Youth as Key Actors in the Social Prevention of Violence

The Experience of Projóvenes II in El Salvador.

María Antonieta Beltrán & Wim Savenije

Introduction

Two rather extreme images of youth tend to appear when speaking of violence and crime in Latin American cities. The first refers to young people from groups who perform illegal practices or violence, such as that carried out by street gangs or maras, gangs linked to drug distribution, paramilitary groups, or hit men. The second presents young people as the main victims of the activities of these same groups (UNDP, 2013).

Urban ghettos or popular neighborhoods[1] are often witness street and youth violence (Savenije & Beltrán, 2012). The control that gangs and other criminal groups exert, the occasional exchanges of gunfire and the recurrent threats to physical integrity can make these places very dangerous. Many locals prefer not to move around the neighborhood or not to stay long on the street, and confine their children to their homes to protect them.

Beyond these images of violence where young people are presented first, as the bad guys, perpetrators, or offenders, and second, as poor or helpless victims; this article seeks to propose the notion that young people can play an important role in efforts to improve the social relationships in their own communities. Particularly, this article highlights the appropriateness of youth participation in efforts to prevent violence and crime, even in areas of high insecurity.

Many young people in the neighborhoods affected by violence and crime have left school early and experience difficulties finding a job. Others do go to school, but can only access poor quality education or find unstable jobs with low payment (ILO, 2012). Nonetheless, when given the opportunity, they show great willingness to spend their free time in activities that are beneficial for the community. The local youth grasp not only the

Previous page:
A group of young
Maras in El
Salvador. Photo:
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dangers, but they also know the existing resources in their neighborhoods. They interact with their neighbors; some have learned the ways to cope with the dangers on the streets and even manage to establish cordial relationships with gang members, drug dealers, or others who commit unlawful acts in the community. Therefore, assets such as being accepted in the community, being familiar with the rules that govern the street, and knowing the members of the violent groups, may facilitate the work of social prevention of violence and crime in highly insecure areas. This does not rule out the fact that the youth are also exposed to adverse reactions or menaces from violent groups. Handling such risks, however, can and must be an integral part of violence prevention initiatives. They should be considered in the budget of every project, as resources, training and monitoring are required for this purpose(Savenije & Beltrán, 2012).

This paper will start with a brief description of urban popular neighborhoods in Latin America. The difficulties faced by the youth, which set them at a risk for violence, are highlighted. After this, the idea of the social prevention of violence and crime is explained in further detail, emphasizing some considerations for the work in neighborhoods with high levels of insecurity and economic and social precariousness. The third section presents some experiences in which young people worked to improve relationships and reduce insecurity in their communities. These experiences were acquired during the project 'Social Prevention of Violence with Youth Participation - PROJÓVENES II', implemented by the National Institute for Youth (INJUVE) of El Salvador. These efforts have not only been beneficial for community relations, but they have also provided a new sense of life and social integration. Last but not least, they have fostered local youth's social and personal development.

Urban youth in Latin America: poverty and social exclusion in popular neighborhoods

Latin America has experienced a rapid urban growth in the recent decades. However, much of this growth has been marked by poverty and violence (Muggah, 2007). Latin American cities have become unequal and segregated, i.e. their populations are unevenly distributed in socio-economic terms (Rodriguez & Arriagada, 2004).[2] Urban areas where the poor tend to concentrate, and where also violence is more present, are commonly known as "barrios populares". Although statistically the proportion of the urban population living in conditions of social exclusion has decreased from 33% to 24% in the last 20 years, the absolute number of people currently living in slums increased from 106 to 111 million in Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-Habitat, 2012, 2014). Urban popular neighborhoods are often located in areas prone to natural hazards or human-caused risks, as houses tend to be built on river banks, dump sites, streams, steep slopes, along roads, or next to rail lines.

The dwellings often have poor provision of basic services and are typically built with low quality materials (Sabatini & Brain, 2008; UN-Habitat, 2014). Residents are usually left out of welfare programs and social protection networks (UNDP, 2013, UN-Habitat, 2014). Schools in these neighborhoods tend to be deteriorated, lack sufficient resources, and offer low

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Segregation is also attributed to ethnic background, religion, or age (Sabatini, Cáceres y Cerda, 2001, in Rodríguez & Arriagada, 2004).

*Risky locations
of low-income
settlements:
Photo: FUNDASAL*

quality education (Kessler, 2002; D´Alessandre; 2010; Savenije & Beltrán, 2012). The adults and heads of households also use to have little education, which results in unstable and informal jobs, low wages, and high unemployment (Katzman, 2001; ILO, 2011). These elements contribute to a deterioration of community life and the capacity for collective action, which is reflected in abandoned public places, social fragmentation, mistrust, violence, the use of drugs, and insecurity.

