PREVENTING CRIME AND PROMOTING DEVELOPMENT:

THE CASE OF YOUTH OUTREACH CENTERS IN EL SALVADOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent out-migration of youth from the Northern Triangle has been driven largely by fear due to escalating neighborhood violence in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. These conditions are closely related to the rule of law, including governance concerns, social and economic stability, and high crime rates. A USAID-funded violence prevention program has attempted to address some of these conditions through locally-run youth outreach centers. This exploratory study examines the organizational structure, sustainability, and impact of these Centers in El Salvador. The study is the first effort of its kind in El Salvador. Findings help to identify how community-based preventative interventions influence pathways for youth in violent neighborhoods. This report summarizes findings from the study and concludes with recommendations for future research.

Contents

The escalation of violence, gang activity and drug trafficking in the Northern Triangle—Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador—has contributed to a recent surge of children and families fleeing these countries for the U.S. The number of unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle attempting to cross the border has increased dramatically in recent years, growing from 24,000 in 2012 to over 67,000 in 2014. Unaccompanied minors, or unaccompanied alien children (UAC), are defined as children and youth who migrate without a parent or guardian. In 2009 when Customs and Border Protection first began tracking apprehensions by unaccompanied status, the majority (83 percent) were children from Mexico. By fiscal year 2014 (October 1, 2013 – September 30, 2014), their share of all UAC apprehensions dropped to 23 percent. By contrast, the absolute number and share of UAC from the Northern Triangle skyrocketed. Honduran UAC alone now represent more than one in five of all UAC apprehensions. Although the number of unaccompanied minors has dropped from a record high of 60,000 in 2014, family units—often mothers with young children—are now increasingly seeking a safe alternative to their home in Central America by immigrating to the U.S.

This is not a new phenomenon. UAC and mothers with young children have been crossing the border for decades. However, the recent spike has caught the attention of the media, politicians and the American public, stirring the on-going debate over immigration to the U.S. Much of the ensuing debate has focused on familiar issues: legal status and the country's response to a large and settled population of unauthorized immigrants. Yet, the recent out-migration from the Northern Triangle has also raised questions about the complex reasons why people choose to emigrate—particularly the "push" factors. In the

literature on migration, migratory processes are typically analyzed as the outcome of both push and pull factors. For example, if "pull" factors such as the promise of employment are associated with conditions in the receiving country, "push" factors such as high rates of unemployment are endemic to the sending country. In the case of the Northern Triangle, push factors are closely related to the rule of law: governance concerns, social and economic stability, and high crime rates. Indeed, studies by UNHCR and other researchers provide empirical evidence that the primary reason UAC are leaving their homes is because of the threat of violence and fear of gang activity in their neighborhoods.[1]

Alliance for Prosperity

In 2014, in response to increased emigration from Central America, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, with the help of the United States, created a development strategy known as the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle (A4P).[2] The goal of A4P is to create an environment in which the citizens of the Northern Triangle will want to remain in the Northern Triangle. [3] To accomplish this goal, the A4P seeks to stimulate economic growth, develop human capital, improve public safety and security, and strengthen state institutions. The countries of the Northern

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[1] Goldberg, P. (2014). *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*. Washington, D.C.: UNHCR.; Kennedy, E. (2014). *No Childhood Here: Why Central American Children are Fleeing Their Homes* (Perspectives). American Immigration Council.

[2] http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=39224238, p. 2

[3] Ibid.

Triangle have been working to implement strategies toward these goals. For example, El Salvador, where youth in particular lack economic opportunity, has committed to improving conditions for economic development by passing a law that would ensure tax and customs regulations would not change throughout an investment.[4] El Salvador has also been working to promote security by creating the National Council for Public Security and Coexistence (NCPSC). The NCPSC encourages government and community actors to engage in a dialogue to promote security strategies,[5] which will in turn create a safer place for youth to live and discourage them from engaging in gang and violent activity. Finally, to develop human capital and invest in its youth, El Salvador implemented a Full Time School program.[6] El Salvador has also begun laying the groundwork for a new health system.[7]

INL supports development in the Northern Triangle by addressing two of A4P's goals: security and governance.[8] INL promotes place-based approaches to reduce and prevent violence by working with local governments to create targeted interventions that lower crime. INL has also worked with local police authorities to establish Model Police Precincts (MPP).[9] MPP have had success in lowering violent crime rates. For example, in the

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[4] http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/03/238138.htm

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/rm/2015/239768.htm

[9] Ibid.

Santa Ana region of El Salvador, from 2011 to 2013, violent crime rates dropped by 60

percent. Currently, 23 MPPs are supported by INL in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras,

as well as Belize.[10] Other INL initiatives include expanding the Gang Resistance Education

and Training Program, developing regional models to eliminate criminal activity within

corrections systems, addressing gender-based and family violence, and training law

enforcement to improve their capacity to stop international drug trafficking and organized

crime.[11] A4P represents a collective acknowledgement of the complex relationship between

social and economic conditions in the Northern Triangle and the outmigration of thousands

of women and children. Yet, while the regional approach to these dynamics is a step

forward, the plan has been criticized for inadequately addressing poverty and violence.[12]

These are sweeping problems. Even if the plan did present a convincing approach to the

structural conditions that threaten rule of law, it may be unrealistic to believe that a 25-

page plan with a five-year time horizon would be sufficient. However, this raises an

empirical question at the heart of this project: what type of intervention *will* work? Lessons

from a previous security initiative in Central America may be instructive.

