Are There Alternatives for Youth Trapped in Violent Environments?
Reflections from El Salvador

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INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, September 16, 2014, the headline of El Salvador's daily newspaper, *La Prensa Grafica*, eloquently and ironically set the stage for this reflection: "Fifty percent of all Salvadorans want to leave the country," mainly due to violence. Thus the question of hope is front and center in the minds of many. Thinking about the alternatives for youth living in violent neighborhoods and communities of El Salvador requires more than anything a deep belief that positive change is possible. All the evidence clearly points in a different direction. There certainly are amazing stories of triumph, resilience and change. But it is the stories of heartache, extreme violence, and pain that often engulf us in pessimism. If we are to find alternatives to violence, we must unleash the positive energy and intelligence of youth, particularly those who have been most marginalized and excluded by society, and those who

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have harmed and been deeply harmed in their families, communities and societies. This forms the foundation of our philosophy for youth programming.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS), YouthBuild International (YBI), the Asociación Fe y Alegria, and Caritas El Salvador, with the financial support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Open Society Foundations (OS-F),1 have been amazingly successful at adapting and implementing the YouthBuild program model for service, leadership and employability for at risk youth. The Jóvenes Constructores and My New Life Plan programs have been the most rewarding, challenging, heartbreaking, yet hopeful experience I have had the privilege of being involved in. Yet the headlines of the Prensa Grafica ring true.

Our alliance has sought to respond to the challenge and opportunity of youth employability, simultaneously working to create alternatives to violence and crime as well as migration. The programs targeted youth between the ages of 16 and 25 who have been excluded from opportunities due to low educational attainment, poverty, and lack of employment, and who also live in violent neighborhoods. The goal was to help these highly marginalized young people to become leaders, engage in service, find employment, start a microenterprises, and/or return to school, through training programs featuring life skills, job skills, service and leadership, entrepreneurship, and vocational training. Between 2010 and 2014, more than 4300 young people have participated in Jóvens Constructores or My New Life Plan. The initiative achieved an 83 percent graduation rate of youth at risk and 80 percent combined insertion rate of youth who completed the program (59 percent in employment or self-employment and 21 percent in school insertion). Of those who are working, 47 percent have formal jobs with benefits (more than double the national average). An independent impact evaluation (Beltran and Savenije 2014) found that the integrated nature of the program builds resilience of at-risk youth, developing protective factors with respect to being a victim or a perpetrator of violence through four key elements: (1) a change in routines that distance youth from risky activities and peers; (2) belonging to a valued group; (3) putting into practice

1   From 2009 to 2010, CRS carried out a pilot of the YouthBuild model in Central America with support from the International Youth Foundation (IYF), the Interamerican Development Bank (IADB), First Green Foundation and Nokia. From March 2010 to March 2014, CRS El Salvador expanded this model (with support from USAID) with national partners Fe y Alegria and Fundación Quetzalcoalt. In 2012, the agreement with USAID was expanded to incorporate two new strategies. One strategy incorporated a small pilot for youth in conflict with the law within the Jóvenes Constructores model with program sites in the Mejicanos area of San Salvador. A second strategy (called Mi Nuevo Plan de Vida) involved a new partner, Caritas El Salvador, to develop a referral system along with life and job skills training and some family training support. In 2011 (until March 2014), Open Society Foundations provided support through YouthBuild International to carry out a community based model of the Jóvenes Constructores program. For more detailed information, description and analysis of the results, lessons, and policy issues, please see the Final Report of the program prepared for USAID.

values with a strong ethical and moral compass; and (4) learning to navigate difficult relationships in the family and community (i.e. around gangs).

TABLE 1: KEY PROGRAM INDICATORS

	Total Participants			Percent of Those that Complete		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Participate	2312	2030	4342			
Complete/Graduate	1952	1710	3662	84 %	84 %	84 %
Productive insertion	1090	900	1990	56 %	53 %	54 %
Employment	625	595	1220	32 %	35 %	33 %
Self-employment	465	305	770	24 %	18 %	21 %
Return to school	528	499	1027	27 %	29 %	28 %
Total insertion	1618	1399	3017	83 %	82 %	82 %

Source: Created by Juan Carlos Duran, CRS Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, based on data from On line data base

The evaluation points to the importance of a well-integrated program establishing high, demanding yet reasonable expectations, structure, and routines that youth must follow linked to a decision-making process in which youth, especially higher-risk youth (such as those who are part of the juvenile justice system), choose to make a change in their lives. Experience through YouthBuild International points to the importance of this factor for success coupled with at least two caring adults who serve as mentors to youth and believe in their ability to change the direction of their lives.