Katzman (2001, p.181) lists five factors that have contributed to the continuation of the precariousness and the emergence of disruptive and illegal behavior in Latin American neighborhoods:

(1) The interaction with neighbors is limited to people whose skills, habits, and lifestyles do not promote successful outcomes if compared with the dominating living standards of society.

(2) The neighborhood networks are not conductive to obtaining employment and training opportunities, especially for youths.

(3) Job instability makes it difficult to support basic and appropriate levels of community organization and informal social control.

(4) Children and young people have little contact with or exposure to successful role models within the mainstream society.

(5) Persistent unemployment leads individuals to become increasingly susceptible to alternative or illegitimate sources of income.

According to the same author, these factors increase the predisposition of the urban poor to normative proposals different from those conventionally accepted. On the one hand, some of these do not reject orientations that incorporate the use of illegal ways to meet their needs and achieve their desires; on the other hand, the social isolation and fragmentation

hinder the effectiveness of initiatives that could counteract the attraction of these alternative paths.

Violence and crime

Violence and crime in Latin American cities are indeed very high. Latin America is certainly one of the most violent regions in the world. In 2005, the homicide rate in the region was 25 per 100,000 inhabitants (UNDP, 2009). It is worth mentioning that there are substantial differences between the countries in the region. The Northern Triangle of Central America has significantly higher rates than those of the Southern Cone (UNDP, 2013). By 2012, for example, Honduras reported a homicide rate of 90.4 per 100,000 inhabitants, Guatemala 39.9 and El Salvador 41.2; whilst Uruguay reported 7.9 and Chile 3.1 (UNODC, 2013). Similar heterogeneity can also be found within countries. In the same country there are areas with a murder rate that exceeds 10 times that of other cities or regions. Cities, neighborhoods and even streets can also show great differences (UNDP, 2013). The victims of homicide are in most cases young men (ibid.).

Other forms of crime, such as theft, organized crime, kidnapping and extortion, gang fights, and domestic violence, have also a strong presence in Latin American cities, especially in poor neighborhoods (UNDP, 2013). In addition to these precarious conditions of their neighborhoods, Latin American youth have great difficulty in continuing their education and finding jobs.

Working and studying

Entering the labor market is difficult for youth in many Latin American countries. Often this situation is linked to their level of education (Weller, 2006 in UNDP, 2013; ILO, 2012). Without completing secondary school, their employability in the formal market is reduced (Kliksberg, 2010). Youth unemployment rates are indeed very high, between 2.3 and 5.5 times higher than that of adults; moreover, young people usually only manage to get precarious jobs and low payment (ILO, 2011).

In Latin America, just less than half of the young people finish secondary education: only 48.5% of 20 year olds have completed secondary school. In some Central American countries (such as Guatemala, Honduras, or Nicaragua) only about one-fifth of youth reach that level. In those countries that have achieved higher levels of education coverage (such as Chile, Peru, or Argentina), still between a quarter and a third of all adolescents fail to complete secondary education. This picture is more critical in the most disadvantaged areas, where the vast majority of young people is far from completing secondary education (SITEAL, IIEP and OEI, 2009). "It suffices to note that at the age of seventeen, nine out of ten adolescents from the better socio-economically positioned homes attend school, while half of the poorest young people at that age have already interrupted their studies" (D'Alessandre, 2010, pp.10-11).

The educational level of the parents or heads of the household is strongly related to the socioeconomic status of their families (Croso, 2010). Only 20% of the young people from the households in the lowest

