resources as well as the local data collected by youth involved in the Accompaniment project. The library and Internet center are open to the public which, in addition to providing resources to the community, also helps build positive community relations.

Alternative Education

Grupo Ceiba recognized that alienation from the formal educational system is a significant risk factor for gang involvement. The Alternative Education program was designed to respond to feelings of isolation and hopelessness associated with a youth's exclusion or expulsion from the formal educational system. The Alternative Education program boasts the largest number of participants of any Ceiba program and comprises several education projects aimed at different ages. The primary-level

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curriculum has been approved by the Guatemalan Ministry of Public Education and is a legally recognized alternative to the state-run system. The following are some components of the program.

Light and Hope Alternative School

This program targets primary-level children who, for various reasons, are not attending state-run schools. Whether the decision to leave was voluntary or a child was expelled, these children are often current gang members or youth at high risk of joining a gang. The program's curriculum is designed to develop critical reading and writing, web and English language skills. Recreational activities are used to teach emotional control and interpersonal skills.

Educational Center

This program is aimed at older youth and adults interested in continuing their education. It is not intended merely as an outlet for advancing one's studies but as a space in which participants can build relationships with other community members and support each other academically and personally.

"La Ceibita" Daycare Center

In addition to programs oriented to youth not in the formal education system, Ceiba's Alternative Education Program includes a daycare program for single mothers. This center responds directly to the economic reality of many young mothers in Guatemala who must work to make a living and are not otherwise able to care for their children themselves or pay for formal supervision.

Business Education

In Ceiba's view, a critical component of any prevention program is to provide new opportunities to youth. As director Marco Castillo says, "We cannot finish this process without the economic component." Ceiba stresses job training and attainment of technical skills as avenues of stability and financial security outside the gang. In

Guatemala, where estimates suggest that three quarters of the workforce participates in the informal economy, such training is invaluable. The program focuses on providing students with a decent wage, enhancing self-esteem and promoting cooperation and solidarity among the participants. Some of the skills taught include baking, metal work, industrial cooking, and computing.

Technology Training

Through its business education program, Grupo Ceiba also offers technology training in areas such as computer repair and web and graphic design. Some graduates of this program have also come back to work for Grupo Ceiba providing tech support or have formed cooperatives with fellow Ceiba students.

These cooperatives are designed to help individuals overcome the enormous challenges of opening a small business in Guatemala. By using cooperatives as their business model, Ceiba encourages collaboration and solidarity between participants in the program. Grupo Ceiba provides youth with the necessary start-up capital with the understanding that the cooperative will develop as a part of the larger Grupo Ceiba organization. In return, Grupo Ceiba keeps 50 percent of the cooperatives' profits for startup and maintenance costs while the members of the cooperative receive the other 50 percent. There are currently 10 of these cooperatives operating in Guatemala.

IN MID-2008, a team of graduates of the Business Education program who now run the Computer Restoration Cooperative, participated in the national-level initiative "Open Schools", which is aimed at providing computers and Internet access to outfit public schools in Guatemala. The program is backed by Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom.

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Online Training

Ceiba has recently developed a series of online courses to extend its programs to people who are unable to visit one of the Ceiba centers. Through the Internet, young people have access to a wide variety of Ceiba programs. The online instruction is interactive and students are encouraged to communicate directly with the instructor regularly via email. Approximately 100 youth participate regularly in these on-line courses.

Collaborative Strategies

Grupo Ceiba has deliberately placed its facilities in the more violent and marginalized parts of the areas it serves. The organization prides itself on its organic, bottom-up approach to combating the problems of youth gangs and youth violence, a strategy that that has generated excellent relations with the communities in which Ceiba works.

Ceiba also enjoys good relations with local and national law enforcement. Although Ceiba does not condone the government's mano dura approach to gang violence, the organization has been able to collaborate with authorities on the creation of technology centers in some regional jails. At the government's invitation, Ceiba has installed and staffed a technology center inside a maximum security prison in the town of Escuintla, the first center of its kind in Guatemala. There are plans to create similar centers in two other prisons.

Impact and Limitations

Grupo Ceiba evaluates the success of its work by the success of the youth it serves. When participants are able to obtain jobs and become self-sustaining individuals, Ceiba classifies this as a success. Ceiba currently employs several graduates of the program as members of its technology support team. The organization recently had its work recognized by the United Nations, awarded third-place in the Experiences of Social Innovation in Latin America and the Caribbean 2004-2005 competition sponsored by the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean.

