

**Youth Social Capital Formation in Three Low-Income Urban  
Communities: A summative report of three case studies  
conducted in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Canada**



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Richard Maclure  
Faculty of Education  
University of Ottawa

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### Research Teams

#### El Salvador

Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), Universidad  
Centroamericana “Jose Simeon Canas”

Jeannette Aguilar [jaguilar@uca.edu.sv](mailto:jaguilar@uca.edu.sv)

Marlon Carranza [mecarranza@hotmail.com](mailto:mecarranza@hotmail.com)

Delia Jovel

Iris Tejada

Ingrid Portal

#### Nicaragua:

Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (CEPREV) <http://www.ceprev.org/>

Fundación Nicaragua Nuestra <http://www.nicaraguanuestra.org.ni/>

Vicente Sotelo Aviles [vicmes21@yahoo.com](mailto:vicmes21@yahoo.com)

#### Canada:

University of Ottawa