income quintile completes secondary education (ECLAC, 2007 Croso, 2010). As indicated in the previous section, urban slums are home to parents with little education and low income. However, they also tend to consider education of little importance (Feldman, García Méndez & Araldsen, 1997). These factors hinder the achievement of children's education. In fact, the most common reasons given by young people for why they leave school early are economic problems at home (31.6%) and the need to start working (27%). In Central America, a link between the high number of dropouts in the age group ranging from 12 to 14 years old and the level of insecurity that young people experience has also been identified (Eljach, 2011).
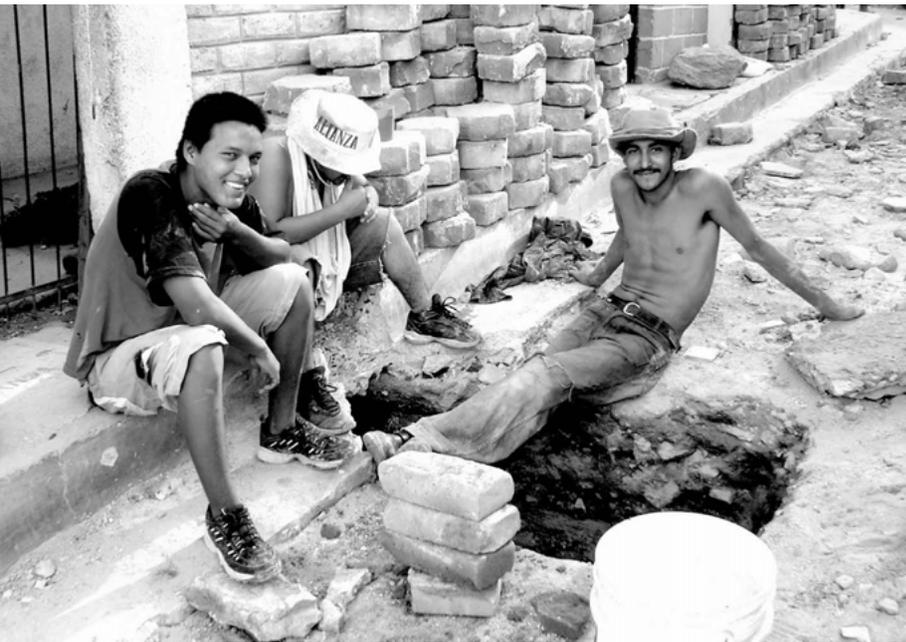
One out of three persons is underemployed in El Salvador. Photo: Joanna Kotowski

Many young people drop out from school, but not all of them enter the labor force. In 2012 it was estimated that in urban areas of Latin America 13.5% of the youth and adolescents neither studied nor worked (SITEAL, IIEP - IEO, 2014). This prevalence increases in the poorest countries. The proportion of young people aged 12-17 who neither work nor study in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua is three times higher than that same group in Chile or Argentina. Also the probability to find a teenager who does not study or work is more pronounced among households with a lower education than in those where adults accumulated more years of study (D'Alessandre, 2010). Without better options to spend their time, youth tend to spend more time on the streets and consolidate friendships with other young people in the same situation. When this happens, the likelihood of joining street oriented groups increases.

Insecurity

As said before, young people are not only the group most affected by violence, they are also the most common perpetrators. The violence

and crimes committed by juveniles are usually group related. In Latin America the groups that routinely use violence differ from country to country and are linked to local dynamics (UNDP, 2013). For example, in Colombia the phenomenon of "child soldiers" (adolescents recruited by non-governmental armies) and "sicarios"[3] is widespread , like in the Province of Buenos Aires (Argentina) the so-called "pibes chorros", who are linked to all sorts of crime and drug use. In the Northern Triangle of Central America, the phenomenon of street gangs, also known as maras, are responsible for much of the insecurity in poor neighborhoods, while in Brazil similar groups (gangues) operate. In general, these groups or gangs can be considered spaces of encounter and mutual protection among excluded or marginalized young people (Rodríguez, 2007, pp.543-544).

Street gangs flourish in situations of marginalization (Savenije, 2009). Undoubtedly, the everyday social exclusion that exists in the places where young people circulate (e.g., deteriorated schools, parks and urban centers), forms part of the daily environment of many urban youth. The deteriorated physical environment and existing social fragmentation increase the risk that young people join street oriented groups (Savenije & Beltrán, 2012). For example, some authors estimate that in Central America between 3% and 5% of young people living in poor neighborhoods with gang presence, affiliate with gangs. Although in particular neighborhoods, the percentage can be higher (Jütersonke, Muggah & Rodgers, 2009).

Many young people, including children, that grow up in slums consider it attractive to belong to a street oriented or criminal group. Not only because of the intense friendships, women, access to money, alcohol and drugs, or other material goods that would normally be inaccessible, but also because they can present themselves as powerful, untouchable, and worthy of respect. These groups can be understood as "street elites" who regard the neighborhood as their territory (Katz, 1988). The common people, especially the young ones, fear the damage that gangs can cause to them or their families; especially if they do not obey the rules imposed by these groups, do not treat their members with all due respect, or if they are perceived to be interfering in their affairs.

However, the vast majority of youth do not join the gangs or criminal groups. They have a desire to study and work, and aspire to advance and to improve their life situation and that of their family, and even to improve the conditions of their community. These young people -some closer/further from joining criminal groups than others- should be incorporated as important actors in social prevention programs.