Beyond the constant search for sustainable funding, Ceiba faces three central challenges. First, the group must break through barriers to build trust with at-risk and gang-involved youth. These young people live on the margins of society, both isolated and isolating themselves. This makes it difficult for them to seek out and trust those who offer them an alternative.

Second, public ignorance and misperceptions about youth violence and its roots mean that prevention-focused organizations such as Ceiba face a difficult working environment. News media contribute to the oversimplification of the gang problem by offering little analysis of its root causes. Many community members support heavy-handed responses to gang violence and believe that organizations like Grupo Ceiba are coddling criminals.

Finally, in the face of high unemployment and wages that do not meet the cost of living in Guatemala, gangs are an attractive option for many marginalized youth. With very limited economic opportunities, many young people look to gang life as an alternative source of economic and social stability.

Conclusion

In the future, Grupo Ceiba will continue serving at-risk and marginalized youth in Guatemala. Though it acknowledges that the demand for violence prevention services cannot be met by one, or even a handful of service providers, the team at Grupo Ceiba is committed to bringing hope and opportunity to as many young people as it can. With increased technical and financial support from government actors, individual prevention programs could lead more collaborative efforts and have a greater impact on the levels of youth crime and violence in Guatemala.

> Public ignorance and misperceptions about youth violence and its roots mean that prevention-focused organizations such as Ceiba face a difficult working environment.

Paz y Justicia, part of the Honduran Mennonite Church, works under the principle that young people seek both identity and belonging. They need both guidance and encouragement to make positive decisions in their lives. Parents are working or sometimes absent, and the support networks of traditional extended families have been weakened or eroded; educators have so many demands that they cannot attend to students outside the classroom setting; broader community structures and support systems are less powerful than they once were. Paz y Justicia is an example of an organization whose work with young people is based on recognition of the importance of these institutions in the lives of young people. Its work in Honduras stresses strengthening communities, families, schools, and other sources of support. With positive alternatives available to them, youth are able to fulfill their needs without turning to a life of violence.

PAZ Y JUSTICIA
Honduras

During the 1980s, the Mennonite Church in Honduras began working to improve living conditions for refugees who had come to Honduras fleeing civil conflicts in neighboring El Salvador and Nicaragua. At the same time, true to the pacifist traditions of their faith, the Mennonites played an active role in the development of a national movement calling for the establishment of an exception to obligatory military service for conscientious objectors. It was from this movement, known as the Christian Civic Movement, that Paz y Justicia, or Peace and Justice, was formed as an arm of the Mennonite Church in Honduras following the effective abolition of obligatory military service in 1994. With this victory, the Christian Civic Movement shifted its priorities and some of its former members reorganized themselves around a new and growing problem in Honduras: youth gang violence. This new organization, Paz y Justicia, focused on youth violence issues, and as the severity of the gang problem began to increase, Paz y Justicia developed a pilot outreach project in Choloma, in the department of Cortés, in northwest Honduras, an area particularly affected by youth violence.

Paz y Justicia now has operations in three municipalities with high levels of gang activity: Choloma, La Ceiba, and Tocoa. Operating on an annual budget of approximately $92,000, Paz y Justicia maintains a staff of 13 full-time employees and some 30 volunteers.

Emigration plays a major role in the deterioration of family units in Honduras, with many young people left to fend for themselves while waiting to join parents and other family members who have migrated to the United States.

While the locations in which Paz y Justicia works are all marginalized communities, local dynamics differ within the three areas, requiring Paz y Justicia to tailor its programs accordingly. For example, drug consumption and trafficking are bigger problems in Tocoa and Choloma, a reality reflected in the allocation of more time and resources toward HIV/AIDS education because of the link between drug use and HIV infection. While the communities' needs differ in some respects, what unites them is the lack of social service programs that work with gang-involved and at-risk youth.

Community Context

Paz y Justicia cites a variety of challenges that are common to Honduran youth living in marginalized areas. Emigration plays a major role in the deterioration of family units in Honduras, with many young people left to fend for themselves while waiting to join parents and other family members who have migrated to the United States. These conditions are aggravated by poverty, a lack of economic opportunity, limited education and recreational activity, drug trafficking and the culture of consumerism that characterize life in many Honduran communities. All these conditions contribute to the likelihood that a young Honduran person will seek belonging, status and stability as part of a youth gang.

