

# Rebuilding Lives and Livelihoods

## Promising Practices for Working With Gang-Involved Youth

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August 2011

PEACEBUILDING AND ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT  
CASE STUDY



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## I. Introduction

### *The Source of These Promising Practices*

This learning paper summarizes what CRS and partners have learned about what it takes to work with youth affected by gang violence—and in particular, those youth that have been or are members of an active gang. Promising practices are drawn from the lessons of the *Jóvenes Constructores de Centroamérica* (JCCA)—or, Youth

“To reach them you must touch their emotional center.”

—Mauricio Figueuroa,  
Director, Quetzalcóatl,  
San Salvador

Builders of Central America—program that CRS, YouthBuild International (YBI) and six national partners carried out in Nicaragua and El Salvador. JCCA is the product of more than 30 years’ experience in at-risk youth programming. It combines the YouthBuild model—now implemented in 16 countries, including 272 urban, rural and tribal communities in the USA—and CRS Central America’s pioneering work in peacebuilding, savings and microfinance for youth.

## II. Program Description and Context

The *Jóvenes Constructores de Centroamerica* (JCCA) Project with financial support from *Entra21*,<sup>1</sup> JCCA reached 490 at-risk and gang involved youth, achieving an 84% graduation rate and 58% job placement success and 35% enrolled in school. Over 40% of participants were involved with gangs before the project. A follow-on study conducted by an independent team of consultants contracted by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) to evaluate the *Entra21* program concluded that “the Central American Youth Builders Project in Nicaragua and El Salvador can be considered a space for real and effective opportunities for youth with connections to gangs and at risk youth.”<sup>2</sup> In El Salvador, CRS has been able to expand the reach of this program to over 2,000 young people with USAID mission funding.

1. *Entra 21* funded CRS and YouthBuild International to pilot and validate the Youth Builders model in Central America with backing from the International Youth Foundation, IDB, Nokia and other private investment.

2. *Entra21, Follow-up Study financed by the International Youth Foundation published in December 2010*, p. 54

JCCA is an integrated 6-month program that builds youth jobs skills and life skills, trains them in a vocational trade and guides them through a community service and reconciliation experience. During the course of their participation young people will create permanent community assets (e.g. community centers, improved public spaces), and in the process acquire critical leadership, job preparation, and competencies for employment or enterprise development. Participants are aged 16-25 years and in most cases enter with at least six years of education. Depending on interest and aptitude, participants may learn a vocational trade, gain job readiness skills, access microcredit tools and products, get support to establish and develop a micro-enterprise, or receive assistance to re-enroll in formal education. All participants benefit from one-on-one attention and mentorship, including group therapy and individual counseling.

Violence prevention requires collaboration between families and the community to change attitudes and behaviors and establish a supportive environment for young people. JCCA effectively replaces the activities, orientation, and motivating factors behind negative behaviors with proactive, practical experiences that enable young people to create successful pathways. This approach offers lifestyle options that lie in sharp contrast to zero tolerance policies that penalize negative behaviors without building local capacity to rehabilitate and re-insert youth offenders into society.

The JCCA model includes the following strategies and curricula:

1. **Basic Education and Skills Training.** JCCA coordinates with vocational training institutes and universities to provide essential educational skills and certification to participating youth.
2. **Building Community Assets.** Participating youth build tangible community assets in an applied learning situation and under the supervision of qualified personnel. This activity focuses on developing work experience, discipline and preparedness while demonstrating positive and “constructive” images of youth.
3. **Employment and Enterprise Development.** An alliance with private sector businesses is developed in each country to generate employment opportunities. Opportunities for youth enterprise development

include industry-specific formation, financial literacy, savings groups during and continuing after the program, seed capital, and ongoing technical assistance.

4. **Life Skills.** Youth, families and communities develop skills for conflict resolution and restorative justice that allow young people to build and foster positive relationships and environments for violence and gang prevention.

### Context

Central America is one of the most violent regions in the world. The homicides rate has reached 47 per 100,000 people—and for young people aged 18 to 25 years it is 90/100,000.<sup>3</sup> In Central America much of violence among youth is attributed to gangs.

The gang phenomenon in Central America is fueled by longstanding animosity, perceptions of the enemy and deeply rooted fear. Though it has structural causes and international implications, at its heart are the painful personal experiences that it simultaneously feeds off of and produces.

Gangs' power is diffuse and highly local. It is not always possible to establish who has influence and where their territory lies. Multiple actors are involved and relationships are constantly shifting. Control over local territory is a key characteristic of gang behavior.

While gangs seek to control local territories and to have more presence in poor neighborhoods, not all poor are violent or join gangs. It is the subjective experience of violence, domestic abuse, fear and desire for revenge that are critical to understanding gang involved youth. Factors such as emotions and psychosocial experiences are independent of the structural factors that

“The project staff show there is a light for people like us. They give us the feeling that we are worthy and we can do it.”

—At-risk youth, JCCA participant

3. The world average is 9/100,000 and anything over 20/100,000 is considered an epidemic by the World Health Organization.

contribute to conditions that create violence.<sup>4</sup> Perceptions of animosity, enmity and deep seeded fear are key characteristics of the young people and their relationships. Most gang-involved youth come from dysfunctional families and have personally suffered abuse and violent incidents/threats. Joining a gang gives these young people a feeling of belonging, safety, validation, adventure and empowerment. For youth to disengage from a violent lifestyle, they must work through issues of grief and trauma, reconcile with their community, develop positive relationships and role models, accept personal responsibility and commit to change.