Prevention in highly insecure areas

The previous section has shown that crime and violence in Latin America occur disproportionally in neighborhoods with economic difficulties, employment instability, deficits in the provision of basic services, and social fragmentation. However under conditions of limited economic and social resources, and frequent incidents of violence and crime, it is difficult to implement projects focused on prevention (Savenije & Beltrán,

2012). The police are generally mistrusted by local people; moreover, they often do not have sufficient knowledge of the local situation in order to do an effective job. For the police, doing prevention work often means parking a police patrol car in a street corner, and expecting that nobody will infringe the law because of their presence (Savenije, 2010). Furthermore, frequent patrolling and frisking of pedestrians gives the residents the feeling that the police are targeting them and stigmatizing everyone, especially the young people, who live in the area. For that reason it is essential to develop a different perspective of crime prevention and to implement policies or programs of social prevention that, among other things, offer opportunities to at risk youth with few chances for development.

Beyond the labels of perpetrators or victims, the youth of popular neighborhoods need to be recognized as young people living in difficult circumstances who deserve better opportunities. Instead of abandoning them and stigmatizing them as potential criminals or treating them as helpless victims, it is important to provide them with possibilities for leisure and exercise, to create opportunities for the development of their social and academic skills, to generate access to academic careers and jobs that stimulate personal and professional growth and offer a real prospect for a better future for themselves and their families (Savenije & Beltrán, 2012). Situate such opportunities in the context of the local neighborhoods may serve as part of a more comprehensive effort of social prevention of violence and crime.

Crime prevention versus social prevention

Prevention can be understood in many different ways and therefore various approaches have been developed to address it (Crawford, 1998). Understood as "crime prevention", it is often conceived as a task that is the primary responsibility of the police, who are accountable for ensuring public order and security. A broader approach considers that security problems are related to larger social phenomena and accepts that other actors should participate in prevention efforts, and not only security forces (Savenije & Beltrán, 2012).

The latter approach is based on findings that show that violence and crime are rarely the only problems present in a community. When these issues do arise, there is also the presence of other social problems such as poverty, deteriorated physical environment, overcrowding, or the virtual absence of upward social mobility opportunities (Crawford, 1998; Tolan, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2003). The recognition that structural factors have an important influence, has led to the acknowledgement that these factors need to be addressed first of all (Tolan, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2003). However, such factors are not the only cause of the presence of violence and crime. In fact, not all popular or crowded neighborhoods suffer from elevated levels violence and delinquency. Social relations between groups and individuals present in the neighborhoods, as well as the quality of such relationships, intervene in their emergence and development. For example, a neighborhood where adults spend time on the streets and in the parks, supervising and participating in the games of
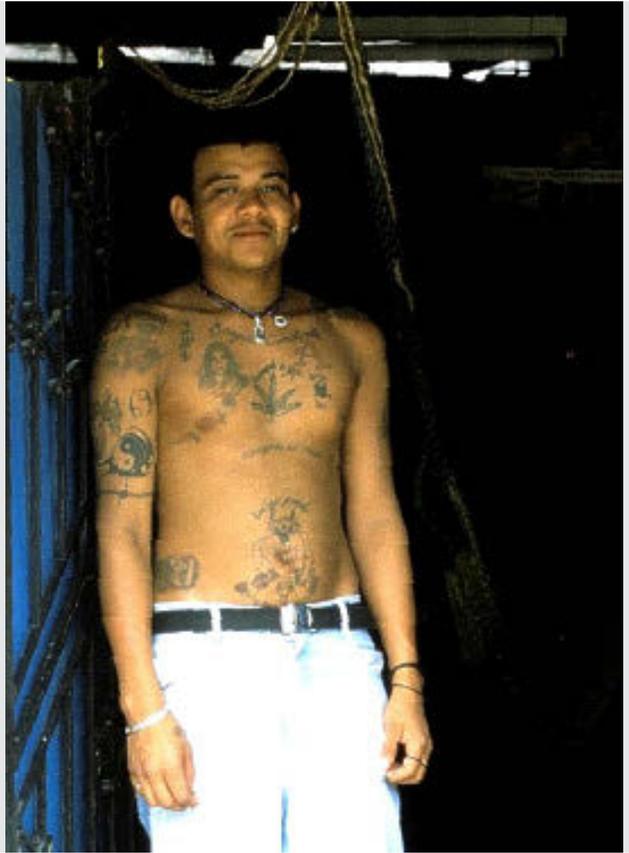
Young man in barrio of San Salvador. Photo: Joanna Kotowski

the children and youth, collaborating in the maintenance of public spaces, and organizing activities in them, stimulates social interaction among neighbors and neighborhood cohesion. On the contrary, a locality where residents confine themselves to their homes, with lonely streets and empty desolate parks, raises the possibility that others seize the public spaces in a less desirable manner: they can congregate to drink alcohol, abuse drugs, assault passersby, and even consider the neighborhood as solely their territory.

