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YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH CRIME & VIOLENCE IN HONDURAS

SUMMARY REPORT FINDINGS

The complexity of the social, economic, and political challenges faced by many Hondurans has led to alarming rates of crime and violence in recent years. The consequences and the cost of this phenomenon are far reaching, including high rates of school drop-out, disintegration of families, serious mental and behavioral issues, and an estimated 10 percent loss in the gross domestic product (GDP), according to the World Bank.[1] More recently, the violence has been linked with a surge of unaccompanied, undocumented minors fleeing the region and attempting to enter the United States.

What do we know about the factors contributing to the escalating levels of violence in Honduras? What do youth, parents, and community leaders have to say? How can we improve programs targeting Honduran youth to prevent and reduce violence? What are some protective factors that could be built upon to strengthen communities?

Data responding to these and other questions are included in **EDC's Honduras Cross-Sectoral At-Risk Youth Violence Prevention Assessment**, conducted as part of the METAS Project (*Mejorando la Educacion para Trabajar, Aprender y Superarse* or Improving Education for Work, Learning and Success), which is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The study examined the realities of the at-risk youth population in Honduras, as well as community dynamics that contribute to the exacerbation or prevention of violence. The study aimed to identify protective factors[2] at the individual, relationship, and community levels that could be leveraged to support youth violence prevention programs. The study's design allowed for an analysis across sectors (e.g., education, civic engagement, health, employment). Data were also disaggregated by city, education status (i.e., in or out of school), gender, age, and level of community risk of violence.

Assessment Objectives

1. Develop a comprehensive understanding of the at-risk youth population in Honduras

2. Develop a comprehensive understanding of youth crime and violence in urban areas

3. Identify multi-sectoral strategic investment options for USAID/Honduras that address contextual youth challenges within the parameters of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and Goal 3 of USAID's Education Strategy

The assessment was conducted between March and May 2013 in three at-risk communities in each of the three main urban areas of Honduras: Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and La Ceiba. Communities were categorized by risk level (i.e., very high, high, medium, and low) to analyze trends across communities with similar risk level. Researchers determined risk levels based on marginalization data from the Inter-American Development Bank and homicide rates from the Honduran Violence Observatory. The assessment used a qualitative and quantitative blended approach, including administration of the Search Institute's Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) survey; focus group discussions; and interviews with at-risk youth, parents, community leaders, and youth service providers.

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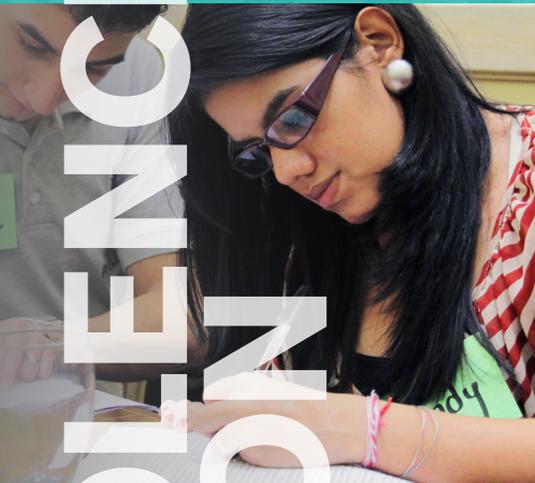
> **"What happens is that it [the violence] is so severe that we do not even mention it. We already see it as normal."**—Mother of two adolescents, La Ceiba

> *"The majority of people get involved in crime due to unemployment. When someone doesn't have a job, they search for a way to make ends meet. So, when they can't find a way, they take the easy way, which is crime, the wrong path."*
>
> *—Young male from San Pedro Sula*
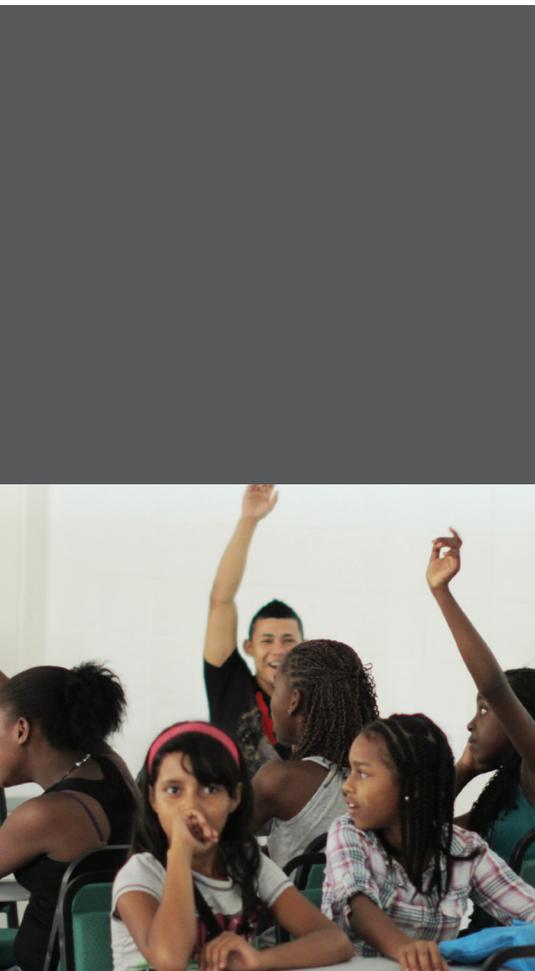
MAJOR FINDINGS