### III. Partnerships

The Jovenes Constructores program is implemented by a network of local partners. Local NGOs work directly with the youth to provide vocational and lifeskills training. In addition to the work of CRS' NGO partners, links to private sector employers, educators, community leaders, police officers and other key stakeholders are critical in supporting youth in the program.

The program uses an “ecological” framework to illustrate the importance of each stakeholder relationship and the role they play in the process of rehabilitating gang-involved and at-risk youth.

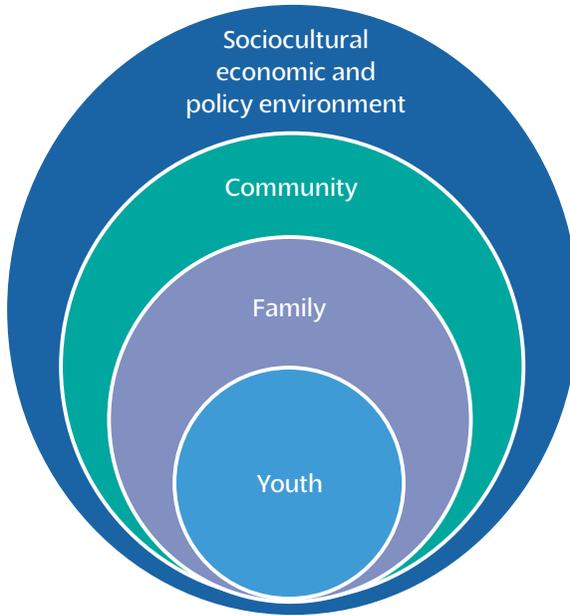
**Work with many community stakeholders.** The factors that influence the decision of a young person to join a gang operate at multiple levels: individual, family, peer and the larger environment, including school, the community and the local economy. Figure 1 illustrates the nested nature of the relationship between these different levels. Youth choose to stay in gangs for psychosocial and emotional reasons, and responses must address these different reasons and include the relevant actors and key stakeholders at each level.

**Ask each stakeholder to do what they do best.** Each stakeholder has a comparative advantage that can support youth within the project. For example, businesses provide jobs but cannot be expected to provide psychosocial counseling. While each stakeholder may play a different role, they all must understand and contribute to the overall vision and goals for the project.

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4. John Paul Lederach. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. 1998. 2007.

Figure 1. Multiple levels of risk affect a young person's decision to join a gang.



**Clearly define the scope of partners working together and the norms that will guide their interactions.** Each stakeholder must understand the rules that will guide their interactions, and the scope of the project. Regular interactions and updates regarding progress, challenges and security issues are also important.

**Realize that key stakeholders also have personal and subjective experiences of crime and violence.** There must be regular dialogue with all partners about the concerns for security, personal safety and progress in the project. For example, one private sector company was willing to hire youth from the project. They conducted interviews and those who were selected were invited into a room to take off their shirts to see if they had tattoos. The youth felt denigrated. Rather than exclude this company, CRS worked with the company to avoid any future recurrence of this practice.

**Establish security protocols prior to the project.** Partners must have a clear idea of what to do in case of threats, attempts to extort or other criminal behavior while they are working in difficult neighborhoods. All of the actors that are working with the youth need to share information, and work together to ensure security for staff, youth and partners.

## IV. Participant Identification and Selection

In order to work with at risk and gang involved youth, the identification and selection process is crucial. Not all youth are ready for this program. Youth with addictions will most likely fail without other prior support. Also all at-risk and gang-involved youth are not the same.

For the purposes of this case study an “at-risk youth” is one who is affected by gang violence, has a family member who is a gang member, lives in a community that has gang presence and are under pressure (social, psychological, or economic) to join a gang. A “gang-involved youth” is one who has been a member of a gang (as defined in his/her community). It is important to note however that not all gang involved youth are the same. The terms “hot,” “warm,” and “cold”<sup>5</sup> describe a youth’s level of involvement with gangs.

A “hot” youth is one who:

- Is a formal gang member (has been initiated or “jumped”),
- Is dependent on illegal substances,
- Continues to commit or orders the commission of serious crimes, and
- Is at the center of decision-making within the gang.

A “warm” youth is one who:

- May or may not have formally joined a gang (i.e. they may not have been formally initiated or ‘jumped’),
- Probably uses illicit substances,
- Has plenty of free time (due to unemployment or having dropped out of school) to engage in petty crimes, mainly stealing, as a way of generating income for the gang,
- Belongs to a gang that has been cut off from the decision making

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5. Based on the work of CRS partner Fundación Quetzalcoatl and in discussions with CRS program staff.

structure outside the local neighborhood (usually due to death, arrest and incarceration of the leaders) and by his or her own choice has opted to engage in activities outside the gang structure, or

- Provides support to gang members and the gang structure such as information, a place to hide out, food, money or other supplies that allows the gang structure to exist.

A “cold” youth (essentially youth at risk):

- Lives in an area heavily affected by gang activity or who has family members that are in a gang,
- Does not use illicit substances, and
- Does not engage in petty crime or violence.