This paper addresses prevention from the perspective of local communal living or active coexistence.[4] Such approach recognizes that although violence manifests itself disproportionally in precarious social contexts, certain social dynamics and processes are maintained that facilitate or impede its manifestation. Working towards a better quality of community life and relations between the neighbors is itself valuable. Recent studies have also shown that in communities where good social relations, mutual trust, and a willingness to work for the common good exist, violence and crime rates are usually lower (Sampson, 2006, 2012). This finding is the starting point of the social prevention approach. Interventions based on this approach focus on social processes, in order to strengthen relationships between neighbors and to prevent individuals or groups from committing crimes or violence (Sutton, Cherney & White, 2014; Savenije & Beltrán, 2012).

04.
Translation of the word 'convivencia' in Spanish. Convivencia is a difficult to translate concept referring to the quality of actively sharing the same physical and social space.

The more recent debate argues that social prevention must start with identification of 'root causes' that eventually motivates an individual to break the law and accordingly, should seek to change them. These 'causes' may include low self-esteem, lack of discipline, weak ties between the individual and the family or school, and low social or vocational skills (Sutton, Cherney & White, 2014). However, it is difficult or impossible to identify and get some consensus on an individual cause or main causes. It is even more difficult to isolate and modify the 'root causes' (Crawford, 1998). Intervening in the social processes in which violent or delinquent actions are embedded and appear in, constitutes a different approach. People, neighbors, and local groups are in constant interaction and therefore it is important to keep in mind the relationships and dynamics between families, neighbors, and other community groups when designing and implementing a prevention initiative. Therefore, in this paper, social prevention of violence is defined as the modification or weakening of social dynamics or processes that lead groups or individuals to use violence or commit crime, through the promotion of social relations and interactions that encourage personal and communitarian development and strengthen peaceful coexistence, creating alternative opportunities and legitimizing informal social control.

Such integrated approach does not only require the need to reduce the presence and impact of street groups as principal actors of crime and violence, but moreover to foster the creation of new and alternative activities, as well as to assist the formation of local groups that enhance community and personal development of young people. Fostering new social endeavors , routines and leisure activities, and creating groups that promote, among others, (youth) culture, sports, environmental care and alternative conflict resolution, make possible the development of new social dynamics among neighbors -young and old- that improve social relations, reduce the attraction of gangs, and diminish the opportunity to commit violent or criminal acts.

Prevention in highly insecure situations

As previously noted, young people from popular neighborhoods are less likely to finish high school, pursue an academic career or to find a well remunerated job, in comparison to their peers with higher educational levels. Their surroundings host the kind of conditions that invite them to spend their time on the streets or to get close to street gangs. The same conditions also produce the risk that young people get victimized by these groups. Therefore young people that live in those insecure neighborhoods usually develop 'special' skills and strategies to keep them at a distance, at the same time as they maintain friendly relationships with those who consider themselves the 'owners of the streets'. In other words, young people have to avoid getting too close, whilst trying to avoid the impression of being disrespectful or to hold them in contempt. Initiatives of social prevention of violence and delinquency should be aware of these kinds of tensions and integrate them into account. Taking into account the risks present in popular neighborhoods, the initiatives must target both immediate actions and long-term achievements so that young

people can visualize a more advantageous future. This can be achieved as long as these paths maintain the youth engaged in the education system and stimulate work in the formal sector, at the same time as the participants further the development of their communities or partake actively in social and civic activities that associate them to wider social networks.

Prevention initiatives should never be understood as short-term projects limited to vocational training, reintegration into the educational system, promotion of sports or recreation activities, that dry-up when the funding ends. Projects should be beneficial to the community, encourage the participation in new activities and motivate the residents to keep practicing them. Youth and other inhabitants of popular neighborhoods frequently feel abandoned when a project finishes or an organization retires from the neighborhood, while they continue to face the same difficulties as before: low possibilities of integration into the wider society, limited capacities created, persistent low motivation for communitarian work and small improvements in their communities. Activities such as sports, art, or training courses are not the objective itself, but a means to modify or reduce social interactions and processes that often lead to violence or delinquency. When young people maintain their interests in an academic career and have the opportunity to go to school, play sports or participate in exciting cultural or artistic activities, etc., they tend to distance themselves from the street culture and the related dangers. Therefore, it is important that young people are integrated into local activities and groups that have continuity, but also that they form skills and abilities that enable them to sustain these groups and interests. In this way, they also can open doors to other young people and help them in their personal development. In doing so, they become an integral part of their community and wider society.