Programs

Five programs form the core of Paz y Justicia's prevention and intervention work. One program is specifically targeted at intervention and rehabilitation of current gang members while the remaining three are prevention oriented. Paz y Justicia estimates that 98 percent of the gang-affiliated youth who participate in its programs are male. The majority of females who do participate generally do so in an adjunct role, brought into the program as a result of a personal relationship with a male gang member who has decided to participate.

Intervention and Rehabilitation of Youth Involved with Gangs

This program encompasses Paz y Justicia's work with gang-involved youth and operates in all three sites. Establishing and preserving the trust of the youth with whom they work is paramount to the success of Paz y Justicia's intervention and rehabilitation programs. As such, the outreach process is approached with extreme care and caution. The majority of participants are recruited by Paz y Justicia, which identifies potential candidates through its familiarity with the communities in which it works; very few young people make initial contact of their own initiative. Paz y Justicia never initiates contact with an individual gang member; to initiate a formal intervention process, gang leaders are approached first. The process begins with the organization contacting a gang leader via an intermediary trusted by the gang leadership. Any attempt to circumvent or disregard the leadership structure of the gang would be interpreted as disrespectful and would eliminate the possibility that gang members could participate.

If a young person is already involved in a gang, Paz y Justicia focuses on establishing or restoring a sense of trust and belonging between the community and the gang-involved youth by providing constructive activities and relationships regardless of the youth's level of gang involvement. Some of the activities offered are sports, businesses and vocational trainings, community service, music and other creative arts such as drama and poetry. Participants themselves guide the decision-making process concerning which activities are offered to ensure the program is responsive to the unique needs of the youth in each community.

Paz y Justicia also provides gang-involved youth with "accompaniment" which refers to intimate, one-on-one mentoring, prayer and reflection, and other personalized support. This accompaniment often takes Paz y Justicia staff into local courtrooms and prisons as staff accompany youth during legal proceedings and visit them during periods of incarceration.

Because Paz y Justicia recognizes the decisive role that family can play in rehabilitating a gang-involved youth, the organization works with families to foster supportive and accepting home environments for program participants. Paz y Justicia staff work with families to break down negative stereotypes, feelings of resentment and other familiar barriers to the reintegration of the youth into the family unit.

Preventive Education for Youth at Risk of HIV/AIDS

In addition to high levels of violence and gang activity, Honduras, like some other Central American countries, has a high rates of HIV, with 0.7 percent of the population infected.[1] Acknowledging that many of the youth they serve are sexually-active from a very early age, Paz y Justicia created a sex education program to promote more responsible, healthy behaviors in both at-risk youth and local Mennonite young people. The two-week program is designed to educate participants on safe-sex practices, sexually transmitted diseases and the general implications of becoming sexually active.

Paz y Justicia staff work with families to break down negative stereotypes, feelings of resentment and other familiar barriers to the reintegration of the youth into the family unit.

ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES for the organization is a Paz y Justicia-led reconciliation between members of two youth gangs, the Wonders and the Vatos Locos. After several years of working with Paz y Justicia staff member Denis Mata, members of the Wonders approached Paz y Justicia and asked if the organization could try and arrange a reconciliation between the Wonders and Vatos Locos. Paz y Justicia then approached the Vatos Locos about their willingness to enter into a reconciliation process with the other gang. Initially, there was significant distrust as to the true intentions of the Wonders in requesting such reconciliation. Some members of the Vatos Locos feared that the meeting was merely a ploy aimed at making members vulnerable to attack, but eventually, they agreed to participate.

Ground rules were discussed and established with both of the gangs in preparation for the meeting. All participants were to agree that they would arrive free of guns and drugs; bad language was also prohibited. The local Evangelical Mennonite Church was selected as the location for the meeting for its neutrality and because of their respect for the church.

Expectations for the reconciliation were high as the event had been widely publicized throughout the neighborhood for several weeks. On the day of the reconciliation, each gang entered the church separately. The Wonders entered first and occupied one side of the church. The Vatos Locos arrived next, but hesitated outside, fearful of entering the same building as their enemies. After some encouragement and reassurance from Paz y Justicia staff, the Vatos Locos entered the church, sitting on the opposite side of the sanctuary from the Wonders.