Positive youth development [3] encourages the discovery and reinforcement of individual and community strengths. The assessment catalogued the aspirations and assets of youth and parents, with the goal that these can become the foundation upon which to design future youth violence prevention and mitigation programs. The assessment also noted the daily challenges faced by young people that need to be mitigated in future programs. While the assessment showed regional variations in responses, broadly, youths and their family members shared similar hopes and identified similar resources. Some items, such as family relationships, were identified as both assets and challenges because of complicating factors, for example, domestic violence, substance abuse, and single or no parent households. The findings follow:

ASPIRATIONS [4]

- Young people aspire to employment or a steady income, a stable family, and educational achievements, such as graduating from high school. This pattern of aspirations is the same for both males and females and for all communities, regardless of risk level.

- Parents' aspirations for their children vary by community risk level. In communities with higher levels of risk, parents hope for safety and security for their children. In communities with lower levels of risk, parents prioritized education-related aspirations, such as school re-enrollment or school completion.

ASSETS [5]

- All youth respondents demonstrate a strong commitment to education, which is an important "internal asset." [6] This includes enjoying learning, feeling motivated to learn, and caring about school.

- Religious organizations and families are critical "external assets" for respondents. Both can provide a sense of belonging, structure, guidance, caring, and support. One caveat to this finding came from females and younger youth from Tegucigalpa and La Ceiba who noted complex challenges within families (e.g., sexual abuse, use of alcohol).

CHALLENGES

- Poverty and lack of economic opportunity are persistent obstacles for young people and their parents. All subgroups in the study report these as their primary challenges. Stakeholders report that there are few jobs available, especially for young people with low levels of education and experience, and the jobs that do exist are temporary and pay poorly. Additionally, it is difficult to create income-generating activities due to lack of credit and the threat of extortion by gangs.

- Family disintegration and inadequate support and guidance are detrimental to children's and youth's development. Respondents cite domestic violence, early pregnancies, substance abuse, migration, and single parent (often female-headed) households as barriers faced by not only young people but all members of their communities.

- Lack of community trust and/or discrimination against youth due to age or community of origin are additional challenges reported by stakeholders, particularly in-school youth and service providers. Young people lack both positive role models and constructive free time activities in their communities.

- Violence, gang pressure or extortion, and ineffective police responses present challenges to all aspects of respondents' lives. Out-of-school youth from communities with "very high" levels of marginalization report that they might not survive long enough to reach their aspirations. It was common to hear from mothers that their greatest aspiration is for their children to "stay alive" and several mothers report that their greatest fears occur when their children "leave the house."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report provides detailed recommendations for future at-risk youth programming and broader violence prevention efforts, including sample activities cross referenced to the assets and the challenges they address. The recommendations are complementary and should be seen as a guide to developing comprehensive solutions to improve not only youth outcomes, but to benefit entire communities.

Following are the recommendations:

▪ **Strengthen the role of schools in community-based violence prevention efforts.** Schools or other learning settings are natural foundations on which to build future programs. Learning activities (e.g., life skills programs, health and safety messages, and arts and cultural events) can help improve educational outcomes for youth, strengthen their assets, and help them fulfill their aspirations. Additionally, schools can provide safe spaces for other activities or serve as community hubs that link educators with families, police officers, and religious and business leaders to develop comprehensive, community-based solutions to violence.

▪ **Engage the private sector to build livelihood skills and bridge the connection between education and work.** Respondents did not view the private sector as a major actor in youth programming or violence prevention. This untapped resource can be a critical partner in programs aiming to improve youth employability or establish broader stability goals. Private sector stakeholders can (1) provide input into training that would better prepare young people to enter the job market, (2) directly hire young people or their family members to increase family incomes, (3) serve as mentors to young people, and (4) advocate within their networks for systemic approaches to violence prevention.