An example of such an approach is the project 'Social Prevention of Violence with Youth Participation PROJOVENES II - INJUVE' -described in the following section - which has approached these issues in two ways. First, it has considered youth as a population willing to learn and engage in activities that benefit their community. Young people are therefore the driving force of the project. Secondly, it has aimed for sustainability, trying to involve community organizations, municipalities, and other institutions. The idea behind the project was that these organizations should remain in contact with young people and their communities after the project was completed, providing support and resources. In other words, the aim was to promote sustainability by establishing a sense of joint ownership and shared responsibility. The model PROJOVENES Prevention II-INJUVE will be explained in more detail in the next section.

The prevention model of Projóvenes II – Injuve: An example

The first part of this section briefly describes some components of the model of "Social Prevention of Violence with Youth Participation" (for a more comprehensive description, see Savenije & Beltrán, 2012). This model is relevant to this article because it considers youth as a target group in two ways: first, youth form an important part of the beneficiaries of the prevention efforts, and second, young people are active

participants and actors in the design and implementation of prevention activities. Some experiences of young people and their learning processes are presented in the second part of the section.

About PROJÓVENES II – INJUVE

The PROJÓVENES II - INJUVE project is an initiative that sought to generate experiences and strengthen capacities for the social prevention of violence in the 14 municipalities of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (AMSS). It has involved mainly young people living in neighborhoods with serious problems of violence and delinquency with the aim of strengthening their communities and addressing the adverse conditions present.

The measures to implement violence prevention actions were based on the realities of each municipality and the specificities of each community. The chosen target population was mainly constituted by children and young people, but also other elements were considered: families were invited to various activities and public spaces -such as parks, fields, roads, community halls or centers- were improved and, in some cases, constructed. Young people were incorporated as protagonists and the driving force of change and transformation of the spaces they inhabit, with the intention of facilitating interactions between their neighbors and improving the community relations. Thus, the aspiration was to improve the local security situation through the generation of stable social ties. The project also provided support to municipalities to encourage their participation in social prevention efforts at community level. Given the fact that all interventions were done at local level, the presence of the local authorities, such as the municipality, was vital. The objective was

INJUVE focuses on different target groups. Photo: Joanna Kotowski

that the municipalities got involved in the project, came to know about social prevention and accompanied the young people in their activities.[5]

Incorporation of the youth

Considered as a cornerstone for crime prevention, youth were encouraged to work actively in the organization of activities with the explicit aim to foster community relations and social cohesion in their communities. Three different positions were designed to enhance the participation of youth: community operators, youth facilitators, and volunteers.

Community operators were the young people who had been immersed in the project for a relatively long time. They received a two-year scholarship to allow them to pursue prevention activities in their neighborhoods. Part of their preparation consisted of practical training in different issues related to prevention. They also participated in a social prevention of violence program, offered by the National University of El Salvador (UES) and received an official diploma to certify them as specialists trained in prevention. Youth facilitators were young people who joined the project as volunteers. After participating in the project for at least one year, they were offered a scholarship to support them while they dedicated themselves more intensively to prevention activities. The facilitators also received various types of training in the field of prevention, as well as in other topics, depending on the area they participated in (e.g. sports, environment, etc.). Volunteers were those who participated without receiving payment and who supported the different activities in their neighborhood whenever they had the time for it.[6] Several volunteers also received trainings on specific topics.

The training and participation in activities in their neighborhoods were not isolated from other prevention activities developed in the municipality. During their training, volunteers, community operators, and youth facilitators supported neighborhood associations, the mayors' office, the Municipal Committees of Violence Prevention (CMPV), NGOs, and INJUVE in the organization and implementation of various activities.

Objectives and work areas

In order to focus on different target groups (individuals, families, communities and municipalities), and to involve different actors and institutions in prevention initiatives, the model established 4 general goals and structured the work by subject areas: (a). family; (b). sport and recreation; (c). art and culture; and (d). health and environment. In each subject area different activities were developed in order to achieve the following goals:

1. The management of public spaces

This objective consisted in the restoration or rescue of public places, which enabled the development of communal activities. This was done through cleaning of the areas, lighting, rehabilitation, improvement, or construction of public places, such as sports complexes, parks, squares, streets, cultural or community centers.[7] Furthermore, it included the

05.
The model has devoted much of its efforts to strengthen institutional development and involvement of the 14 municipalities in AMSS (providing technical training and support). However these activities are not elaborated in the present text. For further details see Savenije & Beltrán (2012).

06.
Volunteers were not exclusively young people; adults were also involved.

07.
Interventions limited to the manipulation of the physical context with the aim of reducing the opportunities to commit crime are known as situational prevention (Sutton, Cherney y White, 2014).

administration of these places, aimed at the sustainability of the restoration efforts through maintenance, proper use and environmental care.

