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Thematic Brief: Youth Violence and Education-Based Interventions for Citizen Security in Central America's Northern Triangle



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Introduction

The increasing level of violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, known collectively as the “Northern Triangle,” has had a significant impact on development in the region. “Data is now emerging to confirm the common-sense understanding that violence has a devastating impact on a poor person’s struggle out of poverty, seriously undermines economic development in poor countries, and directly reduces the effectiveness of poverty alleviation efforts.”¹ The complexity of this issue makes it particularly difficult to address and requires a closer look at the interplay of violence from the household to transnational levels and across key sectors including economic, social, political, and epistemic sectors. Recently, there has been an increased focus on the concept of citizen security as a way of addressing these multi-sectoral issues. “First, we need to fundamentally change the conversation... the problem of violence deserves equal time with hunger, dirty water, disease, illiteracy, unemployment, gender discrimination, housing, or sanitation because for the poor, violence is every bit as devastating and is frequently the hidden force undermining solutions to these other needs”.²

Challenges and Issues

A common proxy for establishing the level of violence in a nation is the intentional homicide rate, as murders and missing persons seldom go unreported.³ Honduras has a particularly alarming trend with intentional homicides increasing from a low of 44.3 per 100,000 to more than double that at 91 in 2012, ranking Honduras as 1st worldwide in intentional homicides. Guatemala has remained somewhat consistent with a rate that has fluctuated but is still ranked 5th worldwide.⁴ El Salvador is the one

exception which has seen a fall in intentional homicides from a high of 70.9 in 2009 to 41.2 in 2012. This fall is widely considered to be due to a gang truce between the two largest El Salvadoran gangs.^{5,6} Despite this, in 2012 El Salvador was still ranked 4th worldwide for intentional homicides and more recent evidence points to a significant increase in 2014. When comparing the intentional homicide rate across all lower-middle income countries El Salvador and Guatemala have nearly seven times the worldwide homicide rate of lower-middle income countries and Honduras has an incredible 15 times the worldwide rate in 2012. These trends point to significant violence issues across Latin America, but with a particularly evident issue presenting in the Northern Triangle.

Across the crimes reported in the three countries, men are predominately the perpetrators, with a large number of crimes committed by young men. For example, in Guatemala in 2013, 51 percent of crimes were committed by youth in the 15-29 age range (86% by males), and 75 percent of crimes were committed by those in the 15-40 year age range (84% by males). This is consistent across the 2009-2013 range. Similarly to the intentional homicide rate discussed above, this indicates an extremely high crime rate by youth, particularly young men, in comparison to the general population. This is also true in the case of intrafamilial violence where the perpetrators of violence are overwhelmingly males. In the case of intrafamilial violence in Guatemala, the victims are overwhelmingly females at a rate of approximately 91 percent. Across the five years of reported cases, 93.8 percent of physical and psychological abuse cases were directed at females followed by 85.7% of psychological abuse cases, 92.6% of physical abuse cases, and

94.6% of the combination of physical, psychological, and financial abuse cases.^{7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23}

At the individual level crime and violence leads to death and disability, which have a profound economic effect on the household. The cost of medical care, loss of productivity, legal services, and psychological impacts all have a profound impact on development at the household level and beyond. The physical impact of violence and crime is particularly salient for agricultural workers, where physical injury can be extremely detrimental to the ability to work.²⁴ The indirect psychological effects have lasting impacts on development, as people adopt avoidance behaviors such as limiting mobility, limiting access to services that require travel such as markets and education, and avoiding public transportation.²⁵ These avoidance behaviors also result in the breakdown of social capital within the community as fear of violence erodes relationships and contact among community members. "If development is the process of building societies that work, crime acts as a kind of 'anti-development', destroying the trust relations on which society is based."²⁶

While law enforcement, declining demand, and international efforts to fight the drug trade have reduced the flow of drugs (particularly cocaine) through the region, this has not resulted in a decrease in violence. These contending groups are now having conflict over fewer routes and territories, which can lead to more violence, rather than less. In economic terms, the flow of drugs through the region is significant with the share of GDP represented by the value of cocaine as high as 13 percent of GDP in Honduras and 11 percent of GDP in Guatemala in the year 2010.²⁷ Other estimates put this number even higher at 14.2 percent of GDP in Latin America,

three times the proportion in developed countries. In El Salvador the cost of violent crime is estimated at 1.7 billion dollars per year with gang violence accounting for 60% of the total).²⁸

