

Proponte Más

Honduras

This brief looks at how the Proponte Más project utilizes a family-focused approach to positive youth development (PYD) within a comprehensive program for violence reduction in Honduras. Proponte Más focuses on reducing risk factors among youth who have been empirically identified at the “highest levels of risk for gang joining” and associated violence and criminal activity. It works at multiple levels with different populations, supporting families, communities, and national systems, such as the juvenile justice system. It has worked to build family support networks within communities that experience high rates of violence and to support youth in conflict with the law. The focus of this brief is on the project’s work strengthening families who have youth identified as highly at risk of violence and joining gangs, but not yet in conflict with the law, so that the family can function more effectively to protect them. This family strengthening approach creates more effective interactions within the family, helping parents and children improve the way they communicate and work together. It knits the family into a more cohesive and supportive unit, increasing youths’ sense of belonging and contribution to their families and reducing their risk of turning to gangs for this sense of connectedness with others.

Background

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and has one of the highest per capita murder rates in the world. Drug trafficking and gang activity have led to a disproportionately large rate of violent death among young people, particularly boys and young men. Proponte Más aims to foster violence reduction in Honduras through an evidence-informed approach to family strengthening and public policy change.

Proponte Más is an expansion and scale-up of the Proponte pilot project in Honduras. USAID and the State Department funded the Proponte pilot to introduce a violence prevention model created by the City of Los Angeles Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development for use in other countries. Creative Associates adapted the Los Angeles model, calling the adaptation the Prevention and Intervention Family Systems Model (PIFSM). PIFSM is comprised of 1) a diagnostic tool used to identify youth who are at the greatest risk of joining gangs and 2) a phased family systems intervention to strengthen families’ ability to protect at-risk youth from gang enrollment.

The Proponte pilot in Honduras was implemented in Tegucigalpa from 2013 to 2015. It focused on introducing the PIFSM and contextualizing it for use in Honduras. This involved administering the diagnostic tool at sufficient scale to determine what score for risk factors was an appropriate cut-off in the local context to identify youth at the highest risk of violence and joining gangs. The family systems intervention was implemented with eligible youth and their families in order to determine what alterations would be needed to make it meaningful for Honduran families.

Proponte Más built on learning from the pilot to deliver a contextualized PIFSM with highly at-risk Honduran youth aged 8-17 and their families. Between 2016 and 2020, with USAID funding through a task order under the YouthPower

Theory of Change

The risk factors for joining gangs, and associated behaviors of youth, are embedded in and supported by the relational dynamics of the family. Therefore, if the relational dynamics of the family are improved, youth’s risk factors and associated behaviors will also improve.

The approach to family strengthening that Proponte Más uses is rooted in family systems theory. The project proposes that increasing the protective mechanisms of the family will reduce the risk of youth joining a gang. Risky youth behaviors can be addressed by identifying and altering patterns of interaction among family members that are contributing to these behaviors. Improving family dynamics through better communication and interaction leads to positive behavior change and reduced risk factors among youth.

Implementation IDIQ, Creative Associates extended activities to the four other cities with the highest violence rates in the country: San Pedro Sula, Choloma, Tela and La Ceiba. Project operations continued in Tegucigalpa under Proponte Más, which like these other cities experiences high levels of homicides and gang violence. Proponte Más also introduced additional activities in all four cities, and at the national level, included increasing and strengthening support services for youth and families, establishing a cadre of family counselors, strengthening alternative juvenile justice measures, and institutionalizing the PIFSM in Honduras.

Contribution & Agency

Two major objectives of Proponte Más' family strengthening approach are 1) to help family members who are living together function more effectively as a unit in carrying out household functions and meeting household needs and 2) to increase the overall cohesion of the entire family across at least three generations. The path to these objectives is the phased family systems intervention that takes place over 6 months. Through each phase, a family counselor provides weekly meetings with the family in their home as well as one-on-one sessions with individual youth. The phases of the intervention are designed to secure family consent for participation, diagnose problems to be addressed, build trust among the family and the counselor, create changes in family dynamics, and recognize and celebrate positive change before moving on to address deeper and more complex dynamics.