2. Vocational training

As mentioned previously, scholarships were given to the community technicians and youth facilitators, to prepare them for work in the area of social prevention of violence and to facilitate their active involvement. In order to expand opportunities for the inclusion, scholarships were also granted to other young people from the communities so that they could participate in different training programs and receive help from a special employment agency. Finally, some scholarships were awarded to young single mothers, so that they could participate in vocational trainings.

3. Community development

This objective was aimed at strengthening local community organizations, such as neighbors' associations, sports committees, environmental groups, etc. Community operators were primarily responsible for laying the groundwork that should stimulate improvements in the relations between neighbors. For this matter, they were trained in management, planning, and the implementation of projects and activities. They promoted the work of local organizations; some even joined the community development associations of their neighborhoods. They also formed, together with volunteers, groups that organized activities focused on topics of interest (football matches, martial arts, environment, etc.) in order to attract more neighbors. Their major challenge was to improve the functioning of the local organizations, promote links between these organizations and the community, but also among the neighbors, and even among members of the same family. The underlying idea was to promote close social relationships and community participation through diverse activities.

4. Institutional development

Institutional development consisted of two main objectives: promoting violence prevention efforts by mayors' offices of the AMSS, and strengthening their capacities for community work. In order to achieve these objectives, the project worked to promote organizational skills and regulations of municipalities, supported by an adequate legal and financial framework. This was done through a strategy of technical training in key areas such as public participation, outreach, culture, youth and childhood development, environmental management, infrastructure, and social prevention. Community operators also participated in the CMPV to promote and support their efforts.

At the time the project concluded, the municipalities were expected to assume the responsibility for continuing social prevention initiatives in their territory. They are considered the main entities that should accompany youth and the entire community in prevention processes and promote the active participation of volunteers and local organizations in the communities. In this way the project sought to secure the

sustainability of activities that stimulate community life and the prolonged social integration of young people.

The main expectation was that through the development of these activities the youth and other participants increased their sense of belonging to their community, while they also improved their ability to participate in educational, employment, cultural, and artistic atmospheres. The project aimed to socially include the participants by making them parts of local actions and local decision making, recognizing them for their efforts, and stimulating their relationships with and the support of local, municipal, and even national organizations.

The experiences of young people: testimonials

The work of youth has largely consisted of strengthening their community, that is, activities have focused on improving relationships, common use of public places, individual resources, and local organizational capacity. In the process many youth have also become community leaders; not only because of the learned skills and gained experiences, but also because of the new interests that evolved and the relationships they established.

Community work requires social skills that allow the individuals to get along in their neighborhood, interact with neighbors, and find access to social organizations and institutions of the "wider society" that can facilitate or sponsor local activities. Community leaders must have a level of personal development, or maturity, in order to establish good relations with different types of people in a variety of contexts. They should not only feel comfortable with communicating ideas or purposes clearly; they must also have the patience and vocabulary to speak to different audiences.

During the various trainings, the participants did not only learn these social skills, many of them also gained confidence to use their newly developed skills. In this way, they learned to work better in their neighborhoods and specifically, how to address their neighbors. "As a volunteer, I have learned to be more communicative, more dynamic. Before, I was very quiet, now I feel more confident when talking to people and inviting them to events. I am not shy anymore when I approach other people". Young participants also learned to stand in front of groups and talk to big audiences; relate with different people, many very different from them; work in teams; and to remain open-minded to different visions and opinions. "I improved my character. In the past I did not discuss, propose ideas, or talk. Now I don't feel uncomfortable anymore!" Another volunteer reported a similar idea: "I learned to talk in public. Now I have a better vocabulary and I know how to use the right words to express myself."

In the process, the participants developed skills and attitudes that help them in interaction with other people. Many have become more patient with others and tolerant when they face different opinions. "I became more patient and understanding with my family and with other people. Now I help to find a solution when there are problems." Some reported even that they got to know themselves better, and that this has helped

them to become more understanding with others. "I changed my attitude. I used to be very closed-minded but now I talk more with people. I relate better with others."

In the context of the project young people can make friends and gain respect in different group contexts than the gangs. Photo: Joanna Kotowski

Learning social skills and achieving greater personal development did not only have an impact on an individual level, but -more importantly- it created useful resources for the community. Despite being relatively young, many consider that they thrived in the project and are now recognized as leaders in their community. "Relationships with the neighbors changed a bit. Previously I only taught martial arts classes. But when I started to work for the community, people began to notice me. I started to interact more with the people and now they look for me. They respect my work and I have gained prominence. They see me as a leader." The participants generally have managed to establish good relations with the neighbors and formed groups that voluntarily help them in their community.