CARSI

The Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) is a United States

Government-funded, multi-pronged effort to improve the rule of law across multiple

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] http://www.coha.org/alliance-for-prosperity-plan-in-the-northern-triangle-not-a-likely-final-solution-for-the-central-american-migration-crisis/ ; http://cepr.net/publications/op-eds-columns/message-to-biden-more-of-the-same-wont-work-in-central-america

Central American countries. From 2008 – 2014 Congress appropriated just over $800 million for CARSI to accomplish two goals: to improve security in the region through enhanced law enforcement, and to support community development efforts to reduce community violence. If an "iron fist" approach to rule of law is heavily focused on enhancing the scope and authority of law enforcement, CARSI balances efforts to improve local policing practices with programs that enhance education, employment, and developmental opportunities for youth. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) manages activities addressing the second goal. These interventions consist of a range of prevention programs "designed to address these issues by providing educational, recreational, and vocational opportunities for at-risk youth."[13]

Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) conducted a rigorous impact evaluation of USAID's crime prevention work under CARSI. The randomized control trial (RCT) allowed researchers to test the effect of community-based crime prevention by comparing neighborhoods that received the "treatment"—an assemblage of multiple programs and interventions—to similar neighborhoods that did not. LAPOP's final report indicates that CARSI had a significant and positive impact on several key outcomes.[14] The greatest effect was a significant decline in reports of violent crime (murder and extortion) and fear walking through areas that, at baseline, were perceived to be dangerous. The multi-year evaluation was a massive undertaking, and an

[13] Meyer, P. J., & Seelke, Clare Ribando. (2015). *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress* (No. R41731). Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf
[14] http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/carsi/Regional_Report_v12d_final_W_120814.pdf

important validation of USAID's community-based crime prevention approach.

Importantly, as an RCT, the LAPOP study meets the "gold standard" of impact evaluation

designs—an unusually rigorous bar for an international intervention of this scope.

However, the study was limited in its ability to assess the relative contribution of CARSI's

many component programs across sectors such as education and workforce development,

employment, public health, and governance.[15] The scale and scope of the evaluation was

sweeping, but it was not possible to assess all of CARSI's moving parts. As a result, while we

know that CARSI worked, it is not entirely clear *how* it worked.

In light of this gap, our exploratory study examines a relatively small CARSI program

in El Salvador: Youth Outreach Centers or, in Spanish, *Centros de Alcance*. Our mixed-

methods design is cross-sectional and limited in its ability to tease out the effect of the

Centers—let alone identify how and to what extent they contributed to USAID's overall

work through CARSI. However, we believe the study is the first effort of its kind in El

Salvador, marking another step towards identifying how community-based preventative

interventions influence pathways for Salvadoran youth in violent neighborhoods.

Youth Outreach Centers

Youth Outreach Centers aim to intervene in the lives of youth living in at-risk

neighborhoods by creating a safe space in their communities and an alternative to being on

the streets. The Centers themselves are physically small buildings with one full-time

coordinator. The full-time coordinator at each Center is supported by numerous

volunteers, and the organization is steered by an advisory board comprised of community

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[15] https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/FINAL%20PDF_CARSI%20REPORT_0.pdf

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leaders and representatives from key local institutions. These are not multi-service

organizations with trained social workers, grant writers, and an array of resources for

youth, such as a gym, sports leagues, and a robust technology center. Rather, the

philosophy behind the Centers is to maximize impact with minimal resources. This

practical focus on sustainability is one reason why the Centers will likely endure long after

CARSI.

Theory provides insight into why and under what conditions the Centers may be an

important part of the community-based crime prevention effort in Central America. A large

body of literature has documented a consistent and positive correlation between

neighborhood disadvantage and negative developmental outcomes that can interrupt

opportunities for social mobility. Neighborhoods can exert a strong and independent effect

on outcomes such as teenage and out-of-wedlock births, negative educational outcomes,

crime and delinquency and adult unemployment.[16] Although youth development is a

complex process involving multiple factors, neighborhood context matters. While

community violence and gang activity may impede positive youth development, other

neighborhood features can counteract these factors. Local youth-serving organizations are

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[16] See: Brooks-Gunn, J., Duncan, G. J., Klebanov, P. K., & Sealand, N. (1993). Do Neighborhoods Influence Child and Adolescent Development? *American Journal of Sociology*, *99*, 353–395.; Browning, C. R., Burrington, L. A., Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (January 9). Neighborhood Structural Inequality, Collective Efficacy, and Sexual Risk Behavior among Urban Youth. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *49*, 269–285.; Jencks, C., & Mayer, S. E. (1990). The Social Consequences of Growing Up in a Poor Neighborhood. In L. E. Lynn & M. G. H. McGeary (Eds.), *Inner-City Poverty in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.; Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126*(2), 309–337.; Sampson, R. J. (2008). Moving to Inequality: Neighborhood Effects and Experiments Meet Social Structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, *114*, 189–231.; Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, *277*, 918–924.

mediating institutions that are central to the development approach. While they may not directly address the conditions that lead to out-migration, their programs intervene to reduce risk factors—such as gang involvement—and shore up protective factors—such as family and community supports.

This pilot study examines Youth Outreach Centers in El Salvador. The study is driven by organization-level questions pertaining to the following domains: the capacity of the Centers and how they are structured; the types of youth they serve; their service delivery model; and their overall impact.

II.   METHODS

This mixed methods study used an explanatory sequential design to examine the impact of Youth Outreach Centers. An explanatory sequential design relies on qualitative data to help explain quantitative results. The sequential nature of this approach involves data collection in two distinct phases. The first phase (quantitative) was an on-line survey of all adult coordinators (n=78) at the 115 operating Youth Outreach Centers in El Salvador.[17] A separate on-line survey was administered to a convenience sample of youth (n=500) who attend the Centers. During the second phase (qualitative), the researcher conducted site visits with five Centers and focus groups with Center coordinators and youth. Each site visit lasted approximately 1 – 2 hours, and included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Center coordinators. Additional interviews were conducted

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[17] Response rate for the coordinator survey was 75 percent.

with USAID administrators who oversee the network of Centers. A total of 77 participants participated in interviews and focus groups.

USAID-El Salvador provided the researcher with Center names, locations and contact information; relevant data collected by USAID for each Center (e.g., budget, FTEs, number of youth served, available programs, etc.) to avoid redundancy in survey instrument; and contact information of Center coordinators at each site. Select staff at USAID provided feedback on early drafts of the survey instrument. The researcher obtained IRB approval for the study through the University of South Carolina. USAID initially emailed all Center coordinators to introduce the project. The researcher then contacted Coordinators via email to explain the purpose of the project in greater detail and provide them with a link to the on-line survey. Administering the second survey instrument to the youth was more difficult because there is no database with their email addresses (if they have one) and no guarantee that they have on-line access. The researcher created a private, password-protected website for the project (www.centrodealcance.org) where youth from the Centers could take the on-line survey. Center coordinators made computers with internet access available at the Centers so youth respondents could complete the survey.