With the two gangs sitting inside the church, staff member Denis Mata then asked the youth to interchange seats with each other stating, "You've entered into this temple to take part in an act of forgiveness. We are all one church and now we're brothers; you should not fear each other. You must break down the barriers that impede you from becoming closer." With this, the young men got up and intermixed, hugging one another and crying.

With a safe and trustworthy environment having been established, a long process of reflection began. Several youth stood up and professed their willingness to end the cycle of violence and retribution between the two gangs; others asked forgiveness from rival gang members. Over the course of four hours, many of the gang members began to realize that they shared the same troubles and hopes for the future as people whom they had seen as enemies only hours before.

This initial step in the reconciliation created the framework for a sustained calm between the two gangs. Paz y Justicia staff are now able to work with each of the youth individually to provide them with opportunities and alternatives to the gang life.

School and Family Peace Education

This program focuses on conflict analysis, prevention and meditation, by training teachers, students and parents on skills such as active listening, anger management and conflict mediation. These types of communication skills can be very effective in dealing with issues at home or at school, which may lead to a young person wanting to join a gang. The program was created after Paz y Justicia staffers noticed that these kinds of skills are rarely taught in schools or learned in the family setting.

Street Accompaniment and Social Change

Paz y Justicia also operates at the street level, working with at-risk youth who do not have a home, or "street kids", as well as children living in unhealthy family situations and suffering from neglect. These activities center around conflict analysis, mediation and leadership training. There is a particular focus on cultivating leadership with street kids, as these youth are some of the most vulnerable to drug addiction, recruitment by youth gangs, or "sicariato", the recruitment of young boys as assassins for hire. Paz y Justicia staff members who lead this program are leaders who are already familiar with local actors and community dynamics.

Collaborative Strategies

Paz y Justicia places a premium on organic relationships with community members in all the areas in which it operates. Recruiting local community leaders to lead programs and activities with youth is essential to Paz y Justicia's work. Without the participation of these local contacts, gaining safe access to gang members who want to be rehabilitated would be nearly impossible and leave the organization isolated and ineffective.

Due to differences over organizational approaches to youth violence issues, Paz y Justicia has encountered some challenges in forming partnerships with other service providers and NGOs. The group has, however, worked closely with the Catholic Church. The Church has been an important and stalwart civil society partner as Catholic officials share both Paz y Justica's view of youth violence and gangs as serious social issues in Honduran society and the organization's interest in rehabilitating gang-affiliated youth.

Paz y Justicia and the Catholic Church began their collaboration in 2003 following the passage of the "Anti-Gang Law" in Honduras, a reform to Article

PAZ Y JUSTICIA

A Paz y Justicia staff member removes a tattoo from the arm of a young Honduran. Paz y Justicia's tattoo removal facility first opened in 2003.

332 of the Penal Code, which gave police the authority to arrest any individual with a tattoo and charge him or her with the crime of illicit association. This created panic within many communities, leading young people to take extreme and harmful measures to remove their tattoos as professional tattoo removal can cost up to $200, making the process unaffordable for most Honduran youth. Many young people resorted to more crude and harmful methods such as the use of battery acid, hot irons, and scraping off the skin with a bottle cap. As a result, Paz y Justicia saw the need for a safe means of tattoo removal and began looking for ways to establish a tattoo removal service. Aware that the Catholic Church was equally concerned with the increasingly repressive climate, Paz y Justicia approached the Church in the area of Chamelecon with a proposal to establish a tattoo removal clinic. The clinic opened in 2003 and remains a very popular service with local young people.

The Catholic Church and Paz y Justicia have also collaborated in the community of López Arellano, where the organization formed community medical brigades and held joint peace walks led by local youth to educate and raise consciousness in the community about youth violence and the need for alternative solutions.

> There is a particular focus on cultivating leadership with street kids, as these youth are some of the most vulnerable to drug addiction, recruitment by youth gangs, or "sicariato", the recruitment of young boys as assassins for hire.

Another vital Paz y Justicia ally is the National Commission on Human Rights in Honduras, an autonomous government body created in 1992 to promote and protect human rights. Paz y Justicia often denounces incidents of police repression against local youth before the commission, a relationship which serves as an important conduit for the type of first-hand information Paz y Justicia is privy to because of its work with youth. The Commission also plays the important role of interlocutor between Paz y Justicia and government officials such as the Attorney General's office and the police, creating spaces for dialogue and facilitating the organization's participation in national forums on issues related to youth violence.