A youth’s level of gang involvement or risk will dictate:

- Whether or not s/he is a candidate for JCCA,
- How the program will approach him/her,
- How the program curriculum is arranged,
- What steps will be taken to ensure security for the youth and staff,
- What areas of economic strengthening will be emphasized, and
- How follow-up will be done

JCCA has found the following practices to be promising:

1. **Recruit a key contact.** The first step to working in a gang-affected neighborhood is to recruit a key local contact. This person is well-linked to community and gang networks and can, through his/her reputation, ensure the safety of program staff.
2. **Conduct a community mapping exercise.** Key questions include:
  - What is currently happening among and within the gangs?

- What is the strength of the community compared to that of the gang?
- What changes are underway?
- Who are the target gang’s rivals and who are its supporters?
- Is there a gang whose leadership structure is weakening and who may be open to change?
- Is the young person “hot, warm or cold”
- What activities/opportunities might attract members’ interest?
- Who are the key leaders, and what is the history of the community?

3. **Build trust with gang members.** To be effective—and safe—organizations working with gang-involved youth must take the time to build a strong reputation in the community. Staff members need to develop trust with the gang. This can be done by spending time in the community and with gang members, talking and playing sports and building relationships.

Once there is a foundation of trust, staff can begin talking about the program to see if any youth are interested in joining. JCCA has found that word of mouth is by far the most effective promotion strategy.



*Young member of the Jovenes Constructors (Youth Builders). Silverlight for CRS*

4. **Identify windows of opportunity.** There is a clear difference between changing the behavior of a gang member and changing the structure that gives the gang life. In those communities where gang structures continue to dominate, the program may be able to work with a few young people, but will not be able to turn the tide of youth related violence. However, windows of opportunity for wider change may occur if the structure of the local gang or clique has been separated from gang hierarchies, and local leaders

are ready for a change. Personal circumstances among gang leaders and their members also open up windows of opportunity, such as the birth of a child, death of a gang member, and marriage.

5. **Reach out through peer networks.** In El Salvador, an entire clique stopped engaging in violent and delinquent behaviors and joined the JCCA program. Seeing clique members start micro-enterprises and participate in community construction work catalyzed neighboring gangs to get involved with JCCA and discuss quitting crime as well. Graduates who were gang-involved become key proponents of the program and are best-placed to do outreach to other at-risk and gang-involved youth. However this can often present risks. Risk factors increase if graduates are taken outside of their neighborhood or school into territories dominated by rival gangs. The approach works best when the promotion occurs with other youth that the graduates know within their own communities.



*“Bryan” (fictitious name), an ex gang member that lives in San Salvador. He shared his story of how he recently left the gang. He was a beneficiary of Jovenes Constructores. Silverlight for CRS*

6. **Maintain clear criteria for program eligibility.** JCCA only accepts “warm” and “cold” youth. Not only would admission of active gang leaders and members endanger staff and participants, “hot” youth are often not ready to commit to the change needed to enter the program. To be successful, youth must transfer their loyalty and sense of belonging from the gang, and invest it in their JCCA cohort and wider community. A gang-involved youth can only be enrolled in a program if s/he does all of the following:
- Commits to distancing him or herself from delinquent behavior for a set period before entering the induction/selection process,

- Distances him/herself from using illegal drugs; and
  - Together with entire clique, breaks ties with the wider gang structure outside the community and makes an effort to join the program.
7. **Make the program area a neutral and safe space.** It is important to obtain the agreement of police not to attempt to arrest or detain youth while they participate in program activities. Additionally staff are encouraged to look out for “infiltrators” from gangs who may not be sincere about participating in the program. The goal of the program is to enforce a ‘No Violence’ policy in all program and activity spaces.
8. **Negotiate safe passage for at risk youth.** If youth have to travel to program centers from other neighborhoods then it will be necessary to

### Partnerships for Social Support: The Nicaraguan Civil Police Force

The Nicaraguan model of partnership between communities and the civil police was recently highlighted in a regional summit for violence prevention. It has been credited with having protected Nicaragua from the development of organized criminal gangs. The civil police’s primary role is to build positive relationships, especially with vulnerable youth, and become trusted role models that youth can come to for help. To this end, law enforces and youth eat and play sports together and attend the same community events. The first time a young person engages in petty crime, the Code of Childhood and Adolescence (1998) mandates that a police officer visit her/him at home, discuss the situation together with the family and propose “second chance” solutions to avoid future delinquency.<sup>1</sup> In addition to inviting youth to join JCCA, the Nicaraguan Police are a key part of the Associations that support JCCA projects and provide follow-up support and monitoring for JCCA graduates.

1. National Assembly of the Republic of Nicaragua, Código de la Ley Niñez y la Adolescencia, Ley No. 287, Articles 76–89 (1998). Accessible at <http://www.conexiones.com.ni/files/68.pdf>

obtain the agreement of area gangs to allow participants to pass through their territory and carry out program activities undisturbed. To facilitate this, youth are encouraged to wear program t-shirts or other identifiers when traveling to and from the program site.

9. **Move activities into neighborhoods where the youth reside.** Gang-involved youth may not be able to leave their neighborhoods safely. To reach them, staff must be prepared to bring the project into the communities where the youth live. Conducting a community mapping exercise to understand the local gang and the local community dynamics is essential prior to working in the community.

