

NINE STRATEGIES TO PREVENT YOUTH VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Policy recommendations for the European Union

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ABOUT INTERPEACE

Interpeace is an independent, international peacebuilding organization and a strategic partner of the United Nations. Interpeace contributes to building lasting peace through inclusive and nationally-led processes of change. Since 2008, Interpeace has been implementing the “Public Policies to Prevent Juvenile Violence in Central America” (POLJUVE) programme in Central America as part of a partnership with national organisations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. To learn more, visit <http://www.interpeace.org/>

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NINE STRATEGIES TO PREVENT
YOUTH VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL
AMERICA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While violence in Central America is widespread and is a major concern for the majority of the population of the region, youth are particularly targeted and vulnerable, both as victims and perpetrators of violence. There is a number of risk factors for youth to become victims of violence: including family violence, discrimination, dropping out of school, inadequate attention for victims of violence, under- and unemployment, easy access to arms, alcohol and illegal drugs, exposure to crime and violent groups. Criminal justice systems which subject youth to inhumane conditions and lack comprehensive rehabilitation programmes are mainly affecting youth who have committed crimes. Marginalised youth — particularly those who live in urban communities without access to basic necessities — are at higher risk of being victims and perpetrators of violence.

Within the “Public Policies to Prevent Juvenile Violence in Central America (POLJUVE)” project, Interpeace, together with its local partners in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, carried out a multi-sector process of dialogue to propose public policies to prevent youth violence¹. The proposals developed priority strategies for state-initiated prevention at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The strategies at each level are complementary, interconnected and intended to address a full range of the factors associated with violence affecting youth, thereby contributing to ending its vicious circle.

These proposals were published² and received by key government actors in each of the three countries. They call for the adoption of a holistic approach to prevent youth violence and emphasise that the actions taken are effective to the extent that they are grounded in sound principles of youth and adolescent policy, such as respect for human rights; promotion of a culture of peace; inclusion and respect for pluralism; diversity; gender equality; youth leadership and participation. Although each country proposed interventions particular to each context, the essence of all three can be summarised in **nine basic strategies for preventing youth-related violence**.

This paper was produced in 2012 within the Initiative for Peacebuilding – Early Warning Analysis to Action Project (IfP-EW). This project, funded by the European Union, aims to develop and harness international knowledge and expertise in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

PRIMARY PREVENTION

1. Programmes and appropriate funding to guarantee fundamental rights linked to reducing youth violence: education, health and employment with a focus on violence prevention.
2. Promotion of youth development through arts, sports, recreation and community participation, which include non-violent conflict management skills.
3. Improvement and expansion of community-based, preventative approaches to public and citizen security.

1 The POLJUVE programme was funded by the Governments of Canada, Spain and the Netherlands.

2 The three public policy proposals documents are:

1. Interpeace (2011). *12 Strategies for the Prevention of Violence Associated With Adolescents and Youth*. Interpeace: Guatemala.

2. Interpeace (2011). *Building a Future of Peace*. Interpeace: El Salvador .

3. Interpeace (2011). *From Local to National Prevention*. Interpeace: Honduras.

These documents can be found on Interpeace’s website at

http://www.interpeace.org/index.php/publications/cat_view/8-publications/9-central-american-youth-programme?start=5

SECONDARY PREVENTION

4. Focused holistic intervention for especially vulnerable groups, such as youths who are homeless, substance abusers, victims of sexual and economic exploitation or who live in very violent communities.
5. Creation, promotion and funding of programmes for rehabilitation and social inclusion with members of gangs and other violent groups.
6. Promotion of holistic treatment of victims of violence, based on the principles of restorative justice.

TERTIARY PREVENTION

7. Improvement of criminal prosecution, better access to justice and guarantees of due process, human rights and prison security for youth in conflict with the law.
8. Creation and promotion of the use of viable alternatives to incarceration for youth accused and convicted of misdemeanours and lesser criminal offences.
9. Implementation of holistic rehabilitation and reinsertion programmes for young people involved in the justice system.

The paper concludes with recommendations to the European Union based on these proposals. The process through which they were formulated will further support programmes and strategies both at the bilateral and multilateral levels, preventing youth-related violence in the region.