Alliances with the private and public sector have been critical. More than 400 businesses provided employment to youth and many continue to contact CRS and partner employment specialists to identify youth needed to fill job opportunities. ASHOKA has provided training in social entrepreneurship for youth in several program sites. The University of Central America (UCA) provided training in the use of online learning platforms and space for staff training and retreats and graduation ceremonies for the youth. The Salvadoran Automobile Club (ACES) supported Fe y Alegria in a newly-created motorcycle delivery services training program. Additionally, key public sector institutions were part of the alliance including the Ministry of Labor (MTPS, oversight and implementation of employment and My First Job law), Ministry of Education (MINED, flexible modes of education for finishing high school), the Salvadoran Institute for Professional Training (INSAFORP, funding of some of the vocational training programs, certification of all professional training), and the Salvadoran Institute for Children and Adolescents (ISNA, responsible for all programming for minors including youth in conflict with the law).

But probably the most important result has been the development and integration of an innovative program culture linked to the methodology of training, which has led to resiliency. The philosophy and culture are present in all the activities. This culture is characterized by using symbolism associated with principles, attitudes, values, and behavior that are highly valued in the programming and by employers. For example, the six tools of success focus on values and behaviors that seek excellence in any activity or context. Another example is how authority is managed, centered on the principle of purpose rather than power. All of this has generated a common language among the youth participants as well as across every program site. This is the foundation for developing a culture that promotes resilience among youth.

Despite this success, we face three challenges: **sustainability, scale, and increased insecurity.**

SEEKING SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALE FOR JÓVENES CONSTRUCTORES

In order to move beyond pilot programs, a strategy for sustainability and scale must be built. This strategy focuses on ensuring the financial and institutional sustainability of the model for youth service, leadership and employability. Over the last four years, we have created the foundation for greater scale and sustainability.

Development of Philosophy and Culture for At-Risk Youth Programming: CRS led the effort, with the support and experience of YBI, in defining the philosophy and program culture. The foundation of this is the following statement, adapted from the English version from YouthBuild:

> *The positive energy and intelligence of youth should be unleashed and focused on solving the problems that face our society. Based on the premise that excluded young people want to rebuild their communities and their lives, and they will do so if given the opportunity, becoming positive agents for change. The desire to serve in solidarity and carry out meaningful work for others is universal. Leadership and youth service are central elements to the development of individuals, the family, the community and the country. We need to do what is necessary with different actors to join efforts that permit communities to have access to national and international resources to contribute to the transformation of obstacles into opportunities with the participation and inclusion of young people.*

Initiate Graduate Movement of Young Leaders: Part of the learning curve includes the process to intentionally structure youth leadership opportunities during

and after program implementation. This has involved training of program staff on how to incorporate youth leadership during the program and fostering the graduate movement. YouthBuild USA graduates have provided training to staff and youth graduates in El Salvador as part of an effort to build a global network. Specifically incorporating youth leadership opportunities is key to this. On April 1, 2014 a celebration of achievements event was organized with the explicit intent to serve as a space for youth leadership. Graduates played significant roles, helping to organize, manage and cater the event, serving as emcees, and presenting their stories. In August 2013 and September 2014, annual graduate encounters provided a space for leadership, training and renewed engagement. Future steps will build in youth participation in decision-making structures.

Program Design and Performance Standards: We developed program design and performance/outcome standards at the end of 2012, and subsequently tested and validated them during 2013. The 99 design standards are divided into three groups of transversal standards (culture and philosophy, 10 items; monitoring, evaluation and learning, 10 items; and youth leadership, 10 items), and four groups of standards by implementing phase (community and institutional diagnostics, 14 items; selection of participants, 8 items; program implementation, 42 items; follow up, 5 items). These are supplemented by the 12 outcome standards linked to program performance. The basis for this process was the original document in English from YouthBuild, which has been significantly adapted for use in El Salvador and the Central American region.

Designing Affiliate Agreement Process: The program design and outcome standards also establish a general framework for developing an affiliate network. CRS is now moving forward with the architecture to put this into place in alliance with YBI. In April, 2014 we signed our first memorandum of understanding (MOU) with a Salvadoran organization (Glasswing), which will implement a new Jóvenes Constructores site using funding from USAID. The MOU is the first step in moving towards affiliate membership and in the coming months CRS and YBI will develop the agreements related to becoming an affiliate, in an effort to begin the scaling process while also ensuring quality and adherence to the standards, philosophy and culture.

Development of Program Design Manuals: In addition to the standards, CRS has developed several implementation manuals. The Leadership Manual; Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Manual; and Youth Member Manual were the first documents to be developed. CRS and YBI will continue to work on other manuals, including Nuts and Bolts of Implementation; Service Learning; Participant Selection/ *Reto Jóven Constructor*; Case Management; Educational Insertion; and a Soft Skills evaluation tool for youth.