Table 1   *Youth respondent characteristics*

	#	%
Age		
13 - 17	295	59%
18 - 21	121	24%
22+	84	17%
Gender		
Male	303	61%
Female	155	31%
Enrolled in school	306	67%
Employed	77	17%
Household composition		
Both parents	196	39%
Parent and step parent	27	5%
Mother only	131	26%
Father only	13	3%
Grandparent(s) only	53	11%
Other relatives	23	5%
Living independently	10	2%

The following sections need to be interpreted with some caution due to biases in sampling, the limitations of a cross-sectional survey, and the nature of self-report data. For example, the youth who participated in this study tend to be active at their Centers and are not representative of all young people who may participate in Center-based programming. The majority of respondents (83 percent) have been attending their Center for at least 7 months, and 88 percent attend at least twice a week (49 percent visit the Center every day or almost every day). Of all the youth who attend the Centers, we would expect that these young people would report that their Center has had an impact on their lives given the amount of exposure they have had to its programs and personnel. Indeed, descriptive

analyses of respondents' self-report data reflect a consistently positive effect of being involved in the Center. However, although sample bias and other limitations of the research design influence our ability to confidently state the true impact of the Centers, data from this study suggest that frequent and sustained involvement in the Centers can lead to positive results with real implications for social capital formation, leadership skills, and social mobility—key areas of youth development.

III.   FINDINGS

The Centers

At the time of data collection, there were a total of 115 active *Centros de Alcance* in El Salvador, and 46 new Centers will open in 2016.[18] The Centers provide a safe environment which aims to foster social connections and empowerment for vulnerable youth in violent neighborhoods. Their larger mission also includes raising awareness about at-risk youth in order to mobilize their support of healthy development. To this end, the Centers have eight core objectives:

1. Provide an alternative space for violence prevention and youth development
2. Reduce the risk factors among vulnerable youth
3. Offer opportunities for youth to develop skills and abilities relevant to work
4. Mobilize community members to participate as volunteers
5. Strengthen and/or reestablish connections between youth and adults
6. Support identity development and sense of belonging among youth, volunteers, and community members
7. Foster a permanent desire to grow and learn through Center programs and activities
8. Strengthen moral and spiritual values among Center youth[19]

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[18] There are an estimated 202 Centers across Central America.

[19] Adapted from *Manual: Centros de Alcance*

The concept of the Center model has evolved over time, but it has its roots in a USAID-funded program that emerged in Guatemala in 2006. The Center model assumes that accessibility and low overhead are necessary conditions for maximum impact and sustainability. Centers also need to be within walking distance of where youth live and staffed primarily by volunteers. A concept paper in 2005 led to an unsolicited proposal to USAID, requesting $5,000 for each Center. The first *Centro de Alcance* opened in El Salvador in February 2008, and the number of Centers there grew quickly. Each Center had a *socio privilegiado* or primary stakeholder, most often a local religious leader (the current model includes five stakeholders).[20] Identifying a primary stakeholder for each Center is an important part of the original model. This provides a measure of investment from the host community which, in turn, strengthens the Center's credibility and sustainability. Endorsement from a local church—whether Catholic or Protestant—also provides a moral authority which protects the Centers, particularly from gangs who may be interested in recruiting some of the very youth that the Centers are attempting to serve.

As word-of-mouth about the Centers spread, a growing number of churches requested to have a Center in their community. The number of Centers surged in 2013 and 2014 with the advent of CARSI, but the model also needed to evolve slightly to accommodate the parameters of LAPOP's randomized experiment. When LAPOP launched the CARSI study, USAID was instructed to start Centers in specific neighborhoods that Vanderbilt had selected for treatment. The revised Center model now included an advisory

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[20] During these incipient stages, it was difficult to convince elected officials or other community leaders to be the primary stakeholder because they were unfamiliar with and questioning of the community-based intervention model behind the Centers.

board of five stakeholders, including a local church and a representative from the municipal government. The original Centers in El Salvador (termed AJR for *Alianza Juvenil Regional*) number 41, while more recently 77 Centers (termed PPCV for *Prevención del Crimen y la Violencia*) have been implemented as part of CARSI.

With a few exceptions, the model has not evolved in any significant way. During the period of rapid expansion, "selling" the idea of a Center proved to be challenging at times, particularly in neighborhoods that were unfamiliar with the concept of community-based programming for youth. The general perspective was that *mano dura* or an "iron fist" approach was a more effective way to address crime and gang activity. Other challenges included thinking strategically about selecting a building for each Center—often a house— in light of local gang boundaries.

A typical Center: a converted house on a residential street with a brightly painted façade

Initially, they selected sites in gang-neutral territory, with the idea that this would enable the Centers to operate physically outside of neighborhood zones of contestation. This created other problems, however, including some tension among youth at the Centers.

Even though the youth who attend are not themselves affiliated with a gang, the ubiquitous

presence and influence of gangs in these high-risk neighborhoods mean that even

unaffiliated youth have been influenced by gang activity in some way. Indeed, many have

brothers, cousins or other family members who are (or have been) in a gang. Now Centers

are more typically located in the middle of a given gang's territory, and a local gang is

consulted before the Center officially opens. This can provide some measure of protection

for the Center—an insurance policy, of sorts, against the possibility that the gang will

vandalize or otherwise interrupt the Center's programs. [21]

Funding

It costs roughly $25,000 to start a Center[22]—seed money that primarily comes from

USAID—and an average of $600 – 700 each month to operate one. Approximately half of

the monthly budget covers the salary of the one full-time staff person, called a

coordinator.[23] The rest of the money pays for basic utilities (electricity and water) and

internet service. The minimal cost required to operate a Center is typically covered by