YOUTH AS VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE

HIGH LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND CRIME ACROSS THE REGION

The Central America Northern Triangle, composed of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, has experienced both an increased awareness of youth issues, as well as improved legislative and policy support for youth rights and development. These positive advances have occurred within a context of almost overwhelming concern about the social violence affecting young people. The region is affected by a disturbingly high degree of violence and crime. Violence and insecurity is a major concern for the vast majority of the population.

YOUTH AS BOTH PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS

In a region where youths aged between 10 and 24 years represent more than 30 percent of the total population, youth are the main perpetrators and victims of violence. Teenagers and young adults, both men and women, are victims of physical, sexual, and psychological violence, neglect and social discrimination at home, school and in the community. They are also particularly vulnerable to the effects of the structural violence of inadequate education, healthcare, information and low employment at a critical stage in life when they begin to take on adult responsibilities as workers, parents and citizens.

YOUTH AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

The principal victims of criminal violence are young people. In 2009, for example, 40 percent of homicide victims in the region were between the ages of 15 and 29; the vast majority of them young men from poor urban areas. The greater risk for youth to become victims is partly linked to social disadvantages: young people who neither work nor study are at greater risk of joining or interacting with youth gangs. At the same time, youth are still developing their capacity to manage conflict without direct intervention from adults — a developmentally appropriate task — and one which is complicated by gender issues, exposure to violent contexts and a lack of effective public programmes to support youth development.

YOUTH AS PERPETRATORS

Youth are involved in perpetrating acts of violence and, as levels of criminal violence increase, so has the number of youths involved. Amongst the most alarming acts are the activities perpetrated by what have come to be known as *maras* (street gangs) and other types of gangs, most active gang members are adolescents and youths, although, in some cases, children under 12 and adults over 25 are involved. Besides youth or street gangs, young people are involved in direct violence related to rivalries between members of sport clubs and different schools, as well as student violence within schools, some of which has led to serious assaults and even homicides. In addition to serious violent crime, homicides, armed robbery and sexual assault, juvenile justice systems report that most young people who enter the system have engaged in a variety of unarmed property crimes and misdemeanours. The probability of a continued adult pattern of violence for youth offenders is directly linked to quality of intervention, treatment and the follow-up they receive in this critical moment of their development.

INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

Youths themselves report being both the victims and perpetrators of a variety of violent and aggressive behaviours which do not usually enter the court systems. These range from verbal insults, physical altercations and sexual harassment to cases of prolonged bullying. Often the effects of this kind of violence on the victims, offenders and witnesses are overlooked in a context of high rates of criminal violence. Although there is general public

outcry about a “lack of values”, there are few programmes designed to specifically address these kinds of interpersonal violence through teaching, using more effective, non-violent ways of interaction.

RISK FACTORS

It is important to remember that not all youth are at the same level of risk of violence. Some of these young people are more vulnerable and more socially disadvantaged. Large numbers of youths in the region live in generalised risk due to social exclusion and violation of their social, economic and cultural rights. Primary prevention strategies are appropriate for all youth facing these challenges. The structural violence which leads to social exclusion has very real consequences, which often put cycles in motion in which one risk factor leads to another. There are several factors which contribute to the likelihood that youths would be victims of violence or become involved in acts of violence. Naturally, the more factors a person or group of people face, the higher the risk. Secondary violence prevention focuses on specific interventions for youth particularly at risk and/or belonging to vulnerable groups.

A. FACTORS IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

Domestic violence is widespread in the region. Many families have been forcibly split up due to the migration caused by the urgent need to find employment, while those who seek work in their home countries have difficulty finding adequate childcare. Adolescents, in particular, often have little adult supervision. At the same time, a culture characterised by patriarchal dominance, machismo, authoritarianism, alcohol and drug abuse, and the tolerance of violence as a disciplinary tool has contributed to high levels of family violence and the exploitation and abuse of children within the home as both direct victims and witnesses to violence.

