Creating reasons to stay? Unaccompanied youth migration, community-based programs, and the power of "push" factors in El Salvador

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A B S T R A C T

An emerging literature explores the experiences of Central American unaccompanied youth en route to the US border and a growing number of studies examine what happens once they arrive. However, we know less about their pre-migration context or the effectiveness of in-country youth development programs thought to deter them from migrating. We address this gap by drawing on survey data gathered from young people in El Salvador who participate in Youth Outreach Centers (n = 445). These Centers are local community-based entities that provide youth services in precarious neighborhoods across El Salvador. The majority of respondents reported feeling unsafe where they live, and 61% reported that at least one murder occurred in their neighborhood in the previous year. Amidst these neighborhood conditions, many respondents report that participating in the Centers had a positive impact on key developmental outcomes, academic performance, and employment. However, 42% reported that they still intend to migrate within the next three years, and younger respondents are significantly more likely to have these intentions. Their intentions to migrate are positively associated with risky behavior, and are unaffected by the quality of their experience in the Centers. These findings confirm the importance of investing in youth development programs in Central America, but they also attest to the potency of 'push' factors prompting youth migration, particularly from violent neighborhoods.

1. Introduction

Over 147,000 unaccompanied migrant youth from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were apprehended at the U.S./Mexico border from 2013 to 2016 (Kandel, 2017). Apprehensions were particularly high in 2014, prompting President Obama to request that Congress approve $3.7 billion in appropriations to address the influx (Hernández, 2014). The bulk of this funding aimed to ramp up border enforcement because the dominant framework adopted by policymakers at the time was that this "crisis at the border" was due to lax immigration laws and ineffective enforcement practices (Musalo & Lee, 2017). However, the Obama Administration also articulated multiple strategies to address the 'push' factors at the root of why these children were leaving, particularly the high rates of criminal victimization, gang violence, and poverty in their respective countries of origin (The White House, 2014).

Among these strategies was a plan to expand the number of Youth Outreach Centers in the Central American region. The Centers, funded in part by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are small community-based entities located in violent neighborhoods that provide programs to enhance positive youth development. In 2014, there were over 120 Centers in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador; following the "crisis at the border," the White House announced that USAID planned to open an additional 11 in Honduras and 77 in El Salvador (The White House, 2014). In the Administration's assessment, the Centers were one part of a larger strategy to deter young people from migrating. By ameliorating the 'push' factors at the neighborhood level, the idea was that the Centers would introduce additional reasons why potential youth migrants would decide to stay. Yet, because there has been no external evaluation of the Centers, this claim raises several questions that are central to our paper: (1) How effective is the Center model at promoting positive youth development outcomes for Salvadoran youth in at-risk neighborhoods? (2) What types of youth are most likely to benefit from these Centers? (3) What is the relationship between benefitting from the Centers and youths' intention to migrate?

We address these questions by drawing on unique survey data from a sample of Youth Outreach Center participants in El Salvador. We aim to explore the effectiveness of this community-based intervention and to assess the relationship between participating in the Centers and the intentions of youth to migrate. Based on our findings, we argue that

future policy and interventions concerning unaccompanied youth from Central America should include implementation of neighborhood-based programing approaches to violence prevention, and targeted resources should focus on intervening with high-risk youth in neighborhoods with weak social capital. However, we caution against a narrow response aimed primarily at deterring future migration. Our findings indicate that youth in El Salvador who live in precarious neighborhoods face real and significant safety concerns, and these threats are likely to persist. Therefore, while an appropriate US policy response should continue to address in-country push factors which contribute to unaccompanied youth migration, the US must also fulfill its humanitarian obligation to meet the needs of this vulnerable population when conditions at home make it impossible to stay.

2. Background

Although an increasing number of unaccompanied minors are from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, violence is particularly high in El Salvador, a country of just over 6 million people and roughly the size of Massachusetts. It has the largest number of gang members per capita and the highest homicide rate of any country in the world (Seelke, 2016a, 2016b). Two transnational gangs exercise considerable influence in neighborhoods throughout the country. Both gangs were started in Los Angeles by disaffected Salvadoran immigrants in the 1980s, but expanded to El Salvador in the late 1990s when the U.S. began more aggressively deporting undocumented gang members (Meyer & Seelke, 2015; Seelke, 2016b). These gangs continued to grow in influence and size, fed in part by the on-going deportation of U.S. gang members to El Salvador, as well as by the problems of poverty and unemployment throughout the country (Shifter, 2012). Although its protracted civil war was resolved 25 years ago, the residual effect of this conflict helps explain security issues in the country today. The civil war took the lives of an estimated 75,000 citizens, and attracted foreign involvement and support—notably from the U.S. given Cold-war era concern for communism's foothold in Central America (Farah, 2012). The peaceful transition from an authoritarian government to a multi-party democracy in 1992 marked the advent of what many hoped would be more prosperous years. However, decades of instability have left civil institutions underdeveloped and limited international support for the resolution of enduring economic and social problems.