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[21] The Centers in no way condone gangs or gang activity. Even the *Centro de Alcance* slogan "por mi barrio" aims to co-opt a saying adopted by the 18th Street Gang "por mi madro vivo, por mi barrio muero"—literally, for my mother I live, for my neighborhood I die. However, the power dynamics in these violent neighborhoods require a strategic détente between the Centers and the local gangs. As one Center employee stated, the gangs are a stakeholder in the Centers, even if they are not official stakeholders.
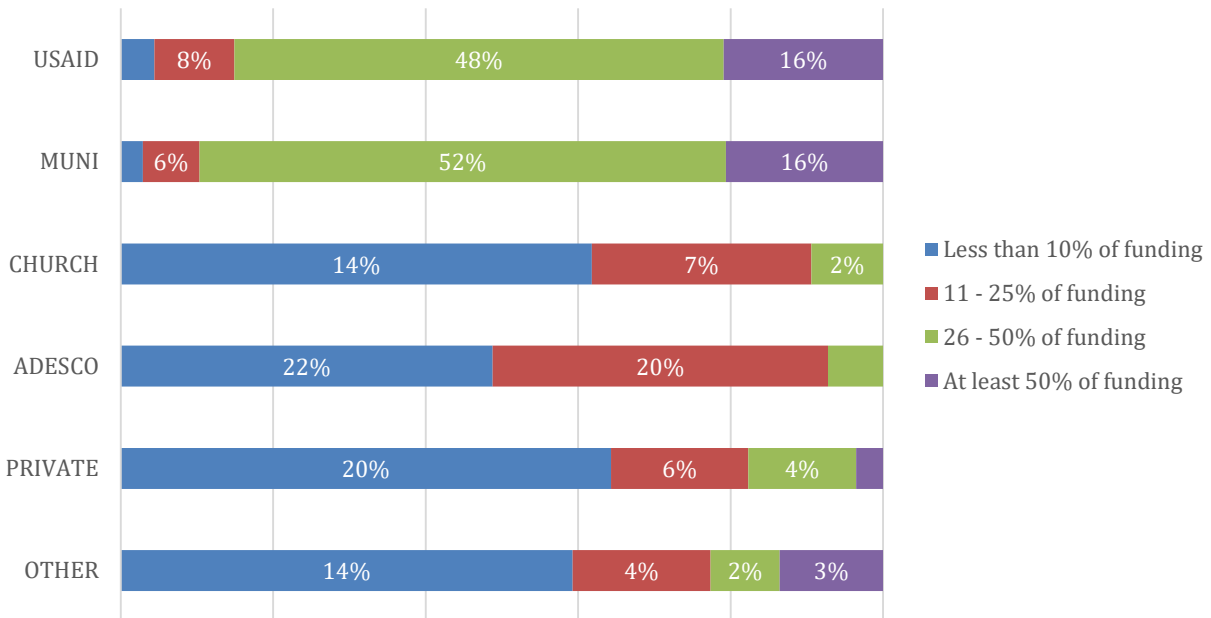
[22] The greatest cost associated with start-up covers the price of the building (often a small 2-bedroom house).

[23] This amounts to minimum wage in El Salvador.

various community stakeholders, but USAID provides some financial support until the

Center is functioning. Financial support for the Centers differs from one community to the

next, but nearly all of the Centers receive funding from a combination of sources (see

Figure 1). Each Center receives some level of support from the local municipality, and 16

percent report that the majority (at least 50 percent) of their funding comes from this

source (MUNI in Figure 1 below). Many also have the support of the local ADESCO[24], a local

organization in most Salvadoran municipalities. Although these entities are not a major

source of financial support for the Centers—42 percent reported that the ADESCO

contributes less than one quarter of their funding—they serve other important functions,

including an advisory role for Center coordinators. Similarly, local churches may not

donate much money to the Centers, but they are central to the Center model. As one

respondent explained, the local church provides "moral authority that protects the Center"

and lends it credibility in the eyes of parents and community members. Private investment

in the Centers has been minimal—only one PPCV site is sponsored to a significant extent by

a local business—but shows signs of success, especially as Coordinators seek long-term

funding solutions. Some coordinators actively petition local businesses and elected officials

for donations and support. These coordinators tend to have some professional experience

in fund raising, or have a natural propensity for it. Other coordinators are less assertive

and/or have not had any training in this area.

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[24] Asociación para el Desarrollo Comunitario

Figure 1   *Center funding sources*

Legend:
- Less than 10% of funding
- 11 - 25% of funding
- 26 - 50% of funding
- At least 50% of funding

Category	Less than 10%	11 - 25%	26 - 50%	At least 50%
USAID		8%	48%	16%
MUNI		6%	52%	16%
CHURCH	14%	7%	2%	
ADESCO	22%	20%		
PRIVATE	20%	6%	4%	
OTHER	14%	4%	2%	3%

Center staff

Center Coordinators tend to be individuals who are extremely committed to and knowledgeable about their community and the work of the Center. They are thought to be central to the success of the Centers. Nearly all of the coordinators live in the same neighborhood as their respective Center, usually within a 10-minute walk. Coordinators range in age from 18 to 42, but the average age is 26 years old. Nearly 80 percent have been in the coordinator position for at least one year. They tend to be well educated and driven: the majority have completed high school (64 percent) or college (31 percent), and most have career goals to continue with their education.

Volunteers help to staff each Center. Volunteers typically come from the community or the local church. Some volunteers are university students, although they tend to serve Centers in less violent neighborhoods that are closer to downtown San Salvador. In theory,

each Center has a *Voluntario Estrella* or lead volunteer who can oversee the Center activities in the event that the coordinator is not present. Coordinators reported that an average of seven active volunteers—those who comes at least 12 hours each month—served during the months of April – June 2016. There is considerable variation from one Center to the next, but on average about half of all volunteers are members of the community, and 10 percent are from local churches.

Volunteers are critical to the success of the Center model. Coordinators in the study state that the biggest impact on the lives of the youth has less to do with the quality of the board games or the relevance of the workshops. Instead, from the perspective of the coordinators, the Centers exert their greatest influence through the relationships that develop among the youth and between the youth and adult volunteers. Yet, while some Centers report that they have dozens of reliable volunteers, others struggle to find adults who are willing to fill this role. This has implications for the possibility of social tie formation between Center staff and youth, because a higher volunteer/youth ratio means less time is likely to be spent with any one particular child. Volunteers also provide some technical expertise that can limit the kind of trainings offered. One coordinator stated "…sometimes there are no volunteers for workshops, so we have to watch tutorials and teach [the material] ourselves." The coordinator went on to explain that this does not always meet the need or expectation that the youth have, causing some to lose interest.

