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## Thematic Brief: Rethinking Interventions Addressing Youth Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle



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## Introduction

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, known collectively as the “Northern Triangle,” are considered three of the most dangerous countries in the world as evidenced by intentional homicide rates.<sup>1</sup> The intentional homicide rate is considered a good proxy for overall violence in a nation as homicides rarely go unreported.<sup>2</sup> The most recent data available from the World Bank place Honduras as the most violent country in the world with an intentional homicide rate of over 91 per 100,000 persons. El Salvador and Guatemala rank fourth and fifth respectively, though more recent data show that levels of violence in El Salvador are significantly increasing due to a failed gang truce. It is anticipated that El Salvador may surpass Honduras’ homicide rate by the end of 2015.<sup>3,4</sup> The majority of violence in these countries is male-on-male violence, with the exception of sexual assault, domestic, and intimate partner violence. The vast majority of violence is conducted by men, with young men aged 15-29 making up as much as 51% of crimes committed in Guatemala.<sup>5</sup> Young men aged 15-29 are also overwhelmingly the victims of crime; for example, making up about half of all homicides in the region.

The drivers of youth violence in the region are multi-layered and complex. Poverty, high levels of unemployment, low levels of education, social exclusion, the breakdown of social capital and relationships, rapid urbanization, a powerful narco-trafficking trade, and the prevalence of gangs are but some of the many drivers of violence in the region. This growing issue is having a significant impact on development: “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.”<sup>6</sup> There have been many interventions focused on youth violence within the region; however, many of these interventions are founded on specific explanations of youth violence. Understanding these explanations of youth violence and a consideration of alternative explanations will lead to more comprehensive strategies to address this issue.

## Challenges and Issues

Throughout the development literature, the interventions that are proposed are consistent with two ways of thinking about youth violence. The first is from a structural-functionalist perspective. This is the idea that institutions and systems in the Northern Triangle are functioning poorly leading to the exclusion of youth and their seeking alternative systems to fulfill their needs.<sup>7,8</sup> These studies and reports focus on the barriers to access to education, health, judicial systems, and other structures. The weaknesses of these institutions both contribute to and reinforce the exclusion of youth. For example, it is widely reported that judicial and penal systems in the Northern Triangle countries unfairly target youth even for their appearance, and the education systems serve to exclude boys leading to high dropout rates.<sup>9,10</sup> These issues lead to youth avoiding the education system and having a sense of distrust and anger towards penal and judicial systems. In this case, youth violence becomes a direct result of these poorly functioning systems.

Large development agencies such as the World Health Organization, the United States Agency for International Development, and the World Bank rest many of their assumptions about youth violence on this theoretical perspective. The interventions that stem from this

perspective focus largely on addressing the lack of functionality of institutions and systems. The focus of these interventions is on improving and strengthening institutions, particularly social, economic, law enforcement, and judicial systems.<sup>11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21</sup>

The second perspective commonly found in development literature is political economy. This perspective emphasizes the corruption of and lack of trust in governments and unstable economic systems that result in the exclusion of youth. In the Northern Triangle countries, governments can be considered shifting democracies that use authoritarian measures to handle crime and violence. This results in a lack of trust in the government that leads to a dependency on gangs for protection and vigilante justice.<sup>22,23,24</sup> For example, “some Central American governments are being increasingly displaced by organized crime as the guarantors of public order and security in the eyes of ordinary people.”<sup>25</sup> This is compounded by poorly functioning economic systems and policies which result in informal economic systems, illegal arms trades, narco-trafficking, and economic-based violence. Youth violence from this perspective focus[es] on two key ideas: the relationship between governance policies and processes as a driver of youth violence, and the relationship between governance and resource inequality (particularly economic inequalities).<sup>26</sup>

Interventions from this perspective focus on economic and governance policies. The failure of economic policies is both a driver and reinforcing effect on youth violence. The lack of employment opportunities, high rates of unemployment, and high levels of poverty are a direct contributor to youth violence. Similarly, lost wages and labor, unwillingness of businesses

and other countries to invest in a violent country, and the diversion of government funds to police and penal systems create a reinforcing effect on the deterioration of economic systems and youth violence.<sup>27,28</sup> Interventions focus on poverty reduction, economic policy, and youth workforce development.