Solid M&E to Demonstrate Success and Drive Learning: Having clear, measurable outcome standards and results backed up by a solid M&E process has marked a significant difference in our program. Virtually no other program for workforce training measures insertion results; rather, they limit themselves to documenting the number of participants trained. Our online data system with robust indicators has allowed us to use data to make decisions about program strategy, assess results, and drive learning. This is accompanied by strong planning processes using program management tools to map out activities on a calendar to review progress and completion. Regular learning meetings brought together program staff across program sites to learn from each other on common topics, such as employability, entrepreneurship, case management, psychological referrals, leadership strategies, participant selection, etc. CRS also incorporated qualitative evaluation tools through a methodology called the Most Significant Change (Dave and Dart 2005), primarily so that youth could identify changes that had taken place as a result of their participation in the program, but also so that staff could envision these less tangible results. Additionally, CRS organized periodic all-site and all-staff learning retreats and trainings to develop skills which helped to build a common culture, experience, language, and philosophy. These retreats and trainings were fundamental for sharing lessons, ideas, and strategies and seeing patterns across sites.

External Evaluation Processes: The Jóvenes Constructores model in El Salvador has been subject to various external evaluations. In 2011, the International Youth Foundation (IYF) commissioned an evaluation of the first pilot cohort in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In 2012, the UCA carried out the first mid-term external evaluation and systematization of the experience based on the expansion of the program. In 2013, CRS commissioned an external evaluation of the five cohorts of Jóvenes Constructores youth in the USAID-funded program sites and two of the cohorts of the OSF-funded site (Beltran y Savenije 2014). Regular exchanges and discussions with the evaluators, have helped shape our understanding of the impact, limits and ongoing challenges to the work and the model. They also provide us with solid evidence of success. None of these have used the "gold standard" of evaluation based on a random control trial, but the methodologies have helped to answer key questions related to the level of insertion, the quality and durability of insertion, and the link to resiliency among at-risk youth living in highly marginalized neighborhoods.

Initial Cost Comparison: Assessing the cost of a program and effectiveness of any investment is essential to the evaluation process and critical for scale and sustainability. A preliminary comparison of the cost (see Table 2) has been more difficult

than it appears.[2] The total number of hours, length of training, intensity of training, and follow up support is different. The costs related to technical assistance involved another layer of cost that must be taken into account. CRS has also attempted to compare this investment with other similar programs related to employability of youth (see Table 3). Because most of the other programs lack data other than number of participants, and none of the other programs are as comprehensive in nature as the Jóvenes Constructores model, it has been difficult to compare or carry out an analysis of the effectiveness of differing programs.

The simple estimate of cost per youth shows that the Caritas-managed program is much less expensive per youth, even when taking into account the technical assistance package. However, the calculation based on the number of training hours (far less) changes the perspective significantly.

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2   Based on the USAID-funded program sites and the counterpart OSF-funded site, the following cost information is available (costs per youth). Between March 2010 and March 2014, USAID provided $4,923,000 to CRS which has benefited 4187 (Jóvenes Constructores and My New Life Plan, including the pilot of youth in conflict with the law). An additional $330,360 was invested in the counterpart site in San Marcos benefiting another 155 youth. Taking into account the different program design, number of beneficiaries, and approximate hours of training as well as the estimate for technical assistance support, Table 2 provides an initial estimate of cost per youth and cost per hour of training per youth. In the beneficiary estimate we are not able to separate costs for the 587 family members that received support from Caritas through the Strong Families component, nor are we able to separate costs for the 1098 youth that received workforce orientation, particularly through Fe y Alegria, but those numbers are not included in the total youth served in the table. For Fundación Quetzalcoatl and the San Marcos counterpart site as well as some of the youth in Mi Nuevo Plan de Vida with Caritas, INSAFORP covered the cost of vocational training. This additional investment is not included in the cost estimate.

TABLE 2. ESTIMATE OF INVESTMENT PER YOUTH PARTICIPANT BY PROGRAM

Implementing Partner and Program	No. of Youth Participants	Budget (USD)	Cost per Youth (USD)	Cost per Youth Including Technical Assistance	Cost per Youth per Hour of Training
Fe y Alegria (400 hours)	2,743	$2145,495	$782	$1,209	$3.02
Quetzalcoatl Foundation (800 hours)	427	$560,197	$1,312	$1,739	$2.17
San Marcos program site[a] (800 hours)	155	$214,194	$1,382	$1,809	$2.26
Fundación para el Desarrollo Juvenil (800 hours)	42	$59,121	$1,408	$1,834	$2.29
Caritas El Salvador (100 hours plus referral system)[b]	975	$423,025	$ 434	$861	$8.61
Sub-total	**4,342**	**$3,402,033**	**$784**	**$ 1,210**	
Technical Assistance package[c]	4,342	$1,851,327	$ 426		

[a] CRS received a grant of $330,360 from YouthBuild International with funding from Open Society Foundations for this site from August 2011 to March 2014. An estimated $116,166 was used for technical assistance, M&E support, learning, etc. The cost does not include in-kind support from INSAFORP to cover the cost of vocational training.

