

A CONVERSATION WITH CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

Working with At-Risk Youth in the Caribbean and Latin America

My career has taken me to countries around the world. Different languages, modes of transportation, building types, smells and sounds. Unfortunately, pretty much wherever I have traveled, I've encountered children who are unquestionably vulnerable. Young people hawking water and candy or food in the streets, young children washing windows for a tip — and from what locals have told me, these children often are being “handled” by someone out of sight. It's overwhelming and disheartening.



**BRUCE
COMPTON**

Thankfully, we are a part of a global ministry that advocates and acts on behalf of these children on the margins. Here, I share the experiences and comments of someone who immediately came to mind for this column, Rick Jones, a youth and migration advisor in Latin America and the Caribbean for Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Rick has lived and worked in Latin America for over 28 years, working for CRS for the past 20 of those years. Currently based in El Salvador, he has led CRS programs that tackle issues such as poverty, gang violence, migration and internal displacement, as well as designing development alternatives and responding to the region's biggest emergencies.

What follows is a question and answer session with Rick where I posed some pretty basic questions intended to shed some light on CRS work, but, also, to help those in Catholic health care consider any potential partnership ideas to work toward helping at-risk youth.

Can you please “set the table,” providing a brief global picture of youth at risk in the international sense? What are some statistics and larger issues globally that provide a way for us to start from more of the same place? When we think about at-risk youth is it labor trafficking,

disease, refugee related, climate change related, other?

There are 1.8 billion young people in the world today — the largest cohort of youth in history. Many of these young men and women live in Sub-Saharan Africa, where half of the population is younger than age 25, and the lack of jobs pushes them into the informal sector. Nearly 80 percent of youth in Sub-Saharan Africa work in underpaid jobs in sectors rife with exploitation and dangers like human trafficking.

Having to work for survival and unable to pay school fees, youth often drop out of school early. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty, especially for young women. Today's young people also must confront climate change, migration, violent extremism and the digital revolution—all of which disrupt traditional earning opportunities. In a rapidly evolving global economy, where small gaps in education become quickly insurmountable, it is vital that youth are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to obtain sustainable livelihoods. These young men and women represent a staggering sum of human potential, yet many are trapped in poverty without the chance to study or work.

Tell us about what CRS is doing to assist at-risk youth, and their families, generally, and then specifically in Latin America and the Caribbean.

CRS is implementing holistic training with

young people ages 16-25 who are unemployed, out of school. It provides life skills, vocational training, entrepreneurship and jobs placement around the world. The program has four components: leadership (taking responsibility for one's life, family and community); community service (giving your talents to the service of others without expecting anything in return); family (a space where participants belong, based on trust, respect and love); and opportunity (for personal and professional growth).

Youth are in the program full-time for six months. At project's end, they receive assistance in finding a job, starting a business or returning to school. We have worked with more than 9,000 young people in Latin America, and 70% have been placed in a job. These young people are from some of the most violent neighborhoods in the Northern Triangle [Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador]. A recent survey showed nearly 80% have thought about migrating to the U.S. and know the risks. When asked why they didn't go, they overwhelmingly cited the YouthBuild program as giving them hope and an opportunity.

Please share experiences that immediately came to mind when I asked you about "youth at risk."

When talking about youth at risk, three people immediately come to mind:

Marvin, from El Salvador (name changed for protection) was abandoned by his parents, and at age 12 was on the street and forced into a gang. By the time he was 18 he decided he wanted out. His payment for leaving the gang: a beating so severe it nearly killed him. While recovering from his wounds, he heard about YouthBuild, the CRS employment program, and decided to try it. He joined the program, completed the six-month training in graphic design. He started his own business, went back to finish school and then went on to college to get a technical degree in graphic design. "CRS saved my life and gave me a sense of dignity I never knew," he said.

Elham is a young woman from Ghana. She was trained in mobile phone repair and domestic electrical installation, thereby challenging the status quo and breaking gender stereotypes. Elham is now on her way to becoming one of the first professional mobile phone repairwomen in the

northern region of Ghana. When asked about her program she said, "this is not just about a job ... when I came to the program I had nearly given up hope on life ... now I have a job and more importantly I have hope for a better future."

Maria Ramirez is another young woman who comes to mind. Her mother left her and her sister with her grandmother when she was just 8 years old. She dropped out of school and at 16 became pregnant and was in an abusive relationship. Before the program, she said she was always depressed and suffered from anxiety. It was no easy

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feat for her to finish the program. She had to find daycare for her two girls, pay bus fare and [deal with] her husband, who was against her spending so much time away from home. "The program taught me I am intelligent, and I learned how to breathe," she said in retrospect.

How is providing aid of this nature in Latin America and the Caribbean challenging in comparison to doing the same in the U.S., if at all? What are the challenges?

One of the biggest challenges is that there are more young people seeking jobs than there are jobs available. That is why in addition to placing people in jobs, we support them in starting their own businesses or going back to school. We need all three options.

A second challenge is that many businesses don't want to hire young people from poor neighborhoods because they are afraid of them. There is a lot of stigma in Central America; many people erroneously believe that young people from poor neighborhoods are involved with gangs. That's just not true.

Another big challenge is getting families to allow young women to participate, and then freeing them up from their domestic responsibilities so that they can participate. Overcoming the gender

stereotypes—that girls should be home sewing or cooking — is critical and we work hard to help young women engage in career paths they choose.

What are the cultural factors at play in your work in Latin America — what needs to be understood by those doing this work there. Additionally, what are insights for us in the U.S.?

One of the biggest things we do is not to lower our expectations. Despite the fact that many of these youth have had limited opportunities and come from disadvantaged families, we keep our expectations high. They are demanding, but reasonable. I think this is a big shift from a culture that views poor people as incapable or less talented. They have big barriers to overcome and so we must be demanding, to help them succeed. We have found that they respond.

What kind of tangible difference are programs making? Any stories to share?

In Central America, most of the [youth who started jobs due to the program] are still in the job after one year. That is a big lift. We work in a place called Ciudad Quetzal outside Guatemala City, which is considered one of the toughest places in the city. Yet our partner has a job placement rate of 99%. In rural Nicaragua, where there are few formal jobs, over 85% of the youth in the program have started a business that is still going after one year. These are no small accomplishments in places where the majority of youth are unemployed.

What is your youth at risk “elevator speech”?
Investing in these young people is the best

thing you can do ... and I can prove it! We contracted an independent cost benefit study that showed our at-risk youth graduates recover the cost of the program in 24 months, have rising incomes and are less likely to migrate.

Are there ways in which the breadth and strength of the Catholic health ministry – or any systems — can effectively partner with CRS on any of this work?

In the next 10 years, most health issues will be around non-communicable diseases, things like diabetes. There will be a massive need for community health workers and there may be a way to partner with Catholic health networks to use digital platforms to train and certify young people to be health workers around the globe, provide them mentoring and work with health systems to put in place these kinds of programs.

What didn't we ask? When you think of at-risk youth and CRS, what should we all understand and consider?

Young people who have been child soldiers or involved in gangs need our compassion and support, not condemnation. Giving these young people a second chance has a huge multiplier effect for building peace. These youth from some of the most marginalized communities have the power to change their lives, their families and their communities. We need to unleash that power.

BRUCE COMPTON is senior director, international outreach, the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

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