Beneficiarios – Center Youth

Coordinators report that one in three youth who actively attend their Center are moderate or high risk. Twenty percent report that at least some of the youth in the Centers are at risk of dropping out of school, and 17 percent report that the majority of youth who

are actively involved at their Center are not formally engaged in the labor market or educational institutions. A relatively small percentage of Coordinators state that youth who are active in the Center are involved with (or were involved with) a gang.

If the Centers serve youth whose risk profiles range from low to high, the youth who responded to the survey tend to less at risk. The majority of respondents under age 17 are enrolled in school (Figure 2). While unemployment is high among respondents who are at least 18 years old (Figure 3), some of these young people are taking classes at the university or otherwise engaged in school. Just over one third (35 percent) of respondents in this age category are neither in school nor working. Youth who are disengaged from educational institutions or the labor force are colloquially referred to as *ninis*, meaning "ni estudian, ni trabajan" (they neither study nor work), and are considered a significant concern by advocates and policymakers in El Salvador. Although there are relatively few of these youth in the sample, it is significant that they are engaged in the Centers—a local organization that is in a position to provide some support and guidance.

Youth in the survey also tend to report minimal risk in other important domains. While 28 percent have tried alcohol at least once, less than 3 percent have had enough alcohol in the last month to feel drunk. (12 percent have used marijuana and a very small percentage have experimented with other drugs.) Similarly, almost none of these young people reported that they are in a gang or suggested that they are on the cusp of joining one. Three respondents reported having been in a gang, and only 11 percent state that they have spent time with gang members without formally belonging to the gang. These are self-report data, of course, and it is possible that those who are engaged in high risk behavior choose not to identify as such (even on an anonymous survey).

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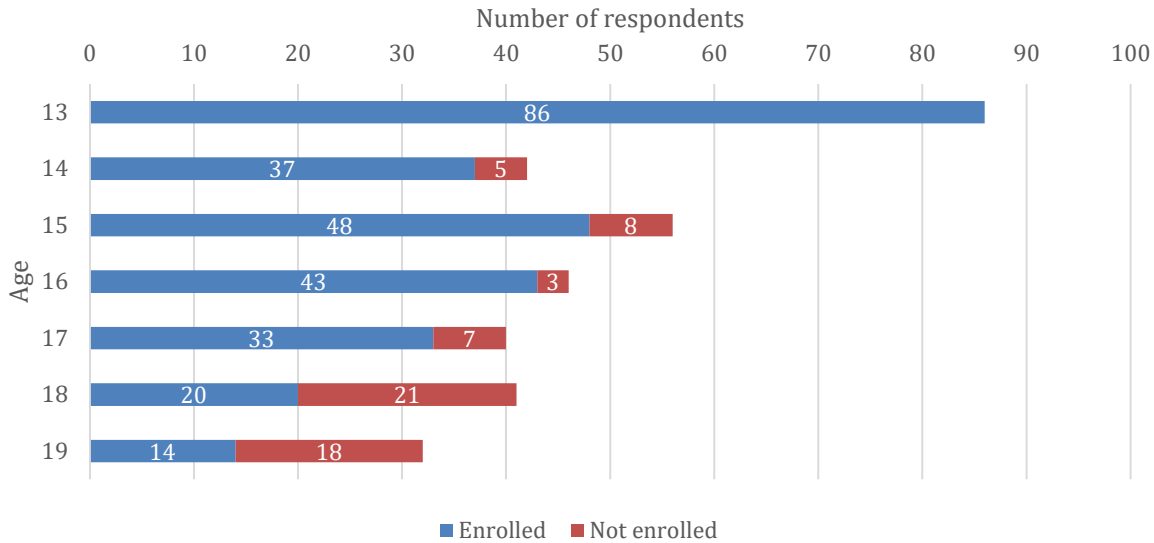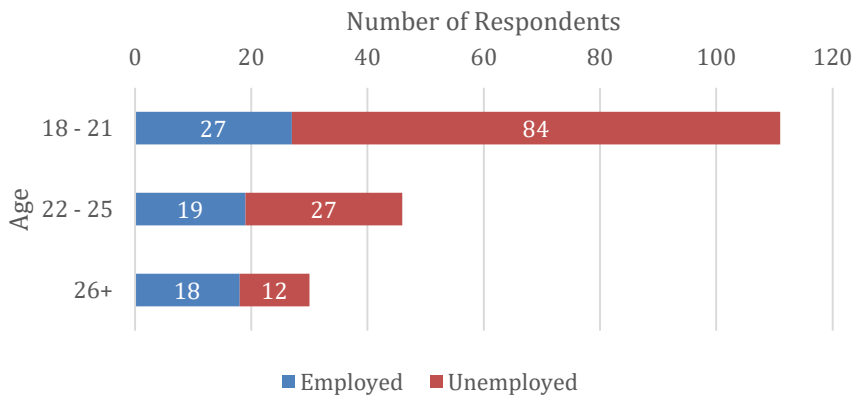**Figure 2**   *School enrollment of school-aged respondents*

Number of respondents

Age	Enrolled	Not enrolled
13	86	
14	37	5
15	48	8
16	43	3
17	33	7
18	20	21
19	14	18

■ Enrolled ■ Not enrolled

Figure 3   *Labor market participation for respondents over age 17*

Number of Respondents

Age	Employed	Unemployed
18 - 21	27	84
22 - 25	19	27
26+	18	12

■ Employed ■ Unemployed

Overall, 27 percent of youth report that their overall economic situation is good or very good. At the other extreme, 22 percent of youth in the sample indicate that their economic situation is bad or very bad. Over half of respondents (57 percent) indicate that their economic situation has not changed in the last year, and 15 percent state that they are worse off than they were a year ago. Money remitted from abroad comprises a large percentage of the GDP in El Salvador. The World Bank estimates that personal remittances

represented 16.6 percent of country's GDP in 2015.[25] In our study, just over one third (37 percent) of the youth surveyed report receiving remittances (compared with 20 percent nationally [see LAPOP Barometer, 2014][26]). Of these respondents, one in five (21 percent) live in households that heavily rely on money remitted by individuals living abroad.