Very little of this violence is reported and documented: it is widely believed that the incidence of legally defined domestic or family violence is vastly under-reported. Therefore, official statistics only represent the tip of the iceberg; nevertheless, the numbers are alarming. In Guatemala, 23,721 cases of family violence were reported in 2008; in 21,432 cases, the victims were women assaulted by their spouses, partners, or ex-spouses. During the first quarter of 2009, Guatemalan courts reported 30,080 legal actions initiated due to family violence. In Honduras, more than 4,000 reports of child abuse and neglect are made each year. In El Salvador, where reporting has been notoriously low, 5,202 cases of domestic violence were reported to the government Institute for Women during the first nine months of 2009. In 2011, the Childhood and Adolescent Institute attended 1,154 cases of neglect and abuse, 89 cases of children or adolescents living on the streets, and another 62 cases of economic or sexual exploitation. Despite the serious levels of child abuse in the region, this type of violence is not often reported for reasons which include the difficulty for children to report abuse by parents or guardians and a lack of awareness and mandatory reporting laws which would involve other adults in reporting abuse.

B. RISK FACTORS AT SCHOOL, AT WORK AND IN THE COMMUNITY

Young people in Central America face two major obstacles to completing their education: access to schools and high drop-out rates due to economic demands and educational systems which do not meet the needs of young people. Many young people do not complete a high school education and drop-out rates in all three countries increase exponentially after children reach adolescence. In Guatemala, more than 204,000 children drop out of school every year. In El Salvador, children usually complete only six grades out of nine. The official overall illiteracy rate is 10 percent. In addition to family economic concerns and household duties (mostly girls), the fact that most schools do not have budgets for professional and vocational guidance programmes, and that existent technical/vocational programmes are either limited or outdated, increases the probability of leaving school before attaining a post-high school degree.

Violence is also common in the classroom: in Honduras, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that 44.5 percent of primary students had been abused one or more times per week by their classmates. 18.48 percent of the sample suffered abuse on a daily or nearly daily basis. Another piece of data worthy of attention is that, of the 465 children who were assaulted, 51.83 percent reported that their assailants were always or often accompanied by other children. Meanwhile, 15 percent of the children in the sample admitted to having taken part in a fight which pitted one group against another group³.

3 UNDP (unpublished). *Study on violence in schools in Honduras. Case of the Central District Schools 7 and 8, Honduras.*

School violence is another demonstration of the wider culture of violence which is deeply rooted in the region.

At school, we assault and beat up our classmates. At work, if someone doesn't do a job properly, the worker gets yelled at, and I feel that this is a form of verbal violence. And at home, at times our fathers hit our mothers or start beating us due to any little thing. (Interview with Salvadorian Student, El Salvador, 2009)

C. EMPLOYMENT

Directly related to the education situation are high levels of youth under- and unemployment. There are very limited opportunities for youth who want to enter the labour market and obtain a decent job. Although unemployment and underemployment in the region are high for all age groups, youth is particularly affected by age-related discrimination and a lack of formal preparation to enter the work force qualified, in order to attain better paid positions with good future career possibilities. According to 2006 figures, in Honduras, a total of 466,911 young people neither studied nor worked in 2006⁴. As a result, and only in Honduras, 80,000 people emigrate every year in search of work; of these emigrants, 60 percent are between the ages of 20 and 34.

When young people do find employment it seldom comes with a salary at the necessary level to start a family or to continue studying. The informal economy is flooded with young parents, especially young mothers, seeking to meet the minimal basic needs of their families. Employment in the formal sector seldom guarantees a living wage or fair working conditions for young workers desperate for experience, and labour laws are often not enforced in the region. Unskilled workers with little formal education are the most vulnerable, continuing the cycle which begins with limited educational opportunities.

D. YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Although it is recognised that participation in activities outside the home is of great value in the developmental process of young people, youth living in poor urban areas have few opportunities to become engaged in social activities, politics, sports and arts. In Guatemala, despite the fact that the Sistema de Consejos de Desarrollo Urbano y Rural [System of Urban and Rural Development Councils] (SCDUR) offers opportunities for young people to get involved, these are limited and often exploited for political ends.

