

FOCUS ON EL SALVADOR

OUTREACH CENTERS BREAK THE PULL OF GANG LIFE

LOURDES, El Salvador—Gang members aren't allowed inside the youth outreach centers USAID helped establish in El Salvador—but they do drop their kids off to join in the activities inside.

Such is the pull—and the promise—of the outreach centers located in the middle of some of the toughest neighborhoods in the country.

"I was walking around with an active gang member and I asked him if he was going to the center," said Juan José Hernández of Creative Associates International Inc., which is carrying out the USAID-funded project. "He said, 'No way, I am from the street.'"

That same gangbanger, however, insisted that his 3-year-old would some day attend. "That really touched me," Hernández said.

The outreach centers offer refuge from gang life and opportunities for educational and recreational activities. There are five in El Salvador, part of a network of 25 centers here and in Guatemala and Honduras.

Participants are between the ages of 9 and 21, and are either ex-gang members (gang recruitment can start as early as age 7) or children who are at risk of joining a gang. Each center provides classes such as: information technology, computer literacy, crafts, baking, job training, career advice, English, and music. They are also a place to hang out.

"Our goal is that this is a second home for them, where they can learn, have fun, express themselves," said Roberto Martínez, 29, the youthful coordinator of the Lourdes Outreach Center. "Sometimes we need to be their fathers, uncles, older brothers."



Roberto Martínez is the coordinator at El Salvador's Lourdes Outreach Center, which gives local children a place to go and an alternative to gang life.

The Lourdes center is part of the Regional Youth Alliance program, a joint effort between USAID and the Central American Integration System, or SICA, started in 2008 to address the gang problem.

Each center costs about \$18,000 a year for the salary of a single coordinator and operating costs. The community furnishes the center's home—usually a church or unused building—that

should be no farther than a 15-minute walk for the young people who will use it. Teachers at the centers are all volunteers, mostly local community members and university students.

Close to 90 percent of the community partners in the outreach centers are faith-based since religious institutions are widely respected, even by gang members.

Salvador Stadthagen, the Regional Youth Alliance program director, said that "in these communities that have poverty and insecurity, which is a terrible combination, you come to realize the institution is churches."

Gang life is like a prison, Stadthagen said. Once kids join, it is hard to step back with baggage like wicked reputations and larger-than-life tattoos. And many don't want to go back to their pre-gang lives.

Gang members live fast, have money, and demand respect—even if they get it through executions and extortion. Some estimates suggest there are at least 25,000 gang members in the country and several thousand more outside the country, primarily in the United States.

Family life is not an alternative for some. UNICEF estimates 70 percent of children in El Salvador have been abused in their homes. Add in poverty, a condition that describes about half the country's children, and

"the pull for the gang member is very strong," Stadthagen said.

Henry Monroy, 17, is a volunteer at the center and also attends some of the classes there. In April, he plans to enroll in a distance learning program that will allow him to complete his secondary education—he is at the seventh grade level now. He is using the Internet at Lourdes to download study materials.

His story is similar to that of other young people who were at the center on a sunny Saturday morning.

"I didn't have anything fun to do," Henry said. "I have many family problems and then I learned about this center."

"It's beautiful; it's like a second home," he said.

Despite its well-equipped computer room, there has been no crime at Lourdes. "We haven't had any robberies. It belongs to the community," Stadthagen said.

USAID wants to open 10 more in the region. The Agency has spent \$2.8 million on the initiative so far. The centers are partially funded by the Central American Regional Security Initiative.

Organizers also hope to expand the reach of the centers by creating youth-run microenterprises, for example, selling the goods made in cooking classes. ★



This stack of sugar cane will be turned into dulce de panela, a candy popular in El Salvador.

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tamales, for example, grew from \$200,000 in 2004 to almost \$1 million last year. He now exports to two dozen U.S. grocery stores.

He has learned about the food safety requirements necessary to sell his products in the United States and was issued a certificate by the American Institute of Baking, which is considered a mark of quality production.

Since the program began in 2003, USAID has assisted between 600 and 700 companies to increase exports, and about 3,300 people were trained.

Products range from furniture to aromatherapy remedies to fine crafts to drink mixes to Paax Muul guitars, a hand-crafted instrument known for its quality. El Salvador's service sector is also getting an assist, with promotion for doctors, translators, and consultants among others.

El Salvador products and services are in demand from as far

away as Taiwan, and marquee names like Wal-Mart and Starbucks have put Salvadoran products on their shelves and menu boards.

Alternativa is another success story. Started in 2007, the non-profit provides a place for artisans to sell their wares (tripling their square footage with a move in December to a high-traffic mall location), assists with exports, and offers technical assistance to the artisans so their products can sell internationally. The artisans' work has sold at craft shows as well, including the Wal-Mart Crafts Festival, said Rafael Cuellar, a project manager for the Economic Development Office at USAID's El Salvador office.

Tomato farmer Rodolfo Rivera is a relative newcomer to exports. In 2008, he heard on television about a USAID initiative to produce tomatoes in

greenhouses and took the plunge. His first harvest—from 2,800 tomato plants—was in May of that year. His customer: Wal-Mart in El Salvador.

Through USAID, Rivera learned how to meet Wal-Mart's quality requirements for the kinds of tomatoes he grows, both the larger salad tomato and the tomato de cuisine, which is most popular in cooking.

Rivera has had setbacks. Wind blew the roof off his greenhouse. And his attempts to build and operate a second greenhouse—so he can eventually provide buyers with tomatoes year-round—ran into trouble when water seepage made the floor unstable.

But he believes he will recoup his investment in the near future.

All told, the export program has helped create more than 14,000 jobs in agriculture and handicrafts. ★