Safety

The safety of Paz y Justicia employees and volunteers is an ongoing concern. Threats and minor crimes against staff are not uncommon and the organization exercises extreme caution in its dealings with local gang leaders. Because of their work, Paz y Justicia staffers are sometimes perceived as gang collaborators by the local community and suffer retaliation as a result. Conversely, being seen as a collaborator with local police can also have negative consequences for the organization. Due to the hostile relationship between law enforcement and local youth, Paz y Justicia staffers must navigate their relationship with police very carefully. They seek to maintain a professional relationship with the police in order to remain both effective in preventing and responding to crime, and trustworthy in the eyes of the youth.

Impact and Limitations

Paz y Justicia estimates that it has served about 320 young people since its founding. It does not believe the need for its services will diminish in the near future.

Although the activities and services offered by Paz y Justicia are relatively

low-cost, the organization faces regular financial constraints. Paz y Justicia would like to expand its activities and have a presence in other municipalities with high levels of gang violence, something that is impossible to do without a significantly higher and sustained level of funding. Additionally, some of the programs they would like to expand or strengthen require equipment and/or personnel that the organization cannot afford. An example is the vocational workshops which are very popular with participants because they provide them with marketable job skills. Unfortunately, they are also one of the most costly activities to carry out due to high overheard for supplies and special instructors.

In addition to financial constraints, certain social dynamics also pose a challenge to the work of Paz y Justicia. While tensions between police and civil society have decreased markedly in recent years, the late 1990s were a difficult time for the organization due to the Honduran government's hard-line *mano dura* approach to youth agangs. Such policies posed serious complications for outreach workers who were dealing with gang-involved youth. Public interactions with known gang members became virtually impossible for service providers for fear of reprisal from law enforcement. More recently, however, the relationships between civil society groups, NGOs and law enforcement have improved, allowing Paz y Justicia to interact much more openly with gang-involved youth without fear of negative repercussions. While engaging a known gang leader is still not tolerated by police, outreach with lower-level members is generally allowed to take place without interference.

Conclusion

Honduran society is under stress as incomes lag behind soaring consumer prices. The lure of the U.S. wage has led to the deterioration of many Honduran families, with many parents unable to provide their

children with the resources, time and support they need. Paz y Justicia seeks to use their limited capabilities and resources to fill this void. Paz y Justicia staff wear many hats—teacher, negotiator, facilitator, mentor, counselor and friend—all with the hope of helping troubled young people find strength, knowledge and hope.

Endnotes

[1] UNAIDS, 2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, Annex, .p 230.

The work of Equipo Nahual illustrates the principle that effective gang prevention programs recognize young people's need for identity and belonging. These programs present youth with opportunities to develop individual identities through healthy and constructive means. The program described below is unusual (and in some circles controversial) in applying this approach in working with active gang members and helping them develop in ways that will encourage them to lead a calmer, gang-free life. This is important work that requires building trust with a particularly challenging set of young people. It is often more difficult because program staff are frequently viewed with distrust themselves by some police and government officials, and by community members who believe that gang-involved youth cannot be rehabilitated. Illustrating another key principle of effective programs, Equipo Nahual staff seek to develop strong and positive community relations, despite these difficulties.

EQUIPO NAHUAL
El Salvador

In the early 1990s, Timothy Bernard McConville, a Scottish Catholic pastor and psychologist working in the San Salvador suburb of Soyapango, El Salvador's most densely populated municipality, became deeply concerned about rising levels of youth violence and the prevalence of gangs in the municipality. While some local organizations were working with at-risk groups including youth and drug users, McConville was concerned that service providers were unwilling to, or uninterested in, working with active gang members. In 2004, McConville and two Salvadoran psychologists, José Roberto Escobar and Wilson Alvarado Alemán, created Equipo Nahual to fill this void.

The organization's current annual operating expenses are in the range of $30,000 to $35,000. Its primary funder, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, an arm of the Catholic Church of England, provides a $20,000 grant, leaving Equipo Nahual in a very precarious financial situation. In the near future, Equipo Nahual will focus on securing new sources of funding to ensure the continuation of its work.