One of the most consistent risk factors across the sample is neighborhood context. Although they do not report engaging in behavior such as drug use and gang involvement that would put them in a higher risk category, the majority of youth in our study live in unstable neighborhoods where they feel unsafe. Two thirds (69 percent) feel very worried or somewhat worried that someone will stop them in the street and threaten or hurt them.[27] A similar percentage are worried for the safety of family members in their neighborhood. Indeed, the majority report that robberies, shootings, and drug sales have happened in their neighborhood in the past 12 months, and 61 percent state that at least one murder has occurred in their neighborhood during this timeframe.

One response to environmental stressors such as neighborhood violence— especially for youth who have family members living abroad—is to consider migration. Theory suggests one of the primary factors that explain why individuals emigrate from

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[25] World Bank staff estimates based on IMF balance of payments data, and World Bank and OECD GDP estimates. See www.worldbank.org

[26] http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/el-salvador.php

[27] Percentages are similar among age groups, but a greater percentage of youth ages 13 – 17 are *very worried* about their safety compared to those who are at least 18 years old (47 percent versus 36 percent).

Latin America is the existence of transnational social networks (Massey, et al, 2002). Respondents' reliance on remittances indicates that these youths are embedded in such transnational networks. Other family members and loved ones have already emigrated and are sending money back to El Salvador.[28] These network ties are conduits for information about how to emigrate and the financial resources necessary to do so. They can also provide assurance of on-going support upon arrival, including a place to sleep, guidance about how to find a job, a ride to work, etc. Indeed, 42 percent indicate that they plan on leaving the country within the next three years (18 percent are unsure)[29] and, of these, 111 (61 percent) are driven by the hope to find work. Only one in ten state that neighborhood violence is their primary reason for emigrating.[30] In summary, the Centers are located in neighborhoods where youth view emigration as a solution to an uncertain future, but unemployment rather than fear of violence is the primary push factor.

It is still quite possible that growing up in a violent or precarious neighborhood in El Salvador exerts an independent effect on youths' tendency to emigrate. However, other factors may moderate this effect, thereby masking its influence. One factor is collective efficacy (Sampson, et al. 1997). Collective efficacy is the willingness of local residents to take action in response to neighborhood problems such as crime. It depends heavily on the

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[28] Given that remittances comprise a significant percentage of the country's GDP, it may be surprising that *more* of these households do not rely more heavily on money sent home from abroad.

[29] However, among those who receive remittances, the difference between the number of youth who plan on emigrating and the number who do not is not statistically significant (at the .05 level).

[30] Some anecdotal evidence supports that many youth in these neighborhoods act on their plan to leave; one coordinator stated that 47 youth in his neighborhood emigrated in 2015.

level of trust—or social capital—that characterizes the social networks within

neighborhoods. While our survey does not measure collective efficacy, per se, several

questions ask youth to identify the degree to which they trust their neighbors. 75 percent

of respondents stated that their neighbors are people who they trust. They see their

neighbors as people who help one another, look out for their house when no one is home

and, generally, are people who they trust. That is, even while the majority of respondents

feel vulnerable in their neighborhoods, they also indicate that these are places where they

feel a sense of social connection to people who are trustworthy. This does not square with

theories of social disorganization and social isolation (Small, 2004). According to these

theories, neighborhoods with high crime and poverty rates tend to be places where

individuals feel disconnected from one another. Minimal social contact reduces trust and

collective efficacy—key mechanisms of social control by which residents keep destabilizing

factors such as criminal behavior in check. These data suggest a paradox: many youth in the

study live in neighborhoods where they feel unsafe, even though they feel a sense of

connection to and trust in their neighbors. In the next section, we explore the possible

contribution of the Centers to the formation and strengthening of social capital for youth

and, ultimately, the effect of the Centers on youth development.

The Impact of the Centers

    The Centers are a place where youth feel safe, even though they are embedded in

neighborhoods that can be violent. By far the majority (80 percent) of youth who

responded to the survey stated that they always feel safe at the Center, and only 5 percent

said that they only sometimes feel safe. This refers to physical safety, but our data indicate

they also feel safe to try new things at the Centers and learn more about topics that are of

interest to them. The Centers are social and intellectual learning environments that foster positive development and equip them to better handle problems and challenges when they arise. Involvement at the Centers also has a tangible impact on social mobility. 32 percent said that they have found a better job because of the Center, and 78 percent reported that the Center has helped them get better grades in school. One youth respondent said that her homework is easier because of the computer skills she has learned at the Center. Given the problem of youth who are disconnected from both work and school, this is a significant contribution to the life chances of these youth and, ultimately, the stability of their families and neighborhoods.

While we should be cautious to overstate the direct impact the Centers may have on the school and work trajectories of youth, it is critical to underscore that the influence they have in these domains is positive. If the Centers are safe havens which have a real impact on youths' connection to school and work, they also influence other important aspects of youth development. Two facets of positive youth development include access to social capital and leadership skills/opportunities.

Social capital and leadership development

Youth respondents express a strong sense of social connection to the Center, and nearly all of the youth report that they feel like the Center is a place where they belong. One female respondent explained that the Center "is a place where you can come and get better in something without worrying whether anyone is going to judge you." The Centers excel at fostering a sense of membership. This due, in part, to the social ties they have developed to adults and peers at the Center. One respondent commented that she appreciates the Center because "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." The survey instrument asked youth respondents to indicate their level of agreement (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) with a series of statements about their Center. Measures of social capital—particularly trust in at least one adult at the Center—were high (see Figure 4). By far the majority of respondents agree or strongly agree that they are meaningfully connected to an adult at the Center ("There is an adult at this Center who cares about me"), and trust that these individuals are supportive ("The adults in this Center tell me what I am doing well"). Most of the youth also believe that at least one adult at the Center knows them well enough to notice when they are struggling.