The family systems intervention includes youth as active contributors to the family system and household activities. Frequently, the first family dynamic that Proponte Más addresses is parental supervision, since it is a common source of conflict between youth and parents/caregivers and a key factor in youth behavior. Youth need effective limits and discipline, balanced with opportunities to exercise independence and agency. Working with parents/caregivers on better understanding adolescent development helps them negotiate the difference between protecting and policing youth. Simultaneously working with youth to strengthen their contribution to the family is a powerful entry point into changing family dynamics.

The work that family members must do in order to change the dynamics of their interactions helps them identify and exercise their agency over these dynamics. Helping parents and caregivers provide healthy leadership to their families creates a more secure base from which youth can share in achieving family goals. Creating an environment in the family in which youth contributions are expected, recognized and appreciated creates the groundwork for youth to make contributions outside of the family, as well.

Phases of the Family Systems Intervention

- **Referral and collaboration:** identify participants, obtain family consent, document problems to be addressed.
- **Building agreements:** Establish an agreement with the family about which problems will be addressed first.
- **Redefining:** Redefine the agreement to incorporate additional behavioral sequences, with the aim of shifting focus from youth behavioral problems to the family dynamics that unintentionally reinforce these behavioral problems.
- **Celebrating changes:** Celebrate the family's efforts and accomplishments. Engage the extended family, possibly reaching out to estranged family members, if appropriate.
- **Integrating:** Create small family projects that require everyone to work together. Counselors participate in identifying the projects, but the family organizes them and carries them out.
- **Next level agreements:** With trust in the counselor and process established, the family can move on to addressing more challenging problems and dynamics.
- **Re-evaluation:** Re-evaluate individual youth to determine what behaviors associated with what risk factors have changed.

Assets

Proponte Más takes note of family assets and builds upon them in the process of working with the family. The family systems intervention helps family members strengthen key soft skills. The results of an evaluation by Arizona State University found that youth learned better communication skills and parents/caregivers improved their parenting skills as a result of their participation in the project. Most significantly, Proponte Más builds a key asset for youth – a safe home environment with supportive family relationships. This is such an important asset that in its fourth year, the project introduced a new element to the PIFSM to capture family cohesion – the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale (FACES-IV), a family-level diagnostic tool that measures the degree of family cohesion, a key indicator of how well the family system is functioning.

Proponte Más also aims to improve youth's educational experience in school. The highly vulnerable families participating in the project often do not feel empowered to interact with teachers and schools. Family counselors support parents and caregivers in engaging with schools and better understanding youths' educational experience. This intervention, coupled with other benefits from the family systems intervention, like clear expectations and improved youth behavior, has led to youth improving their school attendance and participation and experiencing better educational outcomes. This contributes to youth experiencing school as a positive and protective space, rather than an onerous requirement, which helps them gain more from their educational experience.

Building Family Cohesion Through Genograms

An exercise that many Proponte Más families undertake is a genogram – a chart similar to family tree that maps three or more generations of the family and provides information about the quality of family relationships. The construction of a genogram is an opportunity for youth to solicit stories about their family from their relatives and to build a sense of connection among family members across generations. In some cases, the construction of a genogram has helped youth reestablish relationships with relatives with whom they had lost contact. Strengthening youths' bonds with their family members and deepening their knowledge of where they come from supports a sense of belonging in the family that reduces youths' risk of seeking a sense of belonging from joining a gang.

Enabling Environment

A positive relationship with their parents or caregivers is the most basic institution for youth and the family is their first community. Fostering a sense of belonging in the family and ensuring that the family offers a safe space where positive norms are established and upheld is a key goal of Proponte Más. Building the capacity of families helps them become an enabling environment for youth, where they have positive relationships with caring adults and are included in the family as valued contributors. As the protective and supportive power of the family grows and youth behaviors and risk factors associated with violence are reduced, the potential that youth will contribute positively to their wider community grows.