Community Context

Soyapango is a large San Salvador suburb with a population that is largely poor or working class. Young people face high levels of unemployment, weakened family structures, and a variety of social problems in the community. Youth gang violence has been a serious problem in Soyapango for a number of years.

Programs

The word "nahual" comes from an ancient indigenous belief system; it refers to a shadow or protective spirit that watches over an individual during his or her lifetime. The founders of Equipo Nahual see their work with gang members in this light, as helping to develop and protect the individual. Equipo Nahual's approach to working with gang-involved youth is rooted in the work of renowned psychologist Carl Jung, a pioneer of analytical psychology. Building on Jung's principles of self-realization and individuation, the founders of Equipo Nahual structured a program that places emphasis on the discovery and cultivation of personal identity. They believe the process of distinguishing personal identity from the identity of the gang is a critical component of any intervention strategy. Equipo Nahual does not run traditional prevention programs which reach out broadly to all youth. Rather, they have chosen to focus on intervention work with active gang members.

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Since its inception, Equipo Nahual has added staff and now includes five part-time "social promoters," or outreach workers, who are in regular communication with local youth. The organization regularly maintains five programs: Harm Reduction, Street Outreach, Human Development, Group Therapeutics and Circles of Reconciliation.

Harm Reduction

The Harm Reduction program is explicitly directed at active gang members and has two components. The first is jornadas deportivas, or athletic tournaments, in which youth come together to play soccer, basketball or other group sports. These are held on Sundays and are the most well-attended of any Equipo Nahual program, with 100-150 participants each week. The jornadas are designed as a positive alternative activity to typical gang behavior. These activities are often an entry point to participation in Equipo Nahual's more intensive, psychological development activities.

In response to the need expressed by local youth for more skills-based workshops, Equipo Nahual developed the second component to its harm reduction program, vocational workshops. Vocational workshops offer participants the opportunity to learn job skills and better their chances of relative financial stability through steady employment. This program is very popular with local youth who have expressed a desire for more skills-based workshops. Unfortunately, due to financial limitations at this moment, Equipo Nahual operates only a t-shirt silk-screening workshop; in the future, its staffers hope to offer workshops on baking and other skills. Because start-up costs for these workshops are significant, it is very difficult for a small, low-budget service provider like Equipo Nahual to initiate these kinds of activities. A top priority for Equipo Nahual is securing additional funds to expand this workshop program.

Street Outreach

Another major component of Equipo Nahual's work is continual outreach to local, at-risk youth. A core part of the organization's work includes daily walks through the streets of the community, during which staff seek out local youth who may be in need of the kinds of services and programs offered by the organization. This work has to be done with extreme care and sensitivity to neighborhood dynamics so as to not put the youth in danger by being seen with staff of Equipo Nahual and thus perceived as disloyal to the gang.

Human Development

The Human Development series is a collection of workshops designed to help foster personal growth and understanding. The workshops consist of a series of informal talks or charlas led by a member of the Equipo Nahual staff. The aim of each talk is to present a social issue (such as alcohol, drugs, human sexuality, violence, masculinity) and allow the participants to engage in an open discussion about the issue. Real-life scenarios and situations are used to encourage individual self-awareness and critical thinking about important issues that can have serious impact on the lives of these young people.

Each clika, or sub-group of a larger gang, that participates in the Human Development program receives a separate workshop presentation. As with the jornadas deportivas, Equipo Nahual staff is sensitive to community dynamics when engaging in outreach to local youth, inviting them to participate in these workshops. In order to avoid unnecessary friction between participants and ensure their continued participation, members of differing gangs are never mixed at this early stage in the rehabilitation process.

The aim of these workshops is to provide youth with the necessary space to analyze their own thoughts and emotions, through dialogue and interaction on a more intimate and individual level. In a safe environment, each gang member has a

The aim of these workshops is to provide youth with the necessary space to analyze their own thoughts and emotions, through dialogue and interaction on a more intimate and individual level.

chance to find and express his own personal identity, an identity apart from the gang, through the workshop activities. Equipo Nahual believes that having the young person separate his or her personal identity from that of the gang is a critical step in rehabilitation.