[b] Includes funds provided directly by CRS for microenterprise development and support of youth supported by Caritas.

[c] Includes staff training, learning retreats and immersion visits, M&E processes, external evaluations and studies, oversight and supervision, alliance building with private and public sectors, development of standards and manuals, etc. The total program cost has been simply divided by the total number of youth participants. This may not be the most equitable mechanism for calculating the amount . However, it permits an initial ball park estimate.

Data that was gathered through a mapping study commissioned by CRS in 2013 yielded a ballpark comparison, which can been seen in Table 3. While these programs on the surface appear to be less expensive per participant than the Jóvenes Constructores model and more expensive than the Caritas model, it is difficult to compare based on the differing hours and types of programming offered, or profile of participants. More importantly, it is impossible to estimate the effectiveness of these initiatives because of a lack of comparable data related to insertion or outcomes.

TABLE 3. ESTIMATES OF PROGRAM COSTS OF OTHER EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH

Organization	Program	Amount Invested (USD)	Annual Beneficiaries	Average Cost per Participant (USD)
INSAFORP	Hábil técnico and Empresa Centro	$7,833,359	83,045 youth and women	Not disaggregated by program
FISDL	PATI (conditional cash transfers)[a]	$37 million over 3 years	40,000 youth and women	$925
INJUVE	Violence prevention violencia (Projóvenes II)	$2 million	850 youth	$2,353
Municipal government of Santa Tecla	• Scholarships, • Participation, • Leadership and self-employment	$450,000 (annual)	450 children and youth	$1,000
MOJE	7 months technical training	------	118 youth	$1,000
Servicio Social Pasionista (SPASS)	3 month training	------	800 youth	$250

[a] A recent impact study on the PATI program has been carried out. This new information could be used to compare effectiveness of program results.

Source: Vasquez 2013

One additional note for comparison relates to the amount spent to incarcerate a prisoner in El Salvador. In 2011, with a prison population of 25,363 inmates (at over 300 percent capacity of the prison system), the annual cost of simply housing and feeding each inmate was $1,142, of which 62 percent is for food and 30 percent is for salaries of prison guards (Dirección General de Centros Penales 2011).

Deeper cost/benefit analysis should be done, but these initial estimates provide some comparisons. This should be combined with an analysis of national budget expenditures for El Salvador and linked to the ongoing debate concerning fiscal reform.

Seeking a Salvadoran Home for Jóvenes Constructores: Transfer of the Model:
While we have worked with a plethora of national government actors in El Salvador, we have determined that the key institution for transferring the program model to ensure national level sustainability is the Salvadoran Institute for Professional Training (INSAFORP). This decision is based on its institutional mandate of key program components or issues, solid institutional structure and procedures, and a national source of funding. Over the last two and a half years, CRS has engaged INSAFORP and shared the model, results and standards with key staff and directors. INSAFORP's leadership has expressed interest in being the vehicle to achieve sustainability and has already designated funds for 2015 for implementation of the Jóvenes Constructores model. We are developing a plan to train INSAFORP staff and their implementing organizations in the model in order to achieve sustainability and longer term scale, while ensuring quality.

During the last three years, YouthBuild International and CRS have been working with the Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF) of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) to provide the funding to support the transfer and scaling of the model through INSAFORP.

Engaging the business sector has been a new area of work for CRS and our implementing partners. Relations have taken place primarily through job placement efforts wherein employment specialists play a bridging role between businesses and the youth in the programs. Over the last several years, this engagement has led to successful employment placement with over 400 businesses. In 2014 our work with the business sector has led to initial conversations with the Salvadoran Association of Industrialists and an alliance with Glasswing, a Salvadoran NGO, reaching out to textile factories. This relationship needs to be deepened and much more strategic in nature.

VER, OIR, CALLAR…O MORIR: REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTING PROGRAMS IN GANG-IMPACTED NEIGHBORHOODS