Proponte Más actively contributes to the enabling environment surrounding families. The families of at-risk youth in the PIFSM intervention are typically extremely vulnerable and likely to feel disconnected from their communities. Family counselors help facilitate linkages to community services and increase family members' confidence in interacting with service providers. The project has also found that celebrating change in families has bolstered their confidence in interacting with the wider community. Recognizing their accomplishments affirms the family's growth, and the celebrations raise the community's awareness of the positive changes taking place in the family.

Alongside the family systems intervention for most at-risk families, Proponte Más has built Family Support Networks (FSN) that help support families who are found to have a lower level of risk. FSNs are comprised of community members who have an established history of community support and advocacy. Organizing these local leaders into a formal entity fosters collaboration and community cohesion. FSNs engage in evidence-based violence prevention activities with schools and families and support service provider engagement by working with Proponte Más on community service mapping and forming agreements with service providers.

FSNs serve families in a range of ways, including: accompanying them as they navigate systems, advocating for them to follow through on referrals to community services, and providing support during traumatic events, including financial assistance to meet immediate needs such as funeral costs. FSNs help link families to:

- Education services
- Health services
- Employment services
- Recreational activities
- Spiritual support

Youth Contributing to and Protected by Their Families

The approach that Proponte Más has taken to positive youth development is unusual among YouthPower programs in centering the family as the subject of most of its direct interventions. As illustrated in this brief, this approach offers substantial opportunities for youth engagement as contributing members to their families, providing youth with opportunities to build skills such as communication and develop assets, notably through improved educational outcomes. The results from Proponte Más indicate that the project has successfully reduced risk factors for youth through family strengthening: 79% of at-risk youth and families who received the family systems intervention substantially reduced their risk factors to a point below the cut-off score for qualifying for the intervention – as assessed at the end of the intervention, they were no longer considered high risk.

Project Results Highlights

- 1,107 at-risk youth and their families completed the family systems intervention, 79% reduced their risk level to below the qualifying threshold for the intervention.
- 2,138 families referred to community services.
- 154 families and youth in the juvenile justice system received family systems counseling.
- Established a community service referral platform (buscoaqui504.com).
- Worked with the Technical Committee for Juvenile Justice to reduce the number of youth in detention.
- Created a case management system for youth in the juvenile justice system who receive alternative measures to incarceration.
- Established a certification program in family systems theory and practice with the Honduras Association of Psychologists.
- Created a Master's degree in Family Counseling with the Catholic University of Honduras
- Established a diploma course in family systems theory and practice with the National University of Honduras
- Awarded 22 scholarships to members of the justice sector to obtain a Master's degree in Juvenile Justice and Child Protection
- Established a professional network for professionals trained in family systems counseling and graduates of the Juvenile Justice and Child Protection Master's degree.
- Fully contextualized the youth diagnostic tool (*Herramienta Diagnóstica de Medición de Compartamientos de Riesgo*, or IMC) used in the PIFSM for the Honduran context and built the capacity of the National University of Honduras/DICU to process, analyze and calibrate the IMC.
- Created training manuals and videos on PIFSM and built the capacity of two local organizations who are replicating the model.

This product was created in collaboration with YouthPower Learning as part of its review of all YouthPower Task Orders.

YouthPower Action

YouthPower Action supports and advances USAID's Youth in Development Policy through evidence-based positive youth development programming across all sectors and country contexts by providing technical assistance to USAID Missions and operating units. YouthPower Action's activities increase youth engagement and youth voice to strengthen USAID's positive youth development programming. YouthPower Action supports USAID missions and operating units through a flexible buy-in mechanism.

This publication was made possible by the support of the American People through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) under task order contract number AID-OAA-TO-15-00003, YouthPower Action under IDIQ contract number AID-OAA-I-15-00009, YouthPower:

For more information, contact:

Elizabeth Berard
Task Order Contract Officer's
Representative
eberard@usaid.gov

Kristin Brady
Project Director for YouthPower
Action at FHI 360:
kbrady@fhi360.org