Circles of Reconciliation

Circles of Reconciliation are intended to generate community discussion and collaboration around the problem of youth gangs and how to generally improve community life. The goal is to establish a permanent mechanism in which representatives of various community organizations come to discuss community concerns, one of which is youth gangs. According to staff at Equipo Nahual, it has been challenging to organize this group. Many community organizations and other entities such as local government and religious groups are reluctant to be involved with any project dealing with active gang members. Overcoming the stigma attached to working with gangs, while also educating the public about why young people join gangs and how communities can prevent gang violence, are two challenging but necessary goals. While it is still in its initial stages, most sectors of the community have expressed interest in participating in this community council, and Equipo Nahual continues to work toward its realization.

Group Therapeutics

Group Therapeutics is the most intensive component of Equipo Nahual's intervention program. Participation in this program comes only after the individuals in a clika have established significant trust with the staff at Equipo Nahual, something which takes a great deal of time and commitment on the part of the youth. Once a clika feels comfortable with the staff, it may begin group therapy sessions, held once a week with one of the two staff psychologists.

These one- to two-hour sessions are used to explore how the participants came to join

the gang, with the hope that this awareness will contribute to better decision-making and greater sense of individual identity. A "Check-In" marks the beginning of each session, offering participants a space to share their ups and downs of the past week, a chance to blow off steam or simply share what's on their mind. Then the group begins a meditation session led by the psychologist in charge. The aim of the meditation is to facilitate individual reflection on the participants's past, present and future, helping them to examine the decisions and conditions that have contributed to their joining a gang. Mayan symbols, particularly the Nahual, are central to the meditation, used to invoke feelings of individuality and self-awareness. The psychologist then helps each youth to reflect on the meditation session, strengthening the participant's sense of individual identity

Collaborative Strategies

Equipo Nahual sees its work not in isolation from other actors in the community, but in coordination with them. The organization works to maintain good relations with community groups and people, placing a premium on staying in tune with local needs and sentiments. The circles of reconciliation mentioned in the program section are an aspect of this commitment, intended to foster information sharing and strengthen collaboration among community groups.

As Equipo Nahual realized the pivotal role that local attitudes can play in addressing the marginalization of youth, the organization decided to conduct a community-wide survey in the Soyapango area to gain a better understanding of how people perceive youth and gang issues in the context of the community's needs. Equipo Nahual believes that media accounts of the youth gang problem in Soyapango are dangerously distorted, and so the organization sees properly calibrated public outreach as a vital component of its work. The organization sponsored its

Recognizing the pivotal role that local attitudes can play in addressing the marginalization of youth, the organization sees properly calibrated public outreach as a vital component of its work.

inaugural Community Forum in December 2007, uniting representatives of the local police, the mayor's office, community task forces, and partner organizations. The aim of the forum was to increase public awareness and cooperation around the youth violence issue. Equipo Nahual initiated the community-wide survey in Soyapango in late 2007 and intends to present the survey findings at a second Community Forum in 2008. Equipo Nahual hopes that efforts such as the survey and Community Forums will lead to greater awareness about the phenomenon of youth gangs and increased willingness to work with at-risk and gang-involved youth.

Cooperation from religious organizations, specifically the Catholic and Episcopal churches, has been critical to Equipo Nahual's work in Soyapango. In early 2008, Equipo Nahual began a series of meetings with a network of Christian churches in the municipality of Ilopango to explore possibilities for collaboration on work with both active gang members and at-risk youth. Equipo Nahual also plans to reach out to the mayor's office in the nearby town of Ilopango and other local institutions as it develops its work in the area.

In addition to its work with community organizations, churches, and local governments, Equipo Nahual—in a move unusual for a youth service organization—also does outreach with local gang-involved youth to explain the organization and what it does. Equipo Nahual recognizes that it must be sensitive to community dynamics when it engages in this kind of outreach, which makes this work particularly delicate and challenging. But because of its seriousness and the attention it spends on outreach, the organization is accepted by local gang-involved youth and is able to work with them.

Impact and Limitations

One of the most debilitating limitations on Equipo Nahual's work is the lack of funding. El Salvador has one of the highest levels

A group of young people alongside Equipo Nahual staff celebrate a win in one of Equipo Nahual's *jornadas deportivas*.

of gang violence in all Central America; the need for prevention, intervention and rehabilitation services is great. Unfortunately, resources are very limited, particularly for those organizations that choose to work with active gang members.

