

THE FAILURE OF SOCIETIES TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

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From youth gangs in Central America, to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and off the Horn of Africa, to martial arts groups in Timor-Leste, to demonstrations turned violent in European capitals, youth violence comes in many different forms and affects many different regions of the world. What all of these and other cases of youth violence have in common is that they find their roots in a lack of opportunity and a feeling of socio-economic as well as political exclusion.



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Governments are struggling, and to a large extent failing, to respond to the needs and aspirations of their youth, the vast majority of whom are seeking little more than a productive place in society from which they can derive status, dignity and confidence in their future.

Youth is the segment of society that is most dramatically affected by violence globally – both as victims and perpetrators. More than half of all homicide victims and perpetrators globally are under the age of 30, and, in addition to being young, are overwhelmingly male.¹

It is difficult to estimate the true depth and scale of the impact of youth violence. Indeed it is intertwined with a host of other problems including the breakdown of health and welfare services, decreases in rates of employment and productivity, pressures on state budgets and a fraying of the social fabric at the level of the fami-

1. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2014). Global Study on Homicide 2013.

ly, the community or the nation as a whole. A U.S. study estimated that the cost to society of one youth turning to a life of crime and violence amounts to several million dollars – including actual costs and foregone economic contribution.²

Learning from the Central American experience

In South and Central America the homicide rate of male victims between 15 and 29 years of age is more than four times the global average for that age group.³ These exceptionally high rates of youth violence are largely owed to the existence of youth gangs and organized crime.

“Iron fist” security and policing approaches – known as *mano dura* – have been employed to stem the tide of youth violence in Central America since the early 2000s, but have proven largely unsuccessful. *Mano dura* has included measures such as making the membership in gangs a criminal offense, loosening the requirements for evidence of a crime, and harsh prison sentences. It has also led to indiscriminate mass arrests of alleged and real gang members by the military and police, often violating their rights.

While *mano dura* responded to public demand for a crackdown on the youth

2. Cohen & Piquero. (2008). New Evidence on the monetary value of saving a high risk youth. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 25, pp. 25-49.

3. UNODC. (2014). Global Study on Homicide 2013.

gangs – heightened by sensationalist media coverage – and was met with widespread public support, it has not to date achieved a significant reduction of violence. Rather than addressing the causes that drive youth into gangs and organized crime, repressive law enforcement has contributed to perpetuating the vicious cycle of youth exclusion and violence.

This dynamic is particularly strong in situations where the security forces act arbitrarily, dehumanize youth, and employ humiliating or even extra-judicial methods that increase the sense of injustice perpetrated against youth by the state. Furthermore, the conditions in over-crowded prisons as well as the group dynamics in the prisons have enhanced the internal cohesion of the gangs. Taking away young people’s dignity has only driven them deeper into gangs and organized crime where they have found opportunities to make a living for themselves and their families as well as to gain status and dignity.

Homicide rates in one Central American country, El Salvador, have plummeted over the last two years due in large parts to a truce between the two main youth gangs, an initiative conceived as part of a comprehensive and locally rooted strategy to reduce crime and violence. While only reluctantly accepted and later supported by the Salvadoran government, the truce and the associated negotiations



to eliminate violence from communities through agreements between the local authorities and the local gangs brought down homicide rates by 60% since its start in March 2012.

Despite these gains, the truce remains fragile and its resilience is perpetually tested in a highly contested political environment and in the absence of alternative economic opportunities. In a country in which 9% of the population depends on gang activity for its sustenance, extortion and other illegal income generating activities remain the mainstay of the gangs. Generating legitimate alternative sources of income for these young people and their

families must be given urgent and committed attention for the sustainability of youth violence reduction.

It is important to learn lessons from some of the contexts that have already experienced extreme forms of youth violence, such as Central America, to inform effective approaches to prevent the seeds of the phenomenon from growing into high levels of youth violence in other countries and regions. From 2007, Central American governments started to shift towards more holistic anti-gang approaches sometimes referred to as *mano amiga* or *mano extendida* (the friendly hand or the extended hand). However, the

newly adopted violence prevention policies across the region, the development of which Interpeace has supported, remain to be comprehensively applied.