There is disagreement over how to curb violence in Central America, and little evidence of the effect that these interventions have on the intentions of youth to migrate. In the case of El Salvador, the federal government has responded to the rise in violence with an "iron fist" approach which prioritizes enhancing the scope and authority of law enforcement (Farah, 2011). This approach has been met with limited success, in part because decades of instability have weakened civil institutions in El Salvador, and there is little international support for addressing entrenched economic and social problems (Shifter, 2012). In fact, there is some evidence that heavy-handed crack downs have led to the expansion of gangs and the gang problem (Meyer & Seelke, 2015; Pérez, 2013). Prison is a breeding ground for gang recruitment, and the power vacuum created by periodic sweeps targeting gang leaders triggers violent negotiations between individuals eager to prove their ability to assume leadership (Meyer & Seelke, 2015). Police corruption and misconduct are also part of the problem because police maltreatment of citizens amplifies distrust of law enforcement due to corruption among some officers. Internal corruption at multiple levels of the police force is fueled by low pay, creating a vicious cycle of distrust, misconduct, and criminal behavior (Seelke, 2016a, 2016b).

In contrast to the 'iron fist' (or mano dura) approach which prioritizes security and aggressive enforcement, community-based programs for youth represent an "extended hand" model (or mano extendida) that deters crime by creating educational, vocational, and recreational opportunities for at-risk youth in violent neighborhoods (Jütersonke, Muggah, & Rodgers, 2009). If the 'iron fist' style of crime prevention involves a militarized crackdown on gangs and the threat of lengthy prison terms, the mano extendida approach emphasizes voluntary participation and incentives (2009). Neighborhood-based crime prevention efforts in El Salvador are insufficient to resolve the country's larger security problem, but addressing the problem of crime at the neighborhood level may ameliorate some of the conditions that push youth to migrate. Children and youth in low-income families are often tethered to neighborhoods, and therefore highly affected by the quality of resources in these communities. Many walk to school, play in the park and go to church in their neighborhood, and are therefore vulnerable to violence and gang activity that happens in their community—common 'push' factors that might prompt them to emigrate.

Theories of international migration suggest that migratory processes are explained by both 'push' and "pull" factors (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000). According to the push-pull framework, there are factors in the sending country that compel people to leave—such as poverty and unemployment—and factors in the host country that 'pull' them—such as the promise of a job and economic mobility. In the case of unaccompanied youth, this framework suggests that a prospective migrant who fears for his or her safety may decide that the future benefit of migration is greater than the risk of staying, despite the cost of the journey and leaving behind family, culture, and country. It also means that the 'pull' of family members in the US may also exercise a gravitational force, and there is considerable evidence that the desire for family reunification is one reason why many unaccompanied youth choose to leave (Chishti & Hipsman, 2015; Goldberg, 2014; Kennedy, 2014).

As with any framework, the push-pull view of migratory processes is contested. The important cross-disciplinary debates over its merits are on-going and summarized elsewhere (see Castles & Miller, 2003; Massey et al., 1993; Silvey, 2004, 2006), but the empirical significance of 'push' factors is clear. Numerous studies have established the relationship between crime, victimization, and Central American migration (Morrison & May, 1994; Sanchez, 2006; Stanley, 1987; Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, & Hamsho-Diaz, 2010). While comparatively less research has focused on 'push' factors and the experiences of youth (Chavez & Menjívar, 2010), a growing number of descriptive studies suggest that a fear of gang violence and poverty are primary reasons why many decide to leave, including the case of youth in general (Anastario et al., 2015) and unaccompanied youth in particular (Goldberg, 2014; Kennedy, 2014; Stinchcomb & Hershberg, 2014).

2.1. Youth Outreach Centers

While community violence and gang activity may impede youth development and contribute to a youth's assessment that the best (and possibly only) solution is to migrate, the premise of *mano extendida* interventions is that other neighborhood features can counteract these factors and provide youth with additional options (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, 2008). Local youth-serving organizations can provide a buffer against certain neighborhood factors in ways that enhance youth development (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). While they may not directly address the conditions that lead to violence or out-migration, their programs intervene to reduce risk factors—such as gang involvement—and shore up protective factors—such as family and community supports.

Unfortunately, there are relatively few community-based youth-serving organizations in at-risk Salvadoran neighborhoods. In response, beginning in 2008 a collaborative effort between local communities and international development organizations has opened over 100 such programs across the country. These programs, called Youth Outreach Centers, aim to enhance youth development, strengthening protective factors for those who live in violent neighborhoods (Roth, 2017). Specifically, Center programming aims to increase identity development, opportunities for youth to develop skills and abilities, and