If the organization is able to obtain additional funding, Equipo Nahual hopes to use its program as a model for gang violence prevention in other parts of the country. In addition to the work in Soyapango, the organization has also identified the neighboring municipality of Ilopango as its next proposed work area. Ilopango is also extremely poor and violent and has high levels of gang activity. This expansion depends on securing additional funding.

The fear of gangs and the stigma associated with those who reach out to them are significant obstacles for Equipo Nahual. Because the organization is dedicated to intervention and rehabilitation, rather than broader prevention efforts, their work implies a level of proximity to gangs that makes many people uncomfortable working with the group. This perception is something the organization hopes to change in the future through education and outreach around the successes of their rehabilitation strategies.

One young man said of Equipo Nahual, "the most important thing that's changed for us is the fact we have someone who sees us as human beings now. Everyone else looks at us like we're animals in the circus."

In the eyes of Director Wilson Aleman, reversing the social stigma that accompanies being a gang-involved youth is critical to the youth's successful rehabilitation. In one instance, a journalist visiting Equipo Nahual was interviewing Aleman and several youth when Aleman was called away to take a telephone call. While in the other room, Aleman overhead the journalist and the young men as they continued the interview. The journalist asked one of the youth, "What's changed since Equipo Nahual came here to your neighborhood to work with you?" One of the young men responded, "Well, there haven't been as many killings because we've been here doing the activities with them. But the most important thing that's changed for us is the fact we have someone who sees us as human beings now. Everyone else looks at us like we're animals in the circus." Aleman says hearing statements like this are the most important feedback possible. "The ultimate reward is knowing that they [the youth] are grateful for the little that we do."

According to Equipo Nahual, another great challenge to their work are the Salvadoran government's mano dura policies and the tense relations these policies have engendered between police and the youth with whom Equipo Nahual works. In one instance, several members of the Equipo Nahual staff were detained by police while working with gang members and themselves charged with "Illicit Association". While the charges were dropped the same day, the experience made Equipo Nahual acutely aware of the troublesome combination of fear and power encapsulated by police forces and the kinds of outcomes such a combination has and may again produce.

Conclusion

Equipo Nahual continues to work under strenuous and challenging conditions. They are fueled not only by the great need they see for their work but also by the encouragement and impact that is revealed in moments such as the one illustrated above. While Equipo Nahual hopes to one day replicate its work across El Salvador extending its presence and message to every community in need of its services, there exist a great number of intermediary steps on the way. For now, the focus is on staying afloat.

Conclusion

While many of the programs profiled in this publication continue to find success in spite of limited political and financial support from local and national governments, it is ultimately the responsibility of the state to provide citizen security and, by extension, support for such local initiatives. In the United States, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the Department of Justice offers a model of how national and local governments can work together to provide both funding and the necessary framework for collaboration between various parts of the community.[1] While such national-local cooperation exists in the United States, it is far less common in Central America due to the governments' continued emphasis on suppression over prevention and rehabilitation.

Youth gangs and International Cooperation

As the United States, Mexico and Central American countries consider various forms of collaboration on the common challenge of the youth gangs, prevention practices should be an important component. FBI cooperation with Central American governments and other forms of information sharing are necessary for an effective response to criminal cross-border activities by gang members. Gang members involved in such transnational criminal activities are, however, a minority, and thousands of other gang-involved or at-risk youth are better reached through prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation methods. It is vital that policy makers and officials recognize such distinctions when designing and carrying out international cooperation and funding programs aimed at curbing the growing gang phenomenon in the United States and Central America. Partnerships and cooperation between gang violence prevention programs and service providers in Central America and their colleagues in the United States should be an important part of the effort to build stronger, community-based youth violence prevention programs in this hemisphere.

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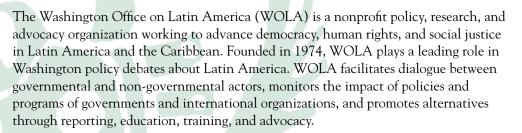Senior Fellow

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Endnotes

[1] Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Strategic Planning Tool," http://www.iir.com/nygc/tool/.

About WOLA

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) is a nonprofit policy, research, and advocacy organization working to advance democracy, human rights, and social justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. Founded in 1974, WOLA plays a leading role in Washington policy debates about Latin America. WOLA facilitates dialogue between governmental and non-governmental actors, monitors the impact of policies and programs of governments and international organizations, and promotes alternatives through reporting, education, training, and advocacy.

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