▪ **Ensure security considerations are taken into account in the program design.** Due to the emphasis by respondents on the personal fear of violence, any programming in these areas must consider how to mitigate security challenges and ensure that participation in activities does not inadvertently increase participants' exposure to violence.

▪ **Provide integrated support to the family with which the young person lives.** Reinforce or build family structures through parental/guardian engagement, training, and other supports (e.g., improving parenting skills, increasing access to affordable childcare and other early childhood development activities), and improve linkages between parents and schools. Conditional cash transfer programs and employment support programs can improve the economic stability of vulnerable households. Activities that promote positive concepts of masculinity can help change patterns of domestic violence and combat gender stereotypes. These types of activities will help secure parental buy-in to the program, increase consistency of youth participation, and bolster the support system young people need to thrive.

▪ **Offer supervised and structured activities for youth in youth-friendly spaces.** Sports, arts, and volunteer activities during non-school hours can provide idle youth with constructive activities and safe spaces. These can be linked with other program goals, such as education or employment activities, and they have the potential to improve how community members view young people.

▪ **Improve health programming for youth.** Young people and their families would benefit from comprehensive health services, including those related to sexual and reproductive health, substance abuse and prevention, and mental health support. These services should not only meet immediate needs but also serve broader preventive purposes. For example, sexual and reproductive health services should increase youth awareness and use of birth control methods and include messages about healthy relationships.

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"People say that it's hard to stop using drugs and alcohol. Look, I used to smoke and drink, and a sister from church counseled me. One day I told her that I smoked and drank and she told me, 'If you don't stop using that, you're never going to change, nothing will change for you.' She told me, 'If you want to find meaning in your life, you have to stop using'…Her words made me reflect on my life."

—Young male from La Ceiba

- **Strengthen positive youth-adult relationships and provide positive role models and guidance for youth.** Young people need to feel supported by caring adults to achieve their full potential. Mentoring programs can combat family disintegration and provide young people with opportunities for structure and guidance.

- **Strengthen positive ties between youth and their community.** Volunteer and service learning opportunities, where youth are able to identify and implement a solution for a localized problem, help young people gain leadership skills, reinforce linkages between young people and their neighborhoods, and allow community members to see youth as positive change agents.

- **Analyze the trade-offs of targeting only at-risk youth versus working with broader youth populations.** While some services should specifically target high-risk youth, there are advantages in working with both groups or in mainstreaming at-risk youth into larger programs to decrease the risk of stigmatization. Additionally, it is critical that programs design their interventions so that they mitigate security risks and opportunity costs for participants. Funders and implementers must consider accessibility of program locations; cost and safety of transportation methods; and other commitments participants may have, such as school, work, and family obligations.

1. The World Bank. (2014, April 10). Honduras: Honduras overview. Retrieved from http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/honduras/overview

2. The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the definition of *risk and protective factors* as put forth by Jessor, Turbin, and Costa: "Risk factors are conditions or variables associated with a lower likelihood of positive outcomes and a higher likelihood of negative or socially undesirable outcomes. Protective factors have the reverse effect: they enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes and lessen the likelihood of negative consequences from exposure to risk." Jessor, R., Turbin, M. S., Costa, F. M. (1998). Risk and protection in successful outcomes among disadvantaged adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science 2*(4), p. 159.

3. *Positive youth development* is a "policy perspective that emphasizes providing services and opportunities to support all young people in developing a sense of a competence, usefulness, belonging and empowerment. While individual programs can provide youth development activities, the youth development approach works best when entire communities including young people are involved in creating a continuum of services and opportunities that youth need to grow into happy and healthy adults." See Oregon Commission on Children & Families. (n.d.). Best practices: Positive youth development. As cited in Alliance for International Youth Development (2013). Guiding Principles for International Youth Development. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://theyouthalliance.org/sites/default/files/Guiding%20Principles%20for%20International%20Youth%20Development_FINAL_2013.pdf

4. *Aspirations* in the study refer to what participants hope to achieve in the future. Researchers for this study examined aspirations of youth in focus groups with young people and parents.

5. *Asset* is a term used in the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) tool, developed by the Search Institute and used as an assessment tool in this study. Researchers for this study examined youth assets through focus groups with young people and parents. As part of the Search Institute's Framework of 40 Developmental Assets, assets are defined as "a set of skills, experiences, relationships, and behaviors that enable young people to develop into successful and contributing adults." Search further categorizes the 40 assets into "internal" and "external" assets. http://www.search-institute.org/research/developmental-assets.

6. Ibid