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**Will These Wounds Ever Heal?
Trauma and Healing in the Lives of Salvadoran Children**

I spent this past summer in San Salvador, El Salvador, exploring the lives and rehabilitation of inner-city children affected by violence. Although El Salvador has ratified the United Nation's sponsored International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2005, the culture of violence in the country still takes quite a toll on its children. According to a World Vision International study conducted in 2003, 79 out of 100 children in Salvadoran homes are mistreated (World Vision 1:2003). As a result of such mistreatment, amidst a scene of severe poverty, schools have high drop out rates and many students flee from their homes and end up on the streets, often as members of one of the gangs in San Salvador (World Vision 1:2003). Poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities and inadequate living conditions are commonly cited as causes of violence in a society still scarred from the 12-year civil war.

With this knowledge in mind, I set out to live in a home for street children in one of San Salvador's most gang-ridden areas in order to explore the history of trauma in the children's lives and analyze the home's approach to dealing with such trauma. Through interviews with the home staff and the children alike, it became clear that every child who enters the home comes due to extreme poverty and abuse. I learned the horrific stories that brought the home's seven current residents to the streets and began to trace the ways their behavior and detachment was related to the trauma they had lived in the past. The children's startling stories revealed heart-wrenching glimpses into their pasts. I began to picture them at seven years of age, bent over alcoholic mothers, trying to wake them up and then retreating to sleep on empty buses to avoid

their fathers' wrath. They grew up, I was told, like plants with no roots as they were continuously passed between family members and viewed, almost certainly, as burdens on the family.

Although these children were desperately in need of love and stability, they did not necessarily receive this inside of the rehabilitation home. I had conducted a preliminary interview with the home coordinator in March, and was very impressed with the family model of the home and its connection to the Catholic Church. However, upon spending two weeks living there, it became clear that the youth were abused and exploited by members of the staff. Additionally, an international beverage producer used them as a cheap labor source and they spent hours placing double sided tape on the back of tens of thousands of advertisements. Due to this experience, my research evolved to encompass corruption within childcare facilities and I learned many shocking tales of abuse both within state-run facilities and non-governmental organizations alike.

Although I had intended to confine my research to violence experienced by street children, I moved out of the first home and into a home focused on preventing children in high risk cases from running to the streets. Upon informing outside authorities of the situation in the first home, I was able to settle in to the second home and restore some of my hope in the goodness of aid organizations. The five weeks I spent in this home allowed me to explore the influence of both gang and domestic violence that often leads young children away from their homes and onto the streets. I was able to meet with social workers and live alongside young girls whose strength and resilience amazed me in the face of the trauma they had each endured throughout their lives.

In addition to my experiences at each youth home, I spent every weekend engaging with a youth group in a former refugee community and participating in their dynamic discussions and

reenactments of the cycle of violence in their homes and communities. Violence is extremely pervasive in Salvadoran households, yet it is so rarely brought into the public sphere. This group of courageous youth talked openly about the complexities and causes of domestic and gang violence and committed themselves to fostering peace and communication in their future households. While this is certainly much easier said than done, they are certainly taking beginning steps towards change by organizing with the intent to counteract the violence that leads so many of their peers to the streets.

Throughout my time in El Salvador, I was able to better understand the way that invisible structural violence underlies more overt expressions of violence in Salvadoran gangs and homes. The abundance of arms in the country following the civil war combined with high levels of unemployment, government corruption, and entrenched patriarchy breed violence that deeply affects children. Children who run from violence in the home are then hired by gangs to carry out crimes for seemingly inconsequential rewards. Others who remain in violent environments develop anxiety related disorders that affect every aspect of a child's life including control of one's bowels (which I encountered in several instances).

In the midst of the heartbreaking scene of violence towards children, there are extremely committed individuals and organizations that work to change this vicious cycle. I was able to work alongside many courageous leaders in the field of child rehabilitation and violence prevention and I learned a great deal from their tales of years of trial and error. My research focus expanded throughout the summer as I had new experiences and lived in different settings, yet I was constantly learning as each new child arrived at the youth home with his or her unique history. I was able to use participant observation throughout my entire experience to gain the

perspective not only of a researcher but also as a social worker faced with the unique challenges associated with each different child's situation.

I faced many challenges throughout my research, the most daunting of which involved discerning how to manage the experience of abuse in the first children's home without merely escaping the situation nor becoming complicit in exploitation. Additionally, I found it difficult to schedule meetings with many non-profit youth centers due to the directors' time constraints and frequent travel. I also found the (historically abusive) state-run children's detention center to be extremely bureaucratic, although I hope to further investigate its philosophy and practices in a future visit to El Salvador.

While I am grateful for the chance to have spent seven weeks researching the theme of childhood violence in El Salvador, I realize that it is impossible to understand the complexity of an issue in such a short period of time. For that reason, I will use the research I conducted this summer and extend it into a senior anthropology thesis on the culture of violence in the lives of Salvadoran youth. Additionally, I am currently pursuing a scholarship that will allow me to return to El Salvador for at least a year following my graduation in order to continue learning about violence and rehabilitation efforts in San Salvador. In this way, I hope to discover where I can best invest myself to work to bring peace in young, traumatized lives and prevent future violence.

Reference:

"Child Rights." *World Vision International*. 2003. *Internet*. 20 February 2009. <http://web.archive.org/web/20070822222620/http://www.wvi.org/wvi/global/child_rights.htm>.