By far the greatest challenges to implementation are related to increasing levels of insecurity. Program implementation within the crime and violence dynamics of each of the program sites, and against the backdrop of the gang truce in 2012 and 2013, continues to pose immense challenges and rising levels of insecurity. Throughout the program period, young men and women have continued to be victims of violent crime. Gang and other criminal activities in each of the program areas continue to evolve. While the number of homicides nationwide dipped between 2012 and 2013, it is back on the rise and in across all program sites insecurity and violence increased during this same period. Homicide rates are in adequate indicators as a measure of security and violence reduction, especially on a municipal or community level. Rather than looking at how the program impacts violence on a community level, program staff continually worked to ensure that the crime dynamics in each area did not create undue problems for the youth and implementation teams.
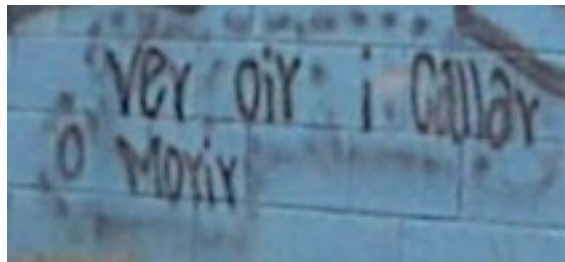
"Ver, oir, callar…o morir"
"See, hear, shut up…or die"

One program site has offered specific examples of the evolution of community-level violence that point to the manner in which exogenous decisions impact life in the area. Of particular note are moments when newly released prisoners return to live in the community, creating tension in the neighborhoods as old and new leaders of gang activity jockey for power and authority. In late 2013, gangs reinforced their identity and territorial dominance by boldly painting their names and letters throughout the neighborhoods. The police responded by painting over the graffiti followed by the gang repainting their identity again. This pattern has been observed in various communities.

Changes to police action or leadership have also generated higher levels of insecurity for residents. Most recently the Safe Home (Casa Segura) community policing initiative has increased *insecurity* for many residents. The initiative includes door-to-door searches in neighborhoods, including areas where a Jóvenes Constructores program has been implemented, looking for gang-related families that have invaded unoccupied homes without permission or compensation, generally after residents have fled due to fear. In one of these neighborhoods, only one home was found to be occupied illegally but no arrests were made. However, the level of insecurity for residents in the area has increased significantly to the point that youth have recommended that staff not visit them in their homes, when in the past that was possible.

Anyone who is not known in the community, or seen talking to the police could be considered to be a "snitch" giving information to the police. The consequences of this are often fatal.

Simultaneously, gang rivalries prevent youth from crossing streets to participate in programs of different types. There has been increased reinforcement of the gang territory such that youth who live in a neighborhood dominated by one gang cannot participate in programs that are carried out in neighborhoods dominated by a rival gang. Gang members will stop anyone coming into their territory and ask of their identity documents, and if the person lives in a rival area, they could risk at the minimum being severely beaten. At many of the program sites, staff consulted with municipal authorities about which neighborhoods were dominated by which gang before conducting outreach activities in those areas. After the recent disappearance of a youth graduate in March 2014, none of the local youth want to be seen visiting his house and recommended that staff not inquire or visit his family. In another case, a community leader approached CRS about helping to build a soccer field in the neighborhood. Within a half-mile radius at least six soccer fields existed, some of which had been created with program funds. However, youth could not cross the streets to go to any of those sports centers because of territorial rivalries.

Negotiating relationships and contacts has been a constant challenge. Even to be seen talking to police can raise suspicion that one is a snitch. In addition, many youth speak of abuses they have suffered at the hands of police and to avoid problems with the local gangs, they do not interact with the police. Program staff have had minimal contact with the police, and even that has been carefully orchestrated so as not to be observed within the community. In the last several months, the police have taken steps towards community-based policing and have even engaged youth and community leaders in a dialogue. However, at one recent graduates' meeting in the health center/ Jóvenes Constructores office, a police contingent arrived, fully armed with automatic machine guns, and "posted" (stood guard) inside and outside the meeting space. This has made youth feel that continued meetings place them at risk with the police or with gang leaders. Therefore, any time outside visitors come to see a program site, CRS will not permit police escort into the area. While a police escort may appear to provide security during the visit, it increases the insecurity of staff and youth after the visit.

These dynamics impact outcomes directly in several ways. Youth whose jobs require travel into different communities often face threats, and may subsequently resign from the job. Those youth that start small businesses do not advertise their services or goods in order to avoid attention and limit the risk of extortion—a survival strategy that flies in the face of entrepreneurial initiative. Other youth have been unable to obtain educational certificates from former schools if they are located in rival territory. Vocational training provided through INSAFORP had to include specifica-

tions not only on training content but also the identification of "neutral" territories. These dynamics essentially demonstrate that ever larger numbers of Salvadorans, particularly young poor men, live "incarcerated" in their own homes and neighborhoods. Programs seeking to provide opportunities to these young men and women end up reproducing and reinforcing these territorial divisions in order to ensure a minimal level of safety of the participants. Not doing so puts everyone at risk, as was experienced in August of 2013 when a youth and vocational instructor were injured by gun shots during program activities.

POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN THE FUTURE

Jóvenes Constructores has clearly demonstrated what is possible to achieve with and for at-risk youth in terms of leadership, service, education, and employability. Building the national scaffolding to sustain this type of programming both financially and programmatically, as well as improving on these processes, will be critical to building a youth-serving system, particularly one that functions for those youth that need access to more and better opportunities. The experience of unleashing the intelligence and positive energy of youth, especially those who have been most marginalized in society, creates tremendous opportunity for all Salvadorans. The following policy and programmatic issues should be considered in the future.

Overlapping Interagency Responsibility and Jurisdictional Confusion with National Authorities: CRS continues to analyze the opportunities for sustainability (funding, human resource, quality control, institutional responsibility) with national government entities. Part of the complexity of this lies in the fact that no fewer than nine national entities share oversight authority with respect to the diverse program aspects included in the Jóvenes Constructores model. And the juvenile and criminal justice systems comprise myriad additional institutions (including multiple layers of courts, police and prosecutor's offices, and prison authorities). National funding streams are divided among all of these actors and decisions about who regulates and oversees policy and programming overlap, leading to jurisdictional confusion and contradictions rather than stronger and better programming.

Fiscal Reform and Responsibility of Salvadoran Government: In a CRS-commissioned mapping study that looked at a sampling of government and NGO programs for youth employability (Vasquez 2013), one of the areas examined related to funding. Virtually of the programs, including those run by the Salvadoran government, exist only with the support of international donations or multilateral loans. Only INSAFORP has a solid funding stream for youth workforce development programs, but not necessarily targeting at-risk youth. This requires a deeper level of analysis

to identify where and how the Salvadoran government will pay for these critical programs to ensure financial sustainability.

Building a Youth-Serving System: At the very least, a multitude of services for youth, particularly at-risk youth, should be housed quite literally under the same roof. The best institutional structure for doing this is clearly INJUVE, particularly through the Centros Juveniles and Casas de la Juventud. These efforts should ensure information and services for health, education, vocational training, sports, arts, employment, micro-enterprise development, and others designed by and for youth. Having these services under one roof also minimizes the frustration and cost of visiting multiple places to access these services. Our experience highlights the fact that existing public services for youth are largely ineffective if the young people do not have advocates to assist them in navigating and accessing the system and referrals. So youth advocates are necessary if referral services are to meet the needs of youth and their families. However, in order to do so, INJUVE needs permanent national funding as well as more institutionalized policies and procedures and public servants should be evaluated on outcomes, not merely how many youth were referred.

The Need for Integrated Programming for At-Risk Youth: An integrated approach means that each program component, activity, or session takes into account a core transversal philosophy, methodology, and culture nested in soft and/or technical skills competencies. Integrated also means that the core implementation team is directly responsible for teaching/facilitating all program pieces (life skills, vocational training, educational reinforcement, service learning, and entrepreneurship) in a process where each piece reinforces the other. For example, the service component puts into practice leadership of youth as well as the application of technical skills learned in vocational training. Developing a truly integrated approach involves significant coordination and team building among staff focusing on how training is carried out rather than the specific content of training.

While less integrated, another approach is to bring in the expertise of various actors and service providers for specific components. However, in order to ensure a minimal level of integration, these services must be closely coordinated by a core implementing team to ensure proper timing, learning and training. This has been the case in incorporating support from INSAFORP to provide vocational training. In this case, the content, start date, hours of training, etc. have been closely coordinated with the core implementing team to ensure timeliness and appropriateness of the training. Some of the integrated aspects are lost but the benefit is that other financial and human resources are part of implementation.

The key is that the core implementation team remains responsible for meeting the holistic needs of the youth in the program. This is the fundamental difference with approaches that are simply coordinated among multiple actors or implementers in typically modular fashion. For example, different organizations, consultants or providers offer a certain number of hours of training or discrete pieces of training, but no one is responsible for looking at whether or not this approach results in overall success for the youth. This is particularly problematic when working with consultants for a set number of hours or a very specific sub-product without a core organizing team. Typically what happens in coordinated approaches is that various organizations are responsible for discrete pieces of a training or program but no one is overseeing that the collective actions reinforce one single outcome or message. This is precisely where the inter-institutional referral process breaks down miserably, especially for at-risk youth.

Additionally, we have identified the following arenas of policy and programmatic attention:

Levels of Trauma, Training of Psychologists, and Weak or Inexistent Referral Systems for Mental Health: Each program site has included professional psychologists on staff to provide individual and group counseling. Repeatedly, staff psychologists commented that they did not know where to refer youth and their families for mental health service. Often they felt poorly-equipped or unable to deal with the types and level of extreme trauma that youth shared with them and they did not know where to refer youth and their families. Through an alliance with Soledad Enrichment Action of Los Angeles and the staff psychologist/priest, we determined that the level of training available in the country is sorely inadequate, especially given the level of trauma. Furthermore, the extreme levels of trauma suffered by nearly all the youth and staff in the program, from being victims of police discrimination and brutality, gang threats, witnessing daily violence, being victims of violence and crime, extract a huge physical and psychological toll. Unfortunately, these levels of violence and trauma are now seen as normal.