## V. Induction

Staff interview each applicant and, if appropriate, their parents or guardians. Motivated youth who voice their aspirations for the future and express a willingness to commit to the program are invited to participate in an induction period. The induction phase is a 40-hour (10–15 days) trial period in which youth are exposed to the different activities that they will engage in during the program. Project staff use activities, interviews, tests and assessments to identify youths' skills, capacities and potential interests and assist them to set realistic goals. Each applicant is given "Four Challenges" to overcome. If prospective youth participants do not complete the four challenges they are not invited to continue. The four challenges include:

1. **A Personal Challenge.** Youth participate in a self-analysis and write a letter of commitment to follow the program's principles (e.g. non-violence, respect, timeliness). They are also encouraged to develop an initial life plan outlining their goals which is reviewed throughout the course of their training. In addition to this, they must show up on time every day during the induction period. Absences are not tolerated and is often an indication that they are not ready to commit to the program. If a prospective youth participant fails to meet the personal challenge, program staff often leave the opportunity open in the event that they are more prepared to try in the future.
2. **An Individual Employment Challenge.** This challenge introduces youth to the area of job readiness. In this challenge youth receive support to:

obtain an identification card such as a birth certificate, prepare a resume, obtain a job application from a potential employer, participate in a mock job interview, and drop off resumes at three businesses.

3. **A Group Community Challenge.** In this challenge youth participants are required to investigate, plan and carry out a short community service project with other youth from the program. This project is usually something that can be accomplished in one day such as a community clean-up project.
4. **A Group Enterprise Challenge.** In this challenge participants are encouraged to start a micro-enterprise using US\$5–10 of seed capital with three or four other youth participants. The exercise requires them to work as a team to create a product for sale, and track income, expenses and profits.

A reflection is conducted at the end of each exercise on what was accomplished, what worked, what did not work and how they felt about the experience. Youth that successfully complete the challenges are invited to become full participants of the project.

## VI. Life Skills Training

Gang-involved youth must go through *psychosocial healing* before attempting any training activity or seeking employment. These youth have experienced

Participating in life skills courses and technical training undoubtedly has led to marked changes in the attitudes and behavior of the youth graduates of the Central American Youth Builders Project. Most of the youth stated that they learned what self esteem was in life skills, and this led them to value themselves as people. With their feet on the ground, they learned of the possibilities and the limitations of their environment, to trust themselves, to set goals in life and to assume responsibilities.

—International Youth Foundation, Follow On Study December 2010

profound traumas in their personal histories that they must process, work through and recover from. The “hotter” a youth is, the more time is needed to heal. This healing process is intended to build confidence, self-esteem, and interpersonal skills such as communication, anger management and conflict resolution. To keep youth motivated, they need *continuous feedback and positive incentives*. Staff must facilitate opportunities for them to have an impact on others and support them to create tangible change. These achievements will offer youth incentives to build bridges between themselves and their community and to repair the broken trust between themselves and others. Some key aspects of the life skills training include:

1. **Focus on personal change.**

The JCCA process pushes youth to examine their life, identify the changes they want to make and then commit to them. A decision to change can be catalyzed by a youth realizing s/he is on the path to her/his goals, or it can come about through dialogue with staff and peers. If youth do not keep to the commitment letter they wrote during the Induction, they are given a one-week suspension and second chance to either recommit or leave the program.

### Youth-Led Development of Modules

JCCA implementers in Nicaragua do not have a structured life skills curriculum. Instead, youth suggest topics and work with staff to turn their interests into learning modules. When necessary, partner organizations are recruited to contribute to modules and strengthen them. In addition to designing modules, each youth follows his/her unique path through the program – instead of keeping to a set schedule, each individual decides which workshops and modules best fit her/his needs and attends only those. Thus participants design their own curriculum, tailored to meet their individual preferences.

- 2. Establish high expectations in a nurturing environment.** Youth need to be held accountable for their actions and decisions. The JCCA program provides youth with the opportunity to practice those skills necessary to live positive lives, commit to their goals, and overcome their fear of failure. Completion of multiple challenges throughout the program offers participants ample opportunities to gain confidence in their abilities, restore relationships with their family and community, and practice the soft skills needed to obtain and keep a job. Youth move through intense exercises with a small cohort of peers and dedicated adult mentors. This builds a close and supportive community and fills a critical social gap for youth whose family may be dysfunctional or absent.

“Barriers are all internal. Sometimes, you feel like when you fail it’s all over—but here we have learned that you can start over and be anything you want to be. I am completely, totally convinced of this. I am determined to learn from the mistakes I make.”

—Youth focus group participant, JCCA graduate

- 3. Participate in the Morning Circle.** Each morning, the program begins with announcements, affirmations of leadership, and a general check-in on how everyone is doing and feeling. Staff place faces with expressions of happy, sad, angry, or frustrated for example and youth gather near the ones they most feel connected and verbally express how they feel. This exercise reinforces recognizing and expressing emotions and dealing with them. Any opportunity of showing positive leadership by youth is mentioned and affirmed publically with the whole group. Motivational music may set the stage and two youth are asked to lead brief warm up exercises for the whole group. In just fifteen minutes, youth engage in leadership, check in with everyone else, and get energized for the day.
- 4. Create a family Tree and Social/Community Timeline.** Youth draw and present a family tree that highlights events and relationships important

to them. This helps youth to conduct a self-analysis and is a diagnostic tool for social workers. Youth engage with family members to fill in blanks in the family tree. Timelines can be transformed into a mural in a public place and increase community pride.

