

Youth outreach centres in El Salvador: providing alternatives to displacement

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A growing number of youth are fleeing El Salvador, one of the most violent countries in the world, and travelling unaccompanied to the US-Mexico border. Youth Outreach Centres have been set up in El Salvador to try to improve conditions in their neighbourhoods and encourage young people to stay.

The number of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras attempting to cross the United States (US) border has increased dramatically in recent years, growing from 2,304 in 2012 to nearly 47,000 in 2016.¹ Many are leaving their homes because of the threat of violence and fear of gang activity in their neighbourhoods.² Clearly US policy should respond to this humanitarian crisis by recognising these children's legitimate claims to refugee protection but international development efforts must also continue to address in-country 'push' factors. The question is how to do this effectively and efficiently.

Today in El Salvador the problems of poverty, corruption, gang activity, violence and drug trafficking are multi-faceted and intertwined. Poverty and unemployment serve as fodder for gang recruitment, expanding gang territory and escalating crime rates.³ Although its protracted civil war was resolved 25 years ago, decades of instability in El Salvador since then have resulted in underdeveloped civil institutions and limited international support for the resolution of enduring economic and social problems.

Children and youth in low-income families are highly affected by the quality of their communities. Neighbourhood violence and gang activity leave them vulnerable, and youth are at heightened risk of police abuse. Together, these circumstances and neighbourhood conditions put youth at risk of victimisation, gang involvement and other hazards that undermine their sense of hope.

Youth Outreach Centres in El Salvador

The Youth Outreach Centre model is a community-based approach to violence

prevention. Strategically located in neighbourhoods with high levels of violence, the Centres – of which there are over 160 – aim to create a safe space where local youth can play, learn and develop.⁴ Youth come to the Centres before or after school and receive homework help, play games, attend periodic workshops and engage in a range of other activities. Although a given Centre will serve hundreds of youth, the Centres themselves are not large; rather, the model is based on the idea that the Centre should function as a second home (their motto is *mi segunda casa*)



Youth Outreach Centre, El Salvador.

October 2017

www.fmreview.org/latinamerica-caribbean

for the youth they serve. Many are located in small houses with a living room repurposed with tables for homework help, and a small rear patio taken over by a table-tennis table.

Each Centre has one full-time employee – a coordinator, typically a community member who lives down the street – who is supported by numerous volunteers and an advisory board comprising community leaders and representatives from key local institutions, particularly churches.

In 2016 we carried out an independent assessment of the Centres through on-line surveys with coordinators and youth, site visits, focus groups and interviews with funding administrators.⁵

Creating a sense of belonging

Physical safety was a concern for youth and coordinators in our study. Sixty-nine per cent of youth feel very worried or somewhat worried that someone will stop them in the street and threaten or hurt them. A similar percentage is worried for the safety of family

members. Given this context, the success of the Outreach Centres hinges on their ability to provide an attractive space where youth can feel safe. Youth respondents express a strong sense of social connection to the Centre, and the Centres excel at fostering this sense of membership, in part because of the strong social ties between coordinators/ volunteers and youth. As one young man explained: “The attention [I receive there] makes me feel like I’m special, and it’s where they let me say what I think and feel.”



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Most of the youth believe that at least one adult at the Centre knows them well enough to notice when they are struggling.

Although the Centres do not aim to deter youth from migrating, their success at building trust and relationships – social capital – contributes to improving the neighbourhood conditions which might lead a young person to decide to stay rather than flee.

Building leaders, creating opportunity

Leadership and self-efficacy are important to youth development, in part because they empower young people to take more initiative in directing their own future. Eighty-two per cent of respondents reported that because of their involvement at the Centre they are better able to handle problems and challenges when they arise. Given the level of community violence and gang activity in their neighbourhoods, combined with their own economic situation and high unemployment rates, we would expect them to express a negative outlook concerning their future; instead, the majority indicate that they have a sense of possibility and feel relatively confident that they can shape their future. Importantly, these young people attribute this perspective to their involvement at the Centre.

Involvement at the Centres also has a tangible impact on social mobility opportunities for youth – outcomes that can mitigate against the ‘push’ factors which might drive them to migrate. Thirty-two per cent said that they have found a better job because of the Centre, and 78% reported that the Centre has helped them get better grades in school. For example, one youth respondent said that her homework is easier because of the computer skills she has learned at the Centre. This is a significant contribution to the life chances of these youth and, ultimately, to the stability of their families and neighbourhoods. While we should be cautious about overstating the direct impact that the Centres may have on the school and work trajectories of youth until we complete a more rigorous impact evaluation, it is important to note that the influence they have in these domains is positive.

Intervening with those most likely to migrate

Some of the youth at the Centres face greater risks than others, including gang involvement and substance use. Relative to their lower-risk peers, we find that higher-risk youth are significantly more likely to have plans to migrate. Centre staff often intervene in the lives of these youth. For example, one coordinator explained that he has met with a local gang leader on several occasions to advocate for young men involved in the Centre. This required him to travel into a part of the town that is very violent to petition that a Centre youth be released from his gang ties – a request that could be met with deadly consequences for the coordinator. Other coordinators shared similar examples of when they intervened in the life of an at-risk youth. Because of the complexity of these interventions, additional training and resources are needed to more effectively weave prevention and intervention into the Outreach Centre model.

Expansion and sustainability

Financial support for the Centres differs from one community to the next but nearly all of them receive funding from a combination of sources. USAID provides some financial support until the Centre is functioning, and each Centre receives some level of support from the local municipality. Other community-based organisations help to fund the Centres and serve other important functions, including an advisory role for Centre coordinators. Similarly, local churches may not donate much money but they are central to the model; as one respondent explained, the local church provides “moral authority that protects the Centre” and lends it credibility in the eyes of parents and community members.

The Centres are sustainable because they have low overhead costs but space is often inadequate for serving large numbers of youth or providing wide-ranging facilities. Demand exceeds capacity, and many youth requested that the Centres be open at the weekend as well as during the week.

A viable alternative?

There is no indication that increased border enforcement has slowed the flow of unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle⁶ to the US, and building a border wall has historically proven ineffective at deterring unlawful entry. After amending US immigration policy and practice to grant asylum to unaccompanied youth who are fleeing violence, it is imperative that policymakers improve support for development, governance and securitisation in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

The Youth Outreach Centres in El Salvador are certainly not a comprehensive solution to the complex problems of gang activity, drug trafficking and criminal violence in the region but our study suggests that they represent a viable alternative to the heavy-handed ‘iron fist’ approach – more aggressive police tactics and longer prison sentences – that has been tried unsuccessfully in El Salvador in the past. They operate with the support of the local community in which they are embedded, have a model that easily adapts to the needs of a given locality, and require minimal support to sustain. With additional resources, and together with broader investments in infrastructure and education, the Centres may prove more effective at intervening in the lives of a greater number of youth who are most at risk of deciding that the cost of staying exceeds the risks of migrating.

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1. <http://bit.ly/US-border-stats-2016>
2. UNHCR (2014) *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection* www.unhcr.org/uk/children-on-the-run/; Kennedy E (2014) *No Childhood Here: Why Central American Children are Fleeing Their Homes*, American Immigration Council <http://bit.ly/Kennedy-2014-CAchildren>
3. Shifter M (2012) *Countering Criminal Violence in Central America*, Council on Foreign Relations <http://bit.ly/CFR-Shifter-2012>
4. The Centres are part of a wider USAID-supported crime prevention effort in the region.
5. A total of 77 individuals participated in interviews and focus groups.
6. Also now referred to as Northern Central America.