The risk of youth violence increasing around the world in the years to come

Youth violence and the growth of gangs have been endemic in Central America. The root causes of this kind of violence, however, are present in a multitude of societies around the world and have in some cases led to other forms of youth violence. One reason to raise the alarm bell and urge

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the development of responses now is that a number of countries exhibit the conditions and early risk factors for youth violence including:

- Unemployment and under-employment resulting from a lack of economic development and economic instability
- Limited access to and/or poor quality education
- Weak and corrupt institutions at different levels and in different sectors (notably law enforcement)
- Weakened community ties and social fabric, often evidenced by stress on the basic family unit
- Experience of armed conflict and/or domestic violence
- Easy access to weapons
- Media stigmatization of youth
- Ossified political structures, including within political parties, thus closing official channels for the expression of youth priorities and preventing the rise of younger political leadership

These factors are conducive to youth feeling marginalized, deprived of opportunities, status and dignity as well as longing for social structure their communities are unable to provide.

In his Ted Talk on “the link between unemployment and terrorism”, Somali-born Mohamed Ali refers to the issue of youth during their critical transition from adolescent to adulthood being in a state of “waithood” in the absence of jobs and a purpose in life. This state with its marked lack of opportunity and hope makes young people vulnerable to the recruitment by radical violent groups (such as Al-Shabaab in the example that Mohamed Ali cites). He describes waithood as a gateway to youth violence.

In many countries, notably on the African continent but in other parts of the world as well, the already high percentage of youth will dramatically increase in the next years due to high population growth rates. Almost half of the world’s population is under 24 and the majority of those youth live in less developed countries.⁴ What is more, many countries that experience high population growth also suffer from a lack of economic opportunities and weak governance, which are precisely the circumstances under which youth violence has flourished in other places.

Even in the European Union one in three young people between the ages

4. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. (2011). Reducing the Involvement of Youth in Armed Violence. A Programming Note.

of 18 and 24 is at risk of poverty and social exclusion.⁵

We therefore see a dangerous mix of risk factors and conducive circumstances that could lead to a further increase of youth violence around the world in the years ahead. It may not reach such dramatic levels as in Central America in many places, but any society that is unable to offer youth a place in society where they feel included and respected, should be weary of the potential of youth violence. The Central American example foreshadows what could happen elsewhere.

Understand and act now

The potential growth of youth violence is serious but not inevitable. To prevent its further rise we must think less of protecting ourselves and more about prevention. It will require a concerted focus on the myriad of interconnected societal problems that need to be addressed and that are at the core of the phenomenon. When youth are included and supported in society, they can realize their productive potential and become constructive citizens.

The lack of understanding of the phenomenon of youth violence remains the biggest challenge. International efforts to identify effective strategies for youth violence prevention that are inspired by lessons learned, address the root causes of the phenomenon, and that can

5. European Commission. Youth Social Exclusion and Lessons from Youth Work.

Photo credit: Arnolito Gálvez for Interpeace



unlock the potential of youth as positive change agents, are both important and urgent.

One element of youth violence prevention is adapting governance systems so that they can engage with and for

this critical constituency in meaningful ways. Additionally, collaboration between civil society, the private sector, local government, and community groups is required to address the different factors that lead to youth violence. The key to youth finding a productive and

satisfying place in society is empowering and engaging young people in the political process as well as in economic and social life. Our future depends on young people feeling they have one.

***Scott Weber** was appointed as Director-General in 2005 by the then-Chairman (2000-2009) of the Interpeace Governing Council, 2008 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former President Martti Ahtisaari. In recognition of his record of professional accomplishments, his commitment to society and his potential to contribute to shaping the future of the world through his inspiring leadership, Scott was selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2009. Each year the Forum recognizes “the 200 most distinguished young leaders below the age of 40 from around the world.”

Interpeace’s work has also been personally highlighted by H.E. President Bill Clinton at the 2006 and 2007 Clinton Global Initiative meetings as an innovative approach to conflict prevention.

In 2010 Scott was nominated by the Governing Council, chaired by former President of Ghana, John A. Kufuor, for a second 5-year term as Director-General.

Scott began his career in the United Nations, first in disaster reduction and then in political affairs. Scott is a member of the Young Presidents’ Organization (YPO), The Chatham House (UK), the Steering Committee of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. He is also a member of the Advisory Boards of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) and the Center for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF). He holds a Bachelor’s degree in International Relations, Economics and Russian from Georgetown University. Scott is French and American.