### **Training on Law, Rights and Responsibilities**

Gang-affected youth face injustice, corruption, exploitation, socioeconomic inequality, stigma, family dysfunction, hopelessness, and the constant threat of insecurity and violence. Effective programs help them find their internal center or focus and regain control, and dignity in their life. JCCA teaches youth about their rights, the laws and policies that govern them, and supports them to design and carry out advocacy activities. It also places emphasis on restorative justice in terms of assuming responsibility for one's behavior. Violence and criminal acts not only break the law, they also do harm to people. Youth learn constructive ways to assume responsibility, repair harm done and restore relationships. Being a leader in the program means taking responsibility for what happens in your own life, the life of your family, your community and the program. In other words, youth are pushed to accept responsibility rather than externalize it by blaming others.

5. **Create Individual Life Plans.** Youth identify their short and, eventually, long-term goals, barriers, strategies and strengths. As they progress with life skills development, youth move gradually into job readiness training (including goal-setting, keeping to a schedule and handling adversity), vocational training, educational support and micro-enterprise development. During the program they set daily, weekly and monthly goals. In order to graduate at the end of the program they must have six, twelve and twenty-four month goals.
6. **Retreats and Reflection Days.** For reflection and healing exercises, including group sharing and storytelling outside the community, often

in a rural retreat center offers a change of scenery and opens the door for more profound change. Reflection days may be led by religious leaders and emphasize sharing, forgiveness and spiritual health.

7. **Mandatory Soft Skills**

**Modules.** Conflict resolution, communication, stress management and leadership are mandatory modules to provide soft skills youth need to stay in jobs or persevere in their own enterprise.



*“Pablo” is a ex gang member that became an important actor of Jovenes Constructores (Youth Builders). He has seen his community change from a dangerous gang war zone where many young men lost their lives, to a much peaceful place. He sits in front of the community’s sports camp.*

8. **Arts Therapy.** JCCA has had great success using arts therapy to reach youth and engage them in individual and

group healing. The art is frequently tied to personal and social history. Murals of the history of the community are created that tell the story of the community and help youth place themselves in a larger context and understand the forces that shape their lives, while creating something truly beautiful for all to see and share.

9. **Provide group and individual counseling support to move beyond abuse.**

Many vulnerable youth have been in abusive situations and need to recover from the resulting issues in order to move into a healthy adulthood. Staff should monitor youth for signs of abuse and, if an incident has occurred, refer the youth to appropriate support. Staff may choose to visit the youth’s home to speak with parents and offer counseling and training in good parenting.

10. **Link emotional healing to opportunities for change.** JCCA’s philosophy seeks a balance between allowing youth their personal freedom and requiring them to assume personal responsibility for their actions. Some promising tools include:

- **The Eight Keys of Excellence:** JCCA in El Salvador is integrating the 8 Keys of Excellence character education program that

guides young people toward a positive future full of confidence, motivation, creativity, team work, leadership and valuable life principles.<sup>6</sup> The eight keys are

- **Integrity.** Match behavior with values
  - **Failure Leads to Success.** Learn from mistakes
  - **Speak With Good Purpose.** Speak honestly and kindly
  - **This Is It!** Make the most of every moment
  - **Commitment.** Make your dream happen
  - **Ownership.** Take responsibility for actions
  - **Flexibility.** Be willing to do things differently
  - **Balance.** Live your best life
- **Hats of Different Colors:** Youth learn that they can and should change hats (emotions) depending on the situation, and they practice identifying which colored hat is appropriate at which times.
  - **Masks:** Youth practice playing different roles (involving language, dress, actions and attitudes) depending on the situation and their audience. Youth often have difficulty working with people they don't know or situations that are unfamiliar. Gang-involved youth frequently define anyone who is not a gang member or warrior as the other. They learn to understand that interacting with others requires different masks or styles depending on the person or circumstances e.g. people often dress and speak differently at work than they would at home or with their friends. This allows young people to engage with others beyond the gang and to overcome stereotypes and fear of others and to feel more at ease outside their usual comfort zone.

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6. See [www.8keys.org](http://www.8keys.org). Many YouthBuild programs in the US have adopted this program.

### **Stop Discriminating! Youth Advocacy in Managua**

JCCA participants in the Jorge Dimitrov neighborhood of Managua were tired of their community's bad reputation preceding them. Media outlets only covered negative stories like homicide and failed to report on the good things that youth were doing to make Jorge Dimitrov safer and more prosperous. Potential employers rejected their applications once they saw their address. In response, youth took to the streets with a large banner that read "Stop discriminating against the neighborhood!" They held up traffic and kept their protest up for one day, achieving media coverage and greater awareness throughout Managua.

11. **Maintaining Discipline.** All staff including vocational trainers, literacy educators and others must all understand the disciplinary system. The program practices restorative justice to assume responsibility for behaviors, repair damages and restore relations. Clear expectations and guidelines must be maintained by all staff and youth participants.

## **VII. Community Service and Reconciliation**

In order to break the cycle of violence, youth need to address the harm they have created in their communities and begin building themselves through a new psychosocial support structure.