For some, these experiences have reoriented their ambitions for the future, as they have decided to continue their formal education. "I thought I was too old [to study]. But I saw people older than me at university, so I decided to finish high school. When I started to attend classes to get the diploma, I got even more enthusiastic and I got the two qualifications. I thought that the diploma and a high school degree would improve my CV."

However, there was always the risk that the groups that controlled the neighborhoods, such as street and drug distribution gangs, would think that these people were interfering with their interests. Therefore the

participants had to sort-out these possible hazards and avoid provoking difficulties to themselves and their activities. The recognition of these groups as neighbors allowed the establishment of cordial relationships, as well as some confidence. The interaction with these groups, therefore, required a lot of social and communication skills. Generally, the participants, especially the community operators, have learned to establish relationships that have allowed them to move with relative ease through the neighborhood and even, when necessary, to negotiate with gangs. "With them I do not relate directly. I invited some to a family happening and many attended. That time about 55-60 people came and half of them were gang members. They recognize the work we do in the community." Sometimes gang members have even joined the community work. "Before, I had no contact with them. Now we communicate, because they help with the work in the community."

Reflections for sustainable social prevention

The previous statements show that the active participation of young people in implementing prevention projects is feasible, even in situations with high levels of insecurity. In fact, they may have a key role in efforts to improve relationships, promote active use of public places, and stimulate the willingness to work for the common good in their communities. However, in order that the active participation of young people and other neighbors produce the best results, a systematic process of training and methodology transfer should be established. With continued support, young people are able to make social prevention work and, at the same time, further their personal development.

  In addition, the experience of PROJÓVENES II - INJUVE indicates that many young people are willing to do community work. They have the

time, the energy, and show commitment to the assignments and responsibilities they assume. Their efforts are mostly voluntary. However this does not mean that they can be left alone. In community work, youth have faced and will face new challenges constantly; they need the support and experience of adults in order to solve many of the problems they encounter. Community leaders, people working in neighborhood associations, or experts at the municipality in the areas of social, communitarian, or cultural work, can be excellent advisors to youth.

Another important element is formal training. Ideally, young people who are already working in prevention should continue to be trained in the areas of management, development of participatory methodologies, practical modes of social prevention, or in any other areas that arise from the demands of the community. In this manner, it is not only the community who will benefit from youth efforts for prevention, the young people themselves become specialists in working with communities. Training youth methodically and to bestow them with a formal diploma does not just give them recognition, it prepares them for the future. At the same time, this kind of recognition also generates appreciation in the community and becomes an incentive to continue working with other young people in the neighborhood. It is also important to consider the incorporation of new volunteers to community work. Since volunteers need to have specific skills or knowledge to pass on to others, they must be trained in the areas (for instance in drawing, sports, dancing, sexual and reproductive health and environment) where they desire participate.

Without resources, social violence prevention work cannot succeed. Thus resources might include scholarships for young people, but also allowances required to cover the expenses that volunteers use during the planning, organization, and coordination of activities. It is important to note that the volunteers must move from the places the live to spaces where they carry out their activities. They often lack the resources to pay for their transportation and food while they are away from home. A stipend to deal with these costs is an important consideration. The availability of material resources to realize their activities is likewise essential. Community initiatives also benefit from adequate space (for example community centers, sports courses), and various materials (such as sports equipment, paint, brushes, musical instruments, seeds for planting, fertilizer, etc.). Without such resources even volunteers cannot carry out activities, despite the good will to do so.

Like providing trainings, resources and support for young people, their safety is a constant concern. Working in areas of high insecurity involves contact with gangs or other violent or criminal groups. To the extent that they consider the neighborhood their territory, participants must acquire special "abilities" to deal with these actors. They must develop ways to operate in a non-threatening and respectful manner that also earns them the respect of these groups. However, experiences of intimidation or assaults, for example, can cause fear, discouragement, and even withdrawal from community work. Psychological support is essential, in addition to the training and support during their work. If participants are

shown that they are not alone, they can more easily overcome difficult experiences.

Projects of social prevention can reinforce the social ties that transform geographical neighborhoods into social communities, especially when they emphasize the active participation of young people and adults. These projects strengthen local organization, enhance existing leadership, and promote new leaders. They also reconnect communities with local government and articulate their actions with other external organizations. Above all, in order to promote the work of young people in communities, it is vital to recognize the presence of these young people, their potential, and their desire to help. Incorporating the young population in community work is not only a way to work for the common good, it is also a way to reduce difficulties and insecurity in their lives, and a way to bring their dreams closer to a feasible level.

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