Figure 4   *Center-based social capital*
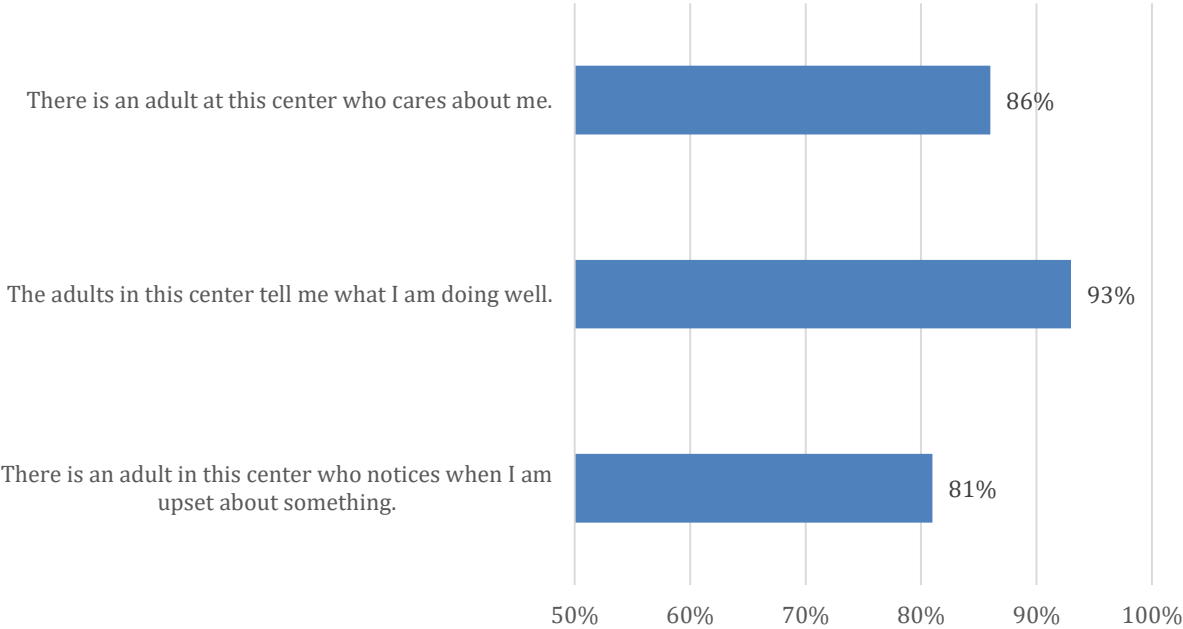
The importance of this support is emphasized elsewhere in the survey, particularly when students respond to an open-ended question about what they like most about the Center. One young person states that the Center is where "we all get along as friends, and there is

always a person who helps us." Other respondents emphasize that the Center is where they meet and get to know people who are not like them: "I meet different people who help me understand different ways of thinking. This helps me communicate with them better."

Figure 5   *Leadership and Self-efficacy*

Leadership and self-efficacy are important to youth development, in part because they empower young people to take more initiative in directing their future. 68 percent of respondents stated that being part of their Center always helps them think about the future. 82 percent reported that because of being involved at the Center, they are "better able to handle problems and challenges when they arise." Given the level of community violence and gang activity in their neighborhoods, combined with their own economic situation and high unemployment rates, we would expect them to express a negative outlook on their future possibilities. Instead, the majority indicate that they have a sense of

possibility and feel relatively confident that they can shape their future (Figure 5). Importantly, these young people attribute their involvement at the Center for influencing this perspective.

Improving and expanding the Center model

Data from this study suggest that the preventative model used by the Centers attenuates risky behavior among youth, strengthens their connection to the community, and facilitates development across a skill areas ranging from leadership to the performing arts. The scope of impact is significant. Youth flock to the Centers after school, and many sites have difficulty accommodating the demand. One reason for the success of the Centers is that they are predicated on buy-in from the local community and sustained by the support of parents and local stakeholders. They are also staffed and supported by community members, and require relatively little funding to support. It is important to emphasize that the Centers represent a model which is highly unusual for many of these communities. The model itself does not depart radically from a positive youth development approach embraced by youth-serving community-based organizations and drop-in centers across many U.S. cities. However, in El Salvador, it is highly unusual to find a dedicated space such as the Centers which is free and accessible to all, regardless of religious ties.[31] The unusual nature of the Centers is one reason it often requires time to earn the trust of parents and youth—initially, many think there must be some undisclosed fee or requirement to access the Center and its resources.

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[31] Church-affiliated youth groups serve congregants, for example. Clubs and businesses that provide youth with internet access or organized sports charge membership fees that many youth cannot afford.

Some of the virtues which make the Centers successful are also limitations which restrict the ability of coordinators to have a larger impact. The Centers are sustainable because they have virtually no overhead costs, but the affordability of the Centers means that the space is often inadequate for serving large numbers of youth. The Centers are not housed in large facilities. They do not have gyms, recreational facilities, or even large rooms where Coordinators can convene meetings with youth participants. As mentioned above, most of the Centers are in relatively small homes. When school lets out, dozens of youth come to the Centers to work on their homework, access the internet, play ping pong, or practice an instrument. The activities often spill out onto the streets where the youth set up miniature soccer goals, and neighbors sometimes complain because of the noise.[32] Some Centers are so crowded that youth who want to enter go home instead—demand exceeds the number of youth the Centers can serve.

A typical Center computer lab (left) and its small entrance/office (right)

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[32] One Center we visited has a drum corps, for example. They must select practice times carefully because neighbors do not always appreciate their music.

Many Centers are 2-room homes with a small patio in back (left). Center calendars are often full (right)

Daily use and heavy foot traffic is evidence of the success of the Centers, but this also wears on the physical space and available resources. This is not lost on the youth themselves. A significant number of survey respondents said they did not wish to change anything at their Center, but 258 made specific comments. The most common theme across these comments concerned the physical structure or location of the Center (51 percent, n = 132). Among these comments, the majority were related to the need for more space, or for improvements to the existing space (e.g., to fix a leaking roof). A number of respondents also stated that the location of the Center was a problem for them, often because it was far from their house. Youth also identified the need for more games, sporting equipment, and technology (particularly internet access). Our site visits provided evidence of this. Humidity and excessive use mean that computer paper, board games, and other materials age quickly. Many youth also requested that the Center be open on the weekend,[33] and

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[33] This is also reflected in a survey question about why youth do not attend the Center more often. 46 percent are limited because of work schedules, and 14 percent have obligations at home that conflict with the Center hours.

several expressed a desire that there be more volunteers available to support and mentor youth.