To facilitate this, one of the lynchpins of JCCA is a youth-led community service project. Implemented mid-way through the program timeline, this activity transforms the relationship between gang-involved youth and their community. It provides youth with an opportunity to:

1. Practice their new vocational skills (e.g. construction, carpentry, painting),
2. Improve their life skills,
3. Repair relationships with the community,

4. Reduce stigma and discrimination in the community,
5. Develop social entrepreneurial skills,
6. Create something of social value,
7. Increase their image, confidence and self-esteem,
8. Link to community stakeholders that can assist them, and
9. Address and debunk gender stereotypes.

**Construction of Physical Infrastructure**

Youth participation in the building of community infrastructures helps to increase community confidence in the project. In Managua and in San Salvador the youth won the confidence of the population and were seen as productive members of the community with skills that could help to contribute to the development of the community. The perception in the community was that youth participating in the JCCA project had transformed positively after the project. Community members noted that youth relationships with other youth and with adults in the community had changed. Some examples of community services include building community centers, rehabilitating parks, restoring school infrastructure and repairing computer centers.



*A community youth practices his break dance moves at a community kiosk constructed by volunteers of Jovenes Constructorres (Youth Builders), in San Salvador, El Salvador. “People say Atlanta was dangerous, now its all right,” he explains. Silverlight for CRS*

“During the community project, we got thanks and recognition from the community. I learned that there is no point worrying what others do, you have to answer to and respect yourself.”

— Youth focus group participant, JCCA graduate

Promising practices in conducting an effective community service project include:

1. Procure media coverage to celebrate the project's success,
2. Encourage non-traditional gender roles (e.g. young women do construction work),
3. Assess project site for security issues (e.g. to ensure it will be safe for youth coming from other neighborhoods, keep materials safe from theft),
4. Ensure the youth engage community leaders, and
5. Carry out an internal environmental impact evaluation.

## VIII. Youth Employment and Enterprise Development

When working with youth in gangs, JCCA speaks of “licit income generation” rather than “finding a job.” Most gang-involved youth have an income—just not a legal one. JCCA pushes youth to hold themselves accountable for the effects they have on others. Youth explore what it means to live safely, without fear, and in a way that makes them and others proud. Through life skills training, group reflection and one-on-one mentoring, youth come to accept that while it is necessary to have a viable livelihood, it is just as necessary that that livelihood is licit, safe, and does no harm to others. Personal change and social responsibility are at the heart of economic strengthening.

**Barriers to employment and enterprise development have as much to do with personal perception as with hard skills.** At-risk and gang-involved youth face significant barriers to salaried and self-employment. Limited access to education and vocational training combined with being raised in situations of socio-economic marginalization, has led to most of these youth lacking job seeking and job keeping skills. Moreover, youth-friendly microfinance services are scarce and most disadvantaged youth lack adequate entrepreneurship skills. Moving beyond their personal comfort zone is often the first and biggest hurdle. Relationships with family, peers and community have a big influence on how the youth see themselves

and what they are willing to do in terms of work. Stigma is another hurdle as employers are deeply wary of hiring youth from gang-affected neighborhoods. The scarcity of opportunity paired with persistence of negative public perceptions has and continues to lead to disillusionment, permanent disengagement from formal employment, emigration, and the attractiveness of criminal activities as a survival or coping mechanism.

Entrepreneurship may suit gang-involved youth better than formal employment because:

- Unemployment is high, particularly in gang-affected areas,
- Youth with gang ties may be unable to commute safely out of their neighborhood,
- Youth may already have entrepreneurial skills and aptitudes developed through past illicit activities,
- Youth may have a low level of formal education,
- Youth's preferred behaviors and norms may not fit into a corporate environment, and
- Stigma and discrimination often block youth from formal employment.

Each youth in JCCA chooses a vocational training field and then works with JCCA staff to assess his/her aptitudes and interests for either the job placement or entrepreneurship track.

### *Job Readiness Training*

Preparing youth to search for and secure a job requires changing their lifelong habits. Gang-involved youth, in particular, do not come from a society where timeliness, professional attire and personal grooming are "normal." Many have never been socialized to avoid confrontation or be diplomatic and circumspect. Effective job readiness training prepares youth to enter mainstream society for the first time. Workshops help youth role play and practice interviewing. The youth speak with human resource representatives of existing companies, and JCCA graduates who have been

successfully employed. They learn what to expect in the recruitment process, how to behave with coworkers, how to write a resume, and how to search for and think critically about job vacancies. As part of their informal training, program rules require them to wake up early, shower, comb their hair, and arrive on time.

The program models expectations that youth will experience in the work environment. At least one day a week they are expected to dress professionally in order to get used to wearing workplace appropriate clothes. In El Salvador, programs have implemented a daily time sheet so that youth track their on-time arrival, hours worked, activities, and work related attitudes.

At the same time, JCCA works with the private sector to advocate for youth rights. Youth who come from gang-affected neighborhoods or have scars or tattoos face enormous stigma and discrimination in the workplace. The address of their residence can prevent them from getting an interview. Their appearance can prevent their being hired—and even if hired, prejudice from supervisors and coworkers can make working life unbearable.