High levels of crime and violence deter investment activity, particularly from foreign direct investors.^{29,30,31} Within Central America, a survey of constraints to business revealed that crime and corruption are the biggest risks to business in the region. Of 455 Guatemalan businesses surveyed, more than 80 percent said that crime was a major deterrent to business (compared to a global average of 23 percent). Guatemala ranked fourth of the 53 countries surveyed by the World Bank in regard to direct economic losses from crime at an average of 25 percent of total sales. Over 80 percent of businesses surveyed stated that corruption is a significant constraint with 58 percent of businesses reporting paying bribes, amounting to about seven percent of total sales in some cases.^{32,33} Similar results were reported in Honduras where 61 percent of businesses found corruption and crime to be the biggest constraint to business.^{34,35} Crime and violence also directly influences economic growth through lost wages and labor and the weakening of formal economic systems. Serrano-Berthett (2011), estimates that a ten percent reduction in the violence in Central American countries would increase annual economic growth by at least one percent.³⁶

The lack of efficacy and distrust in the police systems has led to a significant privatization of security. This privatization of security services privileges the wealthy who can afford such services, but leaves the poor in a situation where the law enforcement system has decayed to a point of functional failure, leaving the poor without a defender.³⁷ With the failure of law enforcement systems, the wealthy are able to

purchase services that become unavailable to the poor, leaving the poor at greater risk of crime and violence. In addition, private security forces are more likely to manipulate services to the benefit of their employers, and are less likely to report against them or to testify against them.³⁸ In some circumstances, this leads to the wealthy taking advantage of the poor, even being violent towards the poor, with relative impunity.³⁹

The justice and penal systems in the Northern Triangle countries are known to be recruitment camps and training grounds for gang participation and narco-traffickers.^{40,41,42,43,44} The prison systems are extremely overcrowded and have been accused of human rights violations including mental and physical abuse.⁴⁵ They also serve to allow gangs to congregate in a single location where they are able to expand their power and increase their operational capacity.⁴⁶ Before even getting to a penal institution, “the criminal justice system in Guatemala fails to convict 94 percent of the criminal suspects brought into the system – with the vast majority of cases being dropped before the case even appeared before the first instance judge.”⁴⁷ The combination of poor law enforcement systems, the failure of judicial systems, and the known issues of the penal systems leads to an environment of near lawlessness in the Northern Triangle nations, primarily targeted at the poor.^{48,49}

Solutions and Good Practices

It is important to recognize that any interventions targeted at a single sector will not be enough to slow the growing youth violence problem. Rather, multi-sectoral and multi-level interventions will be necessary. Despite this, studies show that education-based interventions are highly successful as a preventative measure for youth violence.^{50,51} In one such study across

62 nations, it was found that higher levels of education are correlated with lower levels of violence.⁵² Similarly, the completion of secondary education is highly correlated with greater access to economic and social opportunity.⁵³ Improving the relationship between teachers and students, increasing the relevance of education, and bolstering student self-esteem have been shown to be effective in keeping students in school and in decreasing youth violence in the community.^{54,55,56}

Another educational pathway is to work directly with youth over a long-term to improve self-esteem, facilitate leadership, and create a sense of belonging.^{57,58} Youth leadership training builds the capacity of youth to participate in groups and community decision making, as well as to create groups with their own motives and agendas. These may include sports teams, clubs, school businesses, or other groups that fit the needs of the community youth. The purpose of these interventions are to provide youth with spaces to exercise their leadership skills, increase their participation and self-esteem, and become visible in the community as valued contributors. Interventions such as these have been shown to promote youth development, encourage students to remain in school and active within the community, improve community relationships, and prevent youth violence.⁵⁹

Community-based prevention interventions are very important in the context of the Northern Triangle, particularly in regards to gang violence. “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.”⁶⁰ The most effective strategies take place through tailoring interventions to the community and through

collaboration between local agencies, NGOs, local governments, and other local institutions such as schools and churches. With this in mind, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) (2008) identifies community mobilization and community capacity building as two key strategies in creating tailored interventions. One such organization is “Grupo Ceiba,” in Guatemala. Grupo Ceiba’s 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.”⁶¹

The Grupo Ceiba program uses a multi-step approach to engage at-risk youth. They first use a peer-to-peer model by walking through the community and building relationships with youth in their own spaces. Once a relationship is established, they invite the youth to participate in a soccer game. This is their gateway to engaging youth in other programs. Once a youth becomes involved with the program they can participate in peer-to-peer group counseling programs, leadership training, sporting events, and are involved in monitoring their own communities. Coupled with this program are multiple types of educational opportunities that focus on providing life skills and job skills to the participants. These alternative educational opportunities begin at the primary school level. The earlier interventions take place the more likely they are in preventing aggression and improving social skills. Recreational activities, day care centers, online education, technical education, and business education are all programs offered by the organization in areas

that have high violence and high risk of youth involvement in violence.⁶² The group also works towards changing the perception of youth as violent within the community. This is an important step in addressing the pervasive fear of youth as well as the feeling of youth as excluded from the community.