## Solutions and Good Practices

Two alternative theories that provide a foundation for the explanation of youth violence in this region are conflict and empowerment theories. Conflict theory is the idea that those who have power and those who do not are in competition for resources. This competition leads to conflict. Furthermore, those who have power are able to use their position and resources to impose their ideas of order and consensus on the less powerful. This in turn leads to greater inequalities as the social structures that arise out of competition for resources privilege the elite in both access and control of resources. Viewing youth violence from this perspective would suggest that youth violence is a response to inequalities in access and control over resources. “From this perspective, the relationship between conflict and youth violence includes the authoritarian measures governments use in their approach to youth, the long-lasting effects of wars on the economy and in spurring the growth of the illegal arms trade, and the breakdown of social systems and networks through a culture of fear.”<sup>29</sup> There are five basic concepts in conflict theory that are central to youth violence:<sup>30</sup>

- (1) The underlying **issues** that are leading to youth violence such as social exclusion, lack of jobs and education, and poverty.
- (2) The **framing** of violence by different actors such as the media who present youth as a

menace, versus youth who see themselves oppressed and the victims of inequality.

- (3) The **mobilization** of youth to act violently in resistance to inequality and lack of resources, and the ways this is presenting itself (such as through gangs and organized crime).
- (4) The violent act itself including coercive and violent **confrontation** aimed at gaining resources whether economic, social, or psychological.
- (5) The **outcomes** of violence that benefit the perpetrators such as improved economic status, increased identity, and greater personal or group status.

A focus on these concepts (and other more sophisticated constructs within conflict theory) could lead to important new ways of thinking about interventions for youth violence. For example, how can interventions address how youth violence is framed both by communities and by the youth themselves? How can reframing youth violence change the desire for certain outcomes? How are power relationships changing as a result of youth violence and why? How can interventions foster non-violent manners of addressing the perceptions of inequality and lack of access to resources? Interventions that focus on a conflict-theory driven perspective would aim to see youth violence as a response to inequalities persistent in power relationships and social structures. These interventions would focus on fostering non-violent change in how issues are framed, how youth mobilize, and the ultimate outcomes of youth violence.

Another potential theory for better understanding youth violence is that violence is serving to perform empowering functions. Empowerment theory is similar to conflict theory

in that it rests on the idea that inequalities in societies and power relationships are major drivers of youth violence. In empowerment theory, youth violence acts as an empowering force for those who seek to escape poverty and oppression. An underlying assumption of empowerment theory is that resources are unequally distributed in society and those with the least amount of power are unable to access adequate resources in order to have the ability to make decisions in their life. Once needed resources are acquired an individual gains the ability to make choices that were once denied to them. The outcomes of these choices are empowering given that they result in greater ability to live the life one desires.<sup>31</sup> As such, empowerment theory rests on three important concepts: resources, agency, and outcomes.

- (1) The resources (such as human, social, and economic) needed to have choice in one's life are unequally distributed in society and those who are the least powerful are denied the resources they need to live the life they desire. By exercising violence, youth forcibly take the resources that they deem necessary for their lives. This is not just financial resources, but also includes important social resources such as a sense of identity and purpose, and belonging to a group.
- (2) Once a young person has acquired resources, they are able to exercise agency. Agency is the ability to make strategic decisions that define the parameters of one's life and are necessary for living the life one desires. "Some of the important dimensions to exercising agency include the capacity to speak and be heard (voice), self-esteem, self-reliance, and a sense of belonging. Agency, while at times addressed in the literature on youth violence, is given a cursory glance when discussing these

important concepts. Conceptually, this is the idea that through violence youth gains the ability to make the decisions that will lead to a better life.” (Williams & Swisher)

- (3) Through the exercise of agency, youth are able to achieve empowering outcomes. This is the idea that by exercising violence, youth are able to gain resources, the ability to make decisions, and through this can make decisions that achieve greater outcomes in their life—whether financial gain, power, cultural and personal identity, and other forms of prosperity.

Interventions from this perspective would aim to look at youth violence as a way of achieving greater personal empowerment. For example, what are the resources youth are seeking to gain through violence and why? How do these resources lead to greater agency and what non-violent ways can this be achieved? How are youth empowered through violence and what non-violent ways can this be achieved? What non-violent alternatives would have to be available in a community to deter the desire to achieve empowering outcomes through violence? How do you achieve personal agency through violence – such as identity, voice, self-esteem, and self-reliance?

## Conclusion

The prevalence of youth violence in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, is a major community development challenge. In recent development literature, particularly from development agencies, there is a tendency to view the drivers of youth violence from specific perspectives. These perspectives result in certain types of interventions that are prioritized above others or that may conflict with one another. Despite the efforts at addressing



youth violence, the phenomenon is continuing to grow at a rate that has resulted in these three countries consistently topping the list of the top five most dangerous countries as determined by intentional homicide. To more comprehensively address this issue, development agencies must look beyond the dominant explanations for youth violence in order to develop more robust and effective interventions.

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