Our preliminary recommendations for psychological services include the following:

- All programs working with at-risk youth need trained staff psychologists
- These psychologists should have the support and supervision of a psychologist with doctoral-level training working among program sites
- There should be regular learning meetings among program psychologists to discuss cases and case management and follow up
- All programs need to have scheduled time and resources (human and financial) for staff self-care and collective trauma processing (for all staff, not just psychologists)

- The Ministry of Health should take the lead in designing local and national programs taking into account the width, depth, and breadth of trauma
- University-level psychology programs should be reviewed for content and training to ensure that the country has the professionals it needs to address the short- and longer-term issues related to the extreme levels of violence.

Drug Addiction Services: Many youth suffer from alcohol and drug addiction. However, very few programs exist to address this problem and trying to find services requires a great deal of investigative effort. Inpatient and outpatient programs are scattered, relatively unknown, and not necessarily well designed based on more recent understanding of addiction issues. Jóvenes Constructores programs in the United States often include regular and random drug testing of youth, and then refer to other programs for follow-up and specialized services. This type of drug testing has not been taking place in the programs in El Salvador and even if it did, it would be nearly impossible to find adequate referral services that are located in areas and times that facilitate participation. Again, this is an area for involvement by the Ministry of Health.

Child Care Support and Services: Approximately a fifth of Jóvenes Constructores participants are parents, with little or no access to organized childcare. Most rely on a grandmother or other family member, and when family arrangements don't work, this creates a huge obstacle for employment. Given that 32 percent of all pregnancies in El Salvador are among adolescents (Ministry of Health, 2012), this is an important issue to address if young parents, especially mothers, are to be able to generate income or return to school. Child care services should have trained staff in early infant and child development and nutrition, abundant on a local level, provided for in neighborhoods and work places, with extended hours to accommodate work and study hours. These services could also be part of a professional training program that creates jobs in local communities.
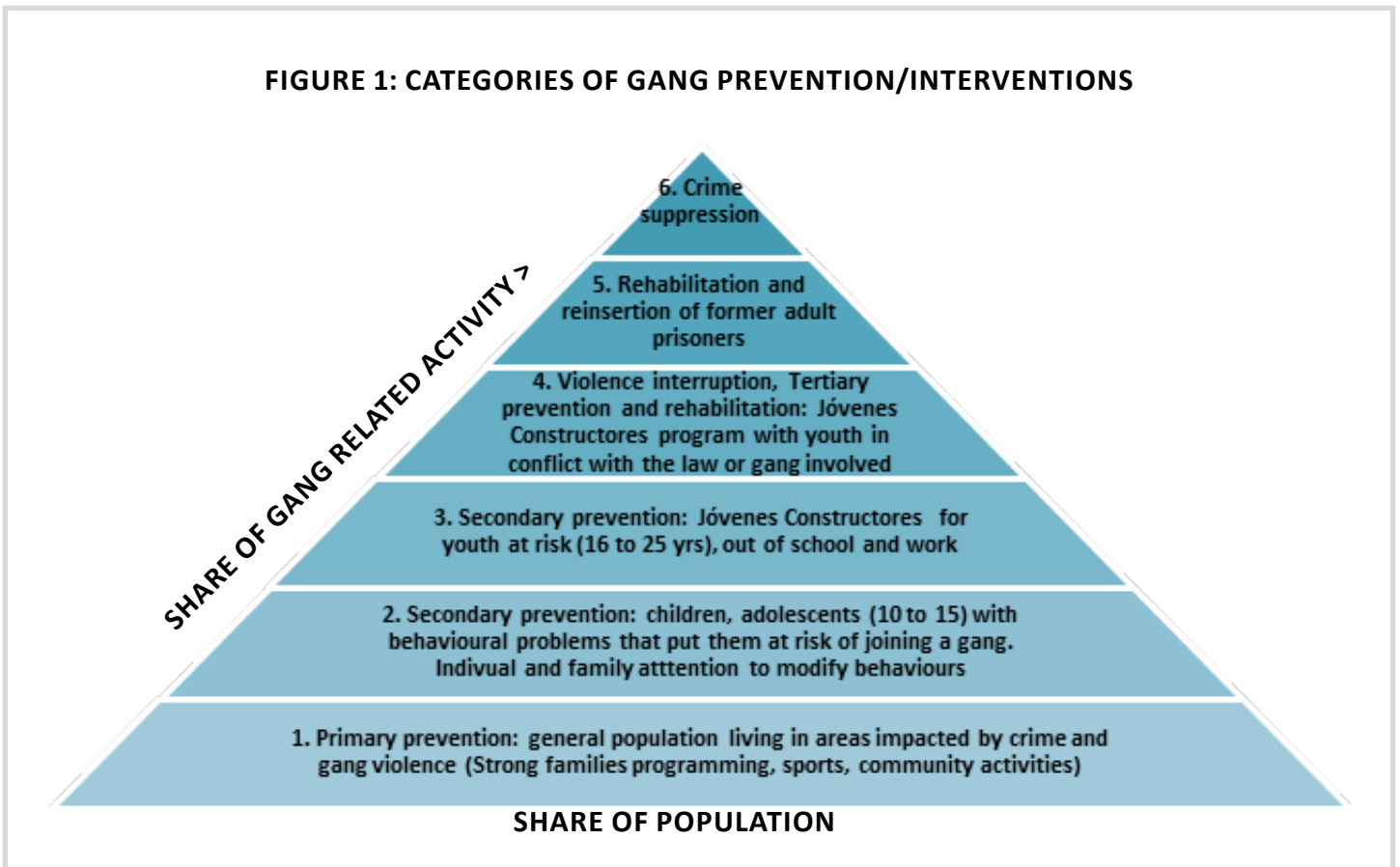
Public Transportation Policy: Public transportation typically ends at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. Private transportation for service sector jobs is made possible by employers, but only to neighborhoods that are not redlined because of violence or gang activity (excluding nearly all of our target population). Expanding public transportation service hours would help reduce this excuse among employers, who regularly discriminate against youth based on their zone of residence.