USAID (2010) identified several types of programs shown to reduce youth violence and promote pro-social behaviors in Latin America. They divide the interventions into formal and non-formal education programs. Formal educational programs include quality enhancement, conditional cash transfer, extracurricular, school-based, and life skills programs. Each is described briefly in turn below.

- **Quality enhancement programs** focus on improving repetition and dropout rates in primary and secondary education programs. This is particularly important when it comes to the education of young males, as there are high attrition rates between primary and secondary school in all three Northern Triangle countries.⁶³ There are also very high repetition rates among young men at all stages of education.⁶⁴ “Establishing an expectation of a high quality educational experience, involving parents and communities as active partners, adopting equitable school rules and policies, and preventing school violence are just some of the ways that schools can promote attendance and staying in school among children and youth.”⁶⁵

- **Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs** provide money to families in poverty with the condition that the family sends their children to school and uses basic health care services. According to the World Bank, CCT programs have been shown to be effective in keeping children in school and promoting attendance (World Bank,

2007). CCT programs have been established in both Honduras and Guatemala.⁶⁶ These programs aim to address the connection between low school attendance and poverty.

- **Extracurricular programs** aim to provide youth with activities that will fill their time and enrich their life skills and education after or before normal school hours. These may include sports activities, tutoring, mentoring, clubs, music, art, technical skills, or other activities.

- **School-based violence prevention programs** focus on improving the capacity of school personnel and on providing services for youth. These programs work with parents, teachers, administrators, and students to improve teaching skills, relationships between youth and adults, and parenting skills. One such program, “Opening Spaces,” in Brazil resulted in “a 60 percent reduction in violence and reduced rates of sexual aggression, suicide, substance abuse, theft, and armed robbery.”⁶⁷

- **Life skills programs** “use a case work approach to provide intensive counseling to targeted students and include a wide range of extracurricular activities and social support along with community policing and juvenile justice interventions. Evaluations have shown the success of these programs in reducing engagement of violent crime, drug use, and association with delinquent peers.”⁶⁸ The former quote is in regards to a life skills program in the United States. USAID does not make it clear if these programs have yet been attempted in the Central American context.

Non-formal programs include accelerated learning, holistic, youth workforce development, and gang violence prevention, programs. Each is described briefly in turn below:

- **Accelerated learning programs**, such as EDUCATODOS in Honduras, has seen success in providing basic education to poor, underserved, and rural areas. EDUCATODOS works by leveraging volunteers, often students in the ninth grade who must fulfil their social service requirement, to facilitate a life and academic skills curriculum. The program targets any person in the community who has not completed primary or basic education, moving the participants through the grade levels. At the end of the program, the participants receive a diploma equivalent to a traditional school diploma.

- **Youth workforce development programs** focus training youth in the skills that they need to gain employment. This includes job skills, life skills, technological skills, and other relevant skills depending on the region and the job market. Some countries in South America have had success in youth workforce development programs with a job placement component for at-risk youth. This strategy has not been attempted at any significant level in the Northern Triangle countries.



- **Gang violence prevention programs** “target ex-gang members and parolees to prevent further gang violence. Approaches include street outreach worker programs and re-entry strategies for former prisoners and ex-gang members.”⁶⁹ These programs include services such as mental health, substance abuse, job skills training, and more. In some instances the programs also provide services to help protect ex-gang members from retaliation for leaving the gang. Research on these programs find that they have a significant impact on reducing violence in target areas and reduce the return of parolees to penal institutions.⁷⁰

Conclusion

There is ample evidence that any intervention strategy aimed at addressing youth violence in the Northern Triangle must be multi-sectoral, multi-spatial, and highly inclusive of both government and the public. As such, it is important to note that education-based youth violence reduction strategies will need to be included in a broader and comprehensive violence reduction strategy that is multi-sectoral in nature.

The increasing levels of violence in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are a growing and pressing issue for citizen security within the region. Any efforts towards reversing this growing issue will require community capacity building at multiple levels from building social capital, strengthening institutional capacity, improving economic opportunities, increasing services such as health and education, providing alternatives for youth to escape from intra-household violence, and more. This will require a detailed examination of the social, economic, political, epistemic, and institutional challenges associated with youth violence risk factors in the Northern Triangle. This paper has given an overview of the current situation in the Northern Triangle, the risk-factors for youth violence, current interventions, and the recommendations that have been put forth by various organizations.



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