Although the Centers prevent many youth from joining gangs, there are challenges associated with running a Center due to gang activity. The model design is thoughtful about important details, including using gang-neutral colors used to paint the exterior of the Centers (they are all painted with the same color scheme). Many indications suggest that the Center model is successful at operating within gang-contest territory. Most Centers (76 percent) are located in a neighborhood with active gangs, but 61 percent of coordinators state that local gangs have no effect on the Center's daily operations. There is no guarantee that this détente will endure. It can be undermined by dynamic factors within gangs— changes in leadership, for example—or changes between gangs as boundaries shift in response to conflict. There are also dynamic factors exogenous to the gangs themselves, including new police practices or laws which change the consequences of gang membership and activity.[34] This swirl of factors is well beyond the control of Coordinators. For the moment, however, most Centers are able to operate despite the presence of gangs. In fact, a gang that is not opposed to a Center may provide a kind thin wall of protection.

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[34] In April 2016 El Salvador's Legislative Assembly reformed the penal code to target gangs more aggressively. Under the new law, gangs are classified as terrorist organizations which, in turn, carries harsher sentencing guidelines. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-reforms-classify-gangs-terrorists-criminalize-negotiations ; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/30/el-salvadors-new-attorney-general-is-the-point-man-in-the-war-against-gangs/

One Coordinator noted: "It's worth mentioning that the local gang is constantly aware of the Centro's activities. [The gang members] keep others from damaging the Centro. Even though they do not use the facilities of the Centro, they help take care of them"

IV. CONCLUSION

The Alliance for Prosperity[35] emerged as a direct response to the "humanitarian crisis" in 2014 when tens of thousands of unaccompanied Central American children were apprehended at the U.S. border. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras established the Alliance, a five-year initiative to address the structural factors contributing to the out-migration of unaccompanied children. The goal is to improve economic conditions and rule of law in the region—the push factors that prompt many would-be migrants to leave. The Alliance for Prosperity has been compared to other large-scale development interventions in Latin America. Plan Columbia, launched in 2000, was a $9 billion anti-drug effort. Beginning in 2008, the Mérida Initiative was similar in focus. It aimed to strengthen rule of law in order to more effectively arrest, charge, and convict drug dealers, primarily in Mexico but also in Central America. With the rise of violence, political instability, and drug trafficking in the Northern Triangle, the Mérida Initiative soon evolved to direct more resources towards Central America. In 2010 it merged with the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) that launched in 2008.[36]

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[35] http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=39224238

[36] https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf

CARSI is premised on the idea that, while security in the region is a priority, rule-of-law interventions should work in tandem with efforts to improve social and economic conditions in the region. The Obama administration refers to this two-pronged model as "A Comprehensive Approach" that "includes partnering with the region to advance good governance, prosperity, and citizen security, enforcing our domestic immigration laws, and working to provide services and assistance to migrants or intending migrants who may be at imminent risk of harm."[37] That is, in the case of Central America, a comprehensive approach to rule of law programming requires more than an exclusive reliance upon an "iron fist" (*mano dura*) enforcement models. CARSI is one example of how traditional security and enforcement measures are coupled with social and economic development—prevention efforts—to more effectively address gangs and crime in Central America. One such effort, and the focus of this study, is the Youth Outreach Center model in El Salvador.

The Youth Outreach Centers in El Salvador provide a replicable violence prevention model that is cost-effective and sustainable. This study provides evidence that the model is also effective. Although the Centers are unable to address the interrelated structural problems associated with poverty, violence and governance that undercut the rule of law, they represent an incremental approach to prevention and youth development. The Centers in El Salvador provide youth in at-risk neighborhoods with a unique opportunity to gather in a safe, neutral place, engage in pro-social activities, develop positive relationships with adult role models, and learn new skills. The Centers provide a space where youth can

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[37] https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/15/fact-sheet-united-states-and-central-america-honoring-our-commitments

receive homework help and basic job training—support that can influence long-term outcomes such as educational attainment and labor market participation. In-depth interviews and focus groups with coordinators and youth provided numerous examples of how the Centers' influence extends beyond prevention. That is, some coordinators are engaged in actively intervening to interrupt violence and promote healthy development. For example, some coordinators have met with local gang leaders to advocate for Center youth so that they might be released from the gang. Other coordinators have developed trainings and workshop for moms and babies in order to intervene early in the development of neighborhood youth.

Although the model is clearly developed, Youth Outreach Centers are not all the same. The model can be easily replicated, and the value-based core is firmly rooted in all of the Centers we studied. However, other aspects of the model are more protean. Depending on the skills and personality of the Center coordinator, and depending on the type of support from community stakeholders, each of the Centers has a slightly different feel. One Center with a male coordinator primarily serves adolescent boys. Because one of the volunteers is a skilled drummer, the Center is known for its drummer brigade. Another Center is led by a female coordinator who has intentionally recruited mothers from the community to volunteer. Youth at this Center learn to make jewelry, and the composition of youth tends to be much younger. Some Centers are heavily supported by local religious leaders, while others have regular volunteers from the ADESCO who incorporate Center youth in various municipality-wide events.

This study has also raised important questions about violence prevention in El Salvador. The Youth Outreach Centers are part of a six-prong approach to violence

prevention designed by Creative, Inc., a USAID partner. Future research should expand the lens of analysis to include other components of this approach to better understand how the Centers contribute to and fit within the larger prevention effort. The Centers in this study are primarily located in small towns around the periphery of San Salvador. Additional research should pilot efforts to scale up the Center model and replicate it in different environments, including more traditional urban neighborhoods and rural areas. Finally, there are over 200 Centers across the Northern Triangle. A systematic impact evaluation of these Centers would help us understand the effect that they are having on violence prevention, and how country context might require modifications in order to optimize the model.

This study also raises questions about the relationship between neighborhood violence in immigrant sending countries and the tendency to out-migrate. Together, these two lines of analysis have significant policy implications. Most recently, the immigration policy debate in the U.S. has been largely confined to the controversial question of how to secure our borders. This study suggests that a more robust immigration policy would extend beyond the wall to address the social, economic and political conditions in the Northern Triangle. Improving the rule of law in these countries will not eliminate the movement of unauthorized migrants from this region to the U.S.—we know that the established transnational social networks will continue to facilitate the flow of future migrants—but it will improve the well-being of children and families in the Northern Triangle so that the option of staying is a safe one which includes opportunities for social mobility and healthy development.