JCCA has identified the following promising practices:

1. **Have a dedicated Job Placement Specialist on staff.** The job placement specialist should be involved with the youth throughout the course of their training. By knowing them well, s/he can continually assess their capacities, interests and needs and tailor their training accordingly, working with them in a spirit of collaboration and trust. To refer youth to appropriate jobs and internships, s/he maps out what employment opportunities exist based on the youth's skills and interests. The Specialist also builds partnerships with enterprises, organizes job fairs and assists youth to obtain the legal documents they need for employment. It is essential to work closely with each youth to identify any unexpected barriers to employment.
2. **Do a market assessment.** Youth are more likely to find jobs if their training has been informed by what the private sector seeks.
3. **Provide financial support for internships and the first weeks on the job.** Many youth are unable to pay several weeks' of transport

and lunch costs. Moreover, families can oppose their children doing unpaid work, especially if it means neglecting housework and work in family-owned enterprises. Covering youths' basic expenses until they get their first paycheck or finish their internship often makes a difference.

4. **Provide personal coaching.** Staff should accompany youth to their job interview, visit them at work, and call them frequently in the first weeks to help them trouble-shoot. JCCA monitors youth for three months and may require companies to produce written confirmation that the youth is still employed.
5. **Cast a wide net.** Look to NGOs and government offices as well as private enterprises for work experience opportunities. Do robust sensitization and win support for helping youth. Sensitize private enterprises to youth issues and develop a database of partners who do not stigmatize against gang-involved and at-risk youth.
6. **Keep internship and employment expectations realistic.** Most internships do not develop into fulltime employment for youth. Encourage youth to appreciate them for the work experience and networking opportunities they provide. Also, keep in mind that not all youth may want to have a job. Youth may be unable or unwilling to adjust to a work environment. Counsel youth before investing the effort in internships and job placement, and consider providing basic entrepreneurship training to all youth, in case they change their mind later.
7. **Link job readiness training to life skills training.** The biggest barriers to youth finding employment include: lack of self-confidence, irresponsibility, poor discipline, lack of motivation, and weak interpersonal skills. Job readiness training must build on and complement life skills work from the start of the program. Using the program to model workplace expectations allows youth to practice and gain confidence in critical soft skills throughout the program, making them better prepared for the workplace. Only youth that consistently show up on time and are not absent from the program are likely to

replicate these behaviors in a job setting. If they cannot perform these behaviors in the program, they will not perform them in their jobs.

### *Entrepreneurial Training*

JCCA focuses on opportunities, not weaknesses. Gangs have many negative aspects, but they do conscribe youth into roles wherein they may learn leadership, teamwork, collaboration, delegation, loyalty and other transferrable skills. Youth can build on these skills to form entrepreneurial groups with their own micro-enterprises. Having control over where, when, how and with whom they work, gang-involved youth are more likely to invest in their small businesses and see them grow.



*Youth from high-risk communities are able to learn valuable skills to prepare them for employment opportunities or to manage their own enterprises. Silverlight for CRS*

In JCCA experience, entrepreneurship training is practical—the more hands-on the better. Youth want something tangible, an output they can see and touch. They want to move quickly, learn a lot all at once, think creatively and dream big.

### *Simulation*

JCCA starts early, introducing youth to micro-enterprise development during their 15-day induction period. As part of their Four Challenges, youth do a market analysis of their neighborhood and invest five dollars (either their own money or provided by JCCA) in purchasing inputs and creating a product to sell locally. They follow up with a group reflection and, if they did well, a written aptitude test and interview to further test their skills and interest in the entrepreneurship track.

### *Link Community Service to Entrepreneurial Skills*

The community infrastructure projects also teach key social entrepreneurship skills: problem solving, teamwork, creativity and perseverance. These same

skills are the ones needed for entrepreneurs starting up a business. JCCA helps transfer skills learned in community service projects to development of youth enterprises through reflections with the youth on the skills they learned. In addition to the simulation, JCCA trains all youth on basic business principles and encourages vocational training students to sell their products after class. Given the challenges of the job market, all gang-involved and at-risk youth should get a solid grounding in business development skills. Regardless of expectations, they may need them in the future.

### *Financing*

Gang-involved youth may have trouble accessing business financing due to the absence of:

- Youth-friendly products and services,
- Institutions willing to lend to youth,
- Family members or guardians willing to co-sign,
- Collateral, and
- Mandatory legal papers, including identification (youth with a history of using fake documents may not be willing to go on record)

JCCA encourages non-formal financing by providing an average of \$200 in seed capital to graduates able to present a viable business or investment plan and defend it in front of a committee of staff and stakeholders. If feasible, JCCA seeks supporting signatures from family members. Funds must be spent within three days and financial reports and receipts submitted to staff to ensure that the funds were used according to the needs specified in the business plan. Some other promising practices include:

- Youth business groups that pool their savings and, after re-investing profits, consider internal lending
- Providing the initial seed capital of in-kind goods rather than cash

### The Best Soy Burgers and Fried Chicken in San Salvador!

A successful brand name, *Sabor Amigo*, partnered with JCCA to:

- Train youth to prepare franchise-quality dishes;
- Supply youth with low-cost condiments to use in their recipes;
- Calculate and track profit
- Provide seed capital (\$30) for youth to start their own sales ventures.

As part of their entrepreneurship training, youth started their own micro-enterprises to make and sell *Sabor Amigo* dishes. Over three Friday mornings, a group of 25 youth learned a different recipe (fried chicken, soy hamburgers and chilidogs, and sausage); that same afternoon they took on the challenge of selling the food they had made that morning. After the training period ended, youth had the option of continuing the partnership or returning the seed capital and seeking a different opportunity.