My First Job law and job banks: In 2013, the Ministry of Labor began rolling out the My First Job law, to create incentives for businesses to hire youth. CRS has been actively enrolling youth in the benefits of the law designed for anyone who has not had a previous formal job (as demonstrated through Social Security records). If the

new employee is over the age of 17, employers receive a small tax incentive. Many in the business sector consider that the manner in which this incentive has been designed provides no or little incentive. The Ministry is working hard to enroll as many youth and businesses as possible in the system, but this effort does not actually ensure that youth find employment through this system. A similar situation exists with the structure of the current job banks *(bolsas de empleo)*. Additionally, our experience in employment placement with at risk youth demonstrates that these professionals need to develop a solid relationship with employers and between youth and program staff and sites. Our recommendation would be to develop a specific contingent of specialized youth employment specialists to address the multiple obstacles that youth face in obtaining working. Additional obstacles identified over the last several years include employers canceling job interview appointment at the last minute or scheduling job interviews only one day in advance, security guards who refuse to allow youth to enter a building for an interview, youth who get lost en route because they do not know the city or what bus routes to take, lack of complete information about the job requirements and compensation, and clear mechanisms for reporting and follow up on labor rights violations.

Integrated violence prevention strategies: Building upon the integrated programming for at-risk youth is also an analysis of integrated violence prevention strategies. Figure 1 (adapted from Wyrick 2006) illustrates the variety of strategies needed to effectively address gang-related violence on a community level. The strategies that comprise interventions for the populations should be territorially focused, population-specific (targeted), simultaneous, and on-going and require the correct amount of programming. For example, in order for primary prevention initiatives to be effective, activities must be more frequent than once a month. Clear outcome indicators for each component and broader impact indicators need to be consistently measured and used to adapt and adjust implementation strategies. To date, the various initiatives have focused almost entirely on categories 1, 3 and 6 with virtually no coordination, and programs are neither simultaneous nor ongoing, much less providing outcome indicators. In addition, the staff involved in this sort of programming receive little to no training and are often ill-equipped to work with at-risk or gang-involved youth.

FIGURE 1: CATEGORIES OF GANG PREVENTION/INTERVENTIONS

SHARE OF GANG RELATED ACTIVITY >

6. Crime suppression

5. Rehabilitation and reinsertion of former adult prisoners

4. Violence interruption, Tertiary prevention and rehabilitation: Jóvenes Constructores program with youth in conflict with the law or gang involved

3. Secondary prevention: Jóvenes Constructores for youth at risk (16 to 25 yrs), out of school and work

2. Secondary prevention: children, adolescents (10 to 15) with behavioural problems that put them at risk of joining a gang. Indivual and family atttention to modify behaviours

1. Primary prevention: general population living in areas impacted by crime and gang violence (Strong families programming, sports, community activities)

SHARE OF POPULATION

This requires funding and leadership but given the millions of dollars invested to date and the result from the region, something significantly different needs to take place if we are to see any hope for the children and adults of Central America. In order for hope to exist, children, youth and their families need multiple, continuous, and attractive pathways for dignified alternatives. Otherwise they are left with one of two options: enduring a dark and dangerous life, or joining the thousands of children who have headed north.

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