Surveys have indicated that young women have especially limited access to opportunities to learn and express themselves outside of the home, work and school. Their participation in other activities is generally made difficult because of household responsibilities, restricted movement outside the home due to safety concerns, and a lack of interest in available activities.

E. UNSAFE COMMUNITIES

Every day in Central America young people are exposed to violence in their communities and on the streets through which they need to walk to work and to school. Communities with the highest levels of violence also tend to be those in which drugs, alcohol, firearms and illegal economic activity take place openly, and few, if any, alternative programmes for youth are available.

In some communities, youth is met with threats from a number of different sources. Honduran youth, for example, have faced an extremely high risk of violence from both criminal elements and illegal armed groups involved in hate crimes and extrajudicial executions. In El Salvador, the most recent extensive youth survey found that, in urban communities, youth was as likely to witness law-enforcement officers mistreating other young people as to witness fighting between gang members⁵.

The failure of the criminal justice systems in all three countries to consistently investigate and prosecute crime has led to high levels of impunity. This increases the risk of youth participation in crime if they no longer fear being caught, and increases the tendency to scapegoat or blame certain groups when no concrete evidence is forthcoming of who is responsible for a particular criminal activity.

4 Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2006). *Encuesta permanente de hogares [Permanent Household Survey]*. Spain.

5 M. L. Santacruz Giral, M. Carranza & Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (2007). *Encuesta Nacional de Juventud, Análisis de resultados [National Youth Survey, Analysis of results]*. San Salvador.

F. YOUTH IN CONFLICT WITH CRIMINAL LAW AND THE PRISON SYSTEMS

Youth who enter either the juvenile justice or adult justice systems in these countries should, in theory, be offered treatment and corrective measures for the factors which led to their participation in criminal acts. Unfortunately, they often face extreme hardship, violations of their rights and deprivation of their basic needs. This reality, instead of helping youths to deal with the issues which led to their participation in crime, in fact often leads to the solidification of patterns of violent behaviour and violent social networks.

The criminal justice systems in all three countries have had serious problems with impunity, violations of due process and abandonment of the prison systems as legally designed mechanisms for rehabilitation. The prison systems are confronted with serious issues, including overcrowding and safety, as well as a lack of qualified, well-paid staff. El Salvador faces the one of the highest overcrowding rates in the world in its adult prison system, with 25,000 inmates housed in a system designed for 8,100. Both juvenile and adult systems suffer from chronic deficiencies in basic infrastructure, which often leads to the illegal practice of housing minors and adults in the same facility, as well as mixing of those convicted of a crime with those awaiting trial. Prison staff members are often corrupt, and there have been reports of extortion committed by prisoners from within prisons.

Social rehabilitation programmes are scarce and lack mechanisms which promote a sense of responsibility in those convicted of a crime. The scope of educational programmes, work training, and sport, cultural, and recreational activities is limited. Prisoners spend practically all day without access to labour, educational or rehabilitation activities. This increases the likelihood of more criminal acts being committed within prisons and of prisoners repeatedly becoming offenders once they are released.

G. IMPACT OF CULTURAL VIOLENCE

The aforementioned factors are neither isolated nor the sole responsibility of individuals or groups. One of the lessons learned in the dialogue process in all three countries was the extent to which relationships based on violence or the threat of violence were so deeply entrenched that often individuals were unaware of the violence underlying their daily interactions. Historically, authoritarian states, institutions and families, which many link to a patriarchal structure, have desensitised citizens to the extent to which people's voices and will are not taken into account in the decisions which affect them. Young people are especially focused on the extent to which they are not "taken into account", are discriminated against and stigmatised simply for being young. Discrimination can be compounded by other factors, such as sex, poverty, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Mass media play a critical role in shaping cultural views, tolerance, placing blame, discrimination, objectification and deliberate neglect of certain groups of young people, often basing their economic viability on selling violence as entertainment from news programmes to internet games.

NINE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PREVENT YOUTH VIOLENCE

As shown above, violence in Central America is the result of underlying structural and systemic causes. Such deep-rooted violence can only be prevented if a holistic and inclusive approach is generally adopted by government institutions and civil society, with the support of the international community.

In El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, Interpeace and its local partners carried out broad consultative and dialogue processes, including leading social organisations, specialists, young people, and government officials, which led to the adoption of public policy proposals to promote and encourage the prevention of youth violence.

This section is a synthesis of the public policy recommendations presented in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in 2011. These recommendations can be classified through three main categories of prevention: primary, secondary and tertiary. At the primary level the strategies seek to address the generalised risk for youths to become victims and perpetrators of violence. At the secondary level, strategies are designed to target those groups and individuals facing multiple risk factors and who have already been either victimised or engaged in violent behaviours. At the tertiary level, strategies are designed to prevent recidivism and promote rehabilitation measures.

A. PRIMARY PREVENTION: BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK FOR PEACE AT HOME, SCHOOL AND IN THE COMMUNITY

Generally speaking, primary prevention refers to a set of social policies designed to improve the quality of life of adolescents and youth with a view to preventing their involvement in violent acts. Said policies correspond to the local population's basic rights, including education, health care, work, housing, recreation, safety, and other universal human rights provided for in national and international legislation.

1. Programmes and appropriate funding to guarantee fundamental rights linked to reducing youth violence: education, health and employment with a focus on violence prevention.

The right of adolescents and youth to **education** free of violence, and adequate to the needs of youth entering the workforce of a modern, global economy, is important to prevent violence. Moreover, accessible and universal education is critical to both violence prevention and preparing youth for its broader role in society. School programmes which teach and enforce non-violent conflict resolution and peer mediation provide mechanisms for addressing teacher-student abuse and harassment, and which include families and the surrounding community in addressing school violence issues, will be more successful in preventing violence and providing quality education.

Access to **healthcare** and information is critical to leading a full life. The inclusion of a violence-prevention focus in public healthcare can increase the wellbeing of the population in general. Adolescents and youth need sexual and reproductive health strategies geared to prevent teenage pregnancies and HIV/AIDS infections, and to be able to make healthy choices in becoming parents. When young people do become pregnant, healthcare professionals should be involved in providing holistic support and referrals for young parents on raising healthy children in violence-free environments. This age group also needs appropriate information and support for healthy lifestyle choices, especially with regard to alcohol, drug and tobacco consumption.

Employment is a fundamental issue for young people in the region. Youth seeks professional and vocational guidance, training and opportunities which would permit full participation in the productive life of their countries and enable suitable provision (now or eventually) for families. Decent jobs, with liveable wages and respect for fundamental rights, should be a priority for human development; they also are essential for halting the vicious cycle of exclusion and violence which affects so many youths.

2. Promotion of youth development through arts, sports, recreation and community participation, which include non-violent conflict management skills.

Healthy, well-rounded development for youth is strengthened enormously by engagement in activities outside of school and the home. Arts, sports and recreation, as well as community and political participation, are all excellent opportunities to develop leadership, self-confidence, and other skills and values which can prevent behaviours leading to delinquency. However, these programmes need to be consciously designed to address non-violent conflict management, prevent bullying and unfair competition, encourage participation from diverse sectors and avoid discrimination in order for them to be effective in preventing violence. Adult allies and mentors who model the values of solidarity, cooperation, tolerance, negotiation and consensus, and who truly value youth perspectives and expressions, are key to transforming activities which youth enjoy into opportunities to greatly enhance positive youth development and make a real contribution to a culture of peace.

3. Improvement and expansion of community-based, preventative approaches to public and citizen security, including holistic prevention of domestic violence.

States should adopt a holistic approach to prevention as part of a national public security policy. There is a need to create and implement situational crime-prevention strategies, victimisation-prevention strategies, community policing initiatives, and better controls with regard to firearms and the use and sales of controlled substances. Improving the quality of law-enforcement interactions with communities has multiple benefits for preventing crime and improving the quality of participation of the community in prosecuting offenders.

Especially important in this strategy is improving public trust in law enforcement, especially among vulnerable groups such as youth and women. Improved strategies for crisis intervention for domestic disputes, as well as strong inter-institutional coordination, are key to preventing domestic violence and protecting victims.

B. SECONDARY PREVENTION: FOCUSED APPROACHES FOR ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE GROUPS

The goal of secondary prevention is to prevent members of vulnerable groups from becoming victims of violent acts or committing them. Secondary prevention strategies are focused on intensifying the strategies of primary prevention with groups and youth who present a series of risk factors due to their personal situation, environment or decisions to join certain groups such as gangs.

This type of prevention is more focused and should be implemented at the community level, so it is necessary to identify and locate vulnerable populations through the use of participative diagnostic tools, community violence observatories and other non-stigmatising tools which will increase the chances of participation of marginalised or discriminated youth in programmes for secondary prevention.

4. Focused holistic intervention for especially vulnerable groups, such as youths who are homeless, substance abusers, victims of sexual and economic exploitation or who live in very violent communities.

Each context, both at national and local levels, is different. Prioritising on which groups to focus should be done through a participatory and consultative process which includes, but does not limit itself to, the perspective of law enforcement. These especially vulnerable groups include youths who are homeless, abandoned or neglected, substance abusers, victims of sexual and economic exploitation, children of prisoners, and youths in communities with prominent gang presence. In addition to restoring rights which may have been violated (see primary prevention), each group faces specific vulnerabilities which need to be addressed to avoid an escalation of their exclusion and risk of violence.

5. Creation, promotion and funding of programmes for rehabilitation and social inclusion of gang members and youth associated with other violent groups.

One group common to all three countries is at particular risk of escalated violence and participation in criminal activity: members of youth and street gangs. This strategy focuses on adolescents and youth who have just become involved in gang activity or on young people who have left or who wish to end their participation in violence or delinquency.

Most rehabilitation programmes have been carried out by private non-governmental organisations. These initiatives, in general, lack government backing and support, and address limited populations. Not only do they lack wider support, but local laws and police agendas often mean that attempts to organise activities and/or meetings with groups of gang-related youths are met with repressive measures. Without state recognition of rehabilitation processes, these youths continue to be treated as delinquent and subject to legal intervention. The best practices of these initiatives should be taken into account to create and strengthen intervention programmes based on evidence of successes in social inclusion and rehabilitation. The safety of participants and the restoration of their fundamental rights is key to keeping youth in these programmes.

Due to the very nature of youth gangs, in most cases, families and communities are also affected and involved; therefore, they constitute members of vulnerable groups and must be taken into account in other strategies.

6. Promotion of holistic treatment of victims of violence, based on the principles of restorative justice.

This strategy not only addresses the very real urgency of attending to the needs of victims of crime and violence, but also addresses the importance of proceeding in a way which contributes to strengthening the social fabric through reconciliation and restoration, involving both the offender and the community. Victims' rights are often lost in a criminal justice system which is inadequate in dealing with the magnitude of a problem. Many victims are re-victimised through the system, leading to a breakdown in confidence in institutions and in some cases lead to the victims becoming victimisers themselves. Victims who are also identified as potential

offenders, such as youth members of gangs or youth living on the streets, are often not treated at all, leading to a vicious cycle of violence which becomes increasingly difficult to break.

C. TERTIARY PREVENTION: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE, REHABILITATION AND SOCIAL INSERTION

Tertiary prevention refers to a series of strategies which prevent individuals in conflict with criminal law from becoming repeated offenders and from being involved in “revolving door justice”. This type of prevention encourages social inclusion and social rehabilitation of individuals who have been accused or convicted of a crime. For adolescents, the priority focus must be on improving the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in relation to juvenile justice.

7. Improvement of criminal prosecution, better access to justice, and guarantees of due process, human rights and prison security for youth in conflict with the law.

This strategy focuses on improving the capacity of the criminal justice system to prosecute crime through improved investigations and a reduction of cases lost due to mishandling, which will reduce wrongful imprisonment and impunity. The focus on due process and rights is important to this strategy, not only to obtain convictions, but most importantly to prevent violence against persons detained or incarcerated by the state. Youth is especially vulnerable to developing permanent resistance to authority when those authorities charged with carrying out justice violate young people's rights or subject them to traumatising environments. Respect for the rights of persons deprived of their liberty by the state also pertains to improving some of the most heinous conditions related to infrastructure, healthcare, and other basic rights which affect both those awaiting trial and convicted prisoners.

The security conditions in prisons have, with good reason, been heavily criticised due to high levels of corruption and neglect of adequate treatment of prisoners to reduce and contain violence and aggression. The focus on prevention, with regard to safety, is based on an acknowledgment of the importance of safety in the lives of inmates, as well as on the urgent need to create a new security model. Models for security should protect the physical and mental wellbeing of prisoners, visitors and staff, as well as prevent criminal activity or escape, which have been the primary focus of security protocols in many prisons.

8. Creation and promotion of the use of viable alternatives to incarceration for youth accused and convicted of misdemeanours and lesser criminal offences.

In compliance with articles 37 and 40 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adolescents especially need to be protected from the trauma and damaging effects of incarceration. Priority funding, training and community coordination should be invested in creating programmes which effectively allow youth to undergo treatment, attend school, and receive orientation and support while completing sentences for crimes and misdemeanours, without serving prison time. A restorative justice approach will improve chances of community acceptance and contribute to increasing public acceptance of “justice” through rehabilitation, not punishment. The judicial systems should be aware of and participate in the evaluation of the effectiveness of these programmes to provide incentives to use them as an alternative option to incarceration. For youth over eighteen, as local laws permit, the use of non-prison measures while awaiting trial should be prioritised, as well as alternative sentencing and early release programmes, to reduce the violations implicit in overcrowded prisons. Implementation of holistic rehabilitation and reinsertion programmes for young people involved in the justice system is needed.

Youth convicted as adults should receive treatment programmes which consider age, stage of development and the outside conditions to which young offenders will return.

9. Implementation of holistic rehabilitation and reinsertion programmes for young people involved in the justice system.

It is important that programmes focusing on the re-socialisation of youth who have been convicted of a crime should be expanded and improved. These programmes should take as their starting point the primary prevention strategies adapted to the context of the penal system and the individual needs of youth. Healthcare, for

example, should include treatment for addictions and health issues related to substance abuse. Schools should adapt programming which diagnoses and responds to the reasons why youth may have left school or not been successful in traditional school settings. Vocational training should focus on topics and spheres in which youth are interested as well as what would prepare young people for the labour market. In all contexts the adults responsible for implementing these programmes should be held to the highest standards of professionalism and receive ongoing professional support and training.

THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE

The European Union (EU) has an important role to play in order to support the adoption of a holistic approach to prevent youth violence and to further promote the strategies listed in the previous section.

While a broad variety of projects with a focus on youth are supported and funded by the EU on the bilateral level, there is also an increasing need for better coordinated actions at the regional and multilateral level, especially when addressing shared patterns of social violence, such as gang problems and domestic violence, and trans-border criminal activity, e.g. drug and human trafficking. This coordination will improve understanding of the different phenomena being addressed, as well as provide opportunities to share evidence of what works to prevent violence, generating a regional-level commitment to preventing the violence which affects youth in all three countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The strategies proposed in each of the three countries have been summarised into 9 strategic approaches at the primary, secondary, and tertiary level. This summary constitutes an umbrella policy proposal for preventing violence which affects youth in these three countries and derives from extensive dialogue, debate and consultation. Similarly, the risk factors summarised represent the consensus of analysis in the three countries regarding those factors which must be addressed in order to prevent and reduce violence. With this in mind we make the following recommendations to support prevention programmes with and for youth in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. Programming, both through non-governmental organisations or state institutions, should contribute to strengthening the capacity of the state to address the issue of youth violence. Projects managed by one agency, while focusing on only one or a few of the 9 strategies, should nevertheless demonstrate the capacity to coordinate and reinforce the effectiveness of those agencies implementing other strategies. Projects which focus on one area in isolation from the rest will not have the same impact as those who structure programming in recognition of two principles: the holistic nature of both the problem and the solutions, and the responsibility of the state to guarantee the security and other human rights of its citizens, especially those who are most vulnerable.
- B. Decisions on what and where to fund should be based on an overall assessment of which strategies have yet to be developed in such a way to provide models of effective prevention. Non-governmental institutions which develop such models should be given incentives to coordinate programming with government institutions and demonstrate how similar results can be achieved for larger populations via the state.
- C. Experience of effective prevention has shown that investment in people working with youth, and the development of models for training and programming, as well as rigorous protocols for dealing with violence and conflict resolution, provides a greater impact than funding of infrastructure. Nevertheless, in the penal systems of all three countries, the state continues to fail to comply with their own laws, as well as international treaties, in providing that infrastructure adequate to the basic human needs for persons deprived of their liberty. In this area, it is recommended that funding should support the state to enter into compliance and provide facilities appropriate for the rehabilitation and security of youth, especially those in the juvenile justice system.
- D. The institutions of the states in the Northern Triangle should be encouraged to develop more evidence-based prevention strategies as an integral part of overall security strategies. Cooperation and coordination which address security issues should also include explicit strategies to prevent violence and address crime. It is recommended to include monitoring and evaluation of effective prevention programmes and strategies in regional forums and exchanges in order to encourage movement towards ever more effective interventions to prevent violence before it occurs.

- E. Some of the most effective prevention is done via programming supported at the national level and implemented at the local level. It is recommended that programming should emphasise strengthening the capacity of local-municipal institutions and organisations to coordinate and implement prevention policies designed to address local issues. These policies should be developed in close consultation with all youth sectors in the municipality.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRIMARY PREVENTION

- A. As has been stated, primary prevention strategies are fundamentally youth development and human rights strategies which are important for the overall wellbeing of youth and society. Programme funding at this level, whether for civil society organisations or state institutions, does not necessarily need to be labelled “prevention”. However, including a prevention focus in youth programming is essential to contribute to the capacity of youth and society in general to address and correct the patterns and acceptance of violence as a means to resolve conflict.

In this sense, prevention can be an added component in education, health, sports and cultural programmes. Not all programmes in these areas are principally geared towards youth violence prevention. Nevertheless, funding the inclusion of components which build skills in non-violent conflict resolution empowers youth to make healthy and positive decisions, and develop youth leadership. The conscious effort to improve capacity to prevent violence in different contexts is a component that adds value.

- B. The international community can play an important role in encouraging an integrated vision of citizen security which includes and prioritises prevention strategies. The false dichotomy of security on the one hand and prevention on the other has led to ineffective programming and contradictory objectives between different state-sponsored efforts. Youth is not blind to these contradictions – in many cases young people are directly and negatively affected. Better coordination will only partially address the issue if there is not a clear vision of prevention as part of an integrated security policy which must include common conceptual frameworks in the various institutions, including those principally engaged in social development.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SECONDARY PREVENTION

- A. Each context requires the identification of the most vulnerable groups and those most likely to escalate violence, as well as where they live and with which other groups they interact. Programme funding in this area should encourage evidence-based proposals to work with particular groups in particular territories in a consistent way on strategies implemented in primary prevention.
- B. Victims' rights and consistent policy across institutions and agencies as to what constitutes appropriate victim support should be encouraged in any programming which deals with victims. In the case of youth victims, it is especially important that programming recognises and develops specific strategies to attend to young people according to their specific needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TERTIARY PREVENTION

- A. The overall importance of professional, functioning criminal justice systems firmly committed to respecting the law and human rights should be the focus of policy for crime prevention. A preventative approach, especially for youth, is integral to making security work for the citizenry. Funding for security/prevention programming should place priority emphasis on early psychosocial intervention which addresses risk factors with youth in conflict with the law. Especially important would be funding for alternatives to incarceration which would involve a network of institutions and organisations to successfully socially reinsert young people into society.
- B. More prisons will not reduce the number of young people involved in criminal activity. It is recommended that infrastructure support should be carefully assessed to help states enter into compliance with their own and international laws, with emphasis on creating structures which meet security needs for the inmates themselves, as well as provide appropriate environments for rehabilitation of prisoners and integration back into their families where possible.

INITIATIVE FOR PEACEBUILDING
EARLY WARNING

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