- Prioritizing relationships over investments—staff grant funding after assessing the group’s dynamic and ensuring transparency and a shared feeling of justice.
- Keep seed capital in line with capacity to pay

### Monitoring and Accompaniment

Micro-enterprises most often fail because:

- Youth (or their families) have few resources and need to use business funds for their personal expenses,
- They are unable to prevent, trouble-shoot or manage the problems that arise,

- They have false expectations about what it takes to manage a business, getting discouraged easily, or
- They start too big, taking on too much risk for the amount of experience they have.

After graduation, JCCA staff visit youth at least every 15 days to observe the business, review the account books, give advice and provide encouragement until the youth's business is running smoothly. In addition to enterprise-related follow-up, JCCA maintain a support network for graduates. This can be informal visits and meals from staff passing through the neighborhood or visits from the community "alliance" (including neighbors, police and other community members). Graduates are welcomed to join non-JCCA activities at the project site, including arts, culture, sports and community activities.

## IX. Gender

Most gang-involved youth are males, and JCCA program participation reflects this. Sex balance among cohorts of at-risk youth differs due to:

- **"Gendered" trades.** Cultural stereotypes of which jobs are "for women" and which "for men" determine enrollment to some extent (e.g. a center offering training to be a cook or cosmetology does not have many male participants). In response, all aspects of the program emphasize gender awareness training. During the community service component, for example, women and men do construction work and then may prepare their meal together. Staff model gender equality and life skills workshops encourage youth to challenge one another and reflect.
- **Safety.** Parents, husbands and boyfriends can be reluctant to let young women leave the safety of the home. For this reason JCCA negotiates safe passage with local gangs and maintains basic security precautions on-site.
- **Household responsibilities.** Housekeeping and child care responsibilities may prevent young women from having the free time to join an economic strengthening program. The best response is as communities hear of the program's effectiveness and see successful

graduates more young women will be allowed to enroll. To help women juggle their responsibilities, young mothers are welcome to bring their small children to the project site during trainings; staff work with them to find suitable childcare options.

### Youth Speak Out against Gender-Based Violence in Nicaragua

JCCA participants in Managua decided to take a stand against gender-based violence in their community. To sensitize their neighbors and make gender discrimination socially unacceptable, they organized a day of protest in which they collected and destroyed albums of music that contained lyrics with negative messages about women and homosexuals, or that glorified violence.

## X. Conclusion

The JCCA program has identified numerous promising practices for working with gang-involved youth. Working with at-risk and gang-involved youth is a dynamic process that requires a thorough understanding of the context, the youth, the communities, and involves multiple actors with clear yet distinct roles. These practices are not yet consistently applied across all programs but are the result of conversations and surveys with youth involved in the program, partners and CRS staff. CRS has found the practices shared in this case study to work in addressing individual youths' psychosocial and emotional issues, repairing their relationships and engaging in licit income generating activities.

The following is a summary of key lessons learned that are not found in the rest of the document.

1. **Understand the youth and recognize that youth in gangs are not homogenous** and they are extremely fluid and fast changing. The power dynamics in a local area change if someone is arrested, killed, deported, or if new actors enter a neighborhood (i.e. drug or gun sales, etc.). The differing temperatures (hot, warm, cold) reflect this as well. There is a huge diversity within the concept of "gang-involved"; each person

and his/her story are unique. Understanding each youth within his/her context makes it possible to:

- Identify and analyze what resources the youth has and how those can be used,
- Identify gaps in and opportunities for family and social support,
- Focus on opportunities rather than weaknesses,
- Assess the level of gang involvement, and
- Address protection issues.

2. **Hold youth to the same expectations** as others in the program. There is not a separate JCCA for youth in gangs. This principle is important in terms of non-discrimination and stigmas as well as a leveling up of social norms. By interacting with other youth and more importantly staff who model the sorts of behavior, attitudes, dress, leadership, and service, that youth need to ensure a better future, youth in gangs are immersed in an environment that allows them to make this transition.
3. **There are different windows of opportunities** with youth that are gang involved regardless of whether or not they are hot, warm or cold. The local group's decision to break with the outside gang structure, the birth of a child, marriage or establishing their own family, incarceration, exhaustion, illness, death of a close family member may all trigger windows of opportunity to be able to intervene and create spaces for change. The key is having those programs in place when those windows of opportunity open up.
4. **Personal change and social responsibility are at the heart of livelihoods.** At risk and gang involved youth carry stigma, and psychosocial and emotional trauma which inhibit their ability to be successful. Addressing these issues is as important as vocational training, job readiness or developing a business plan.
5. **Staff training and care is critical to serve this population.** In order to better focus on each youth and her or his individual circumstances,

implementing partners should train all staff in mentorship and case management, keep a clinical psychologist on staff and complement group therapy with individual counseling. JCCA maintains a high staff-to-youth ratio of 10 to 1. Staff also need to have ongoing training, time for learning, and spaces for healing and getting out of the thick of things.

6. **Foster ongoing learning.** JCCA has the practice of meeting with implementing partners once per month to discuss a single issue for example enterprise development. Partners share their experiences, challenges and what is working or not. Lessons are gleaned and applied. These sessions last no more than 3 hours.
7. **Partnerships with a wide range of actors** from communities, police, municipal actors and private sector employers are key to success. This is an unusual array of actors, often working together for the first time. For each to understand the program, its goals and the importance of the each other's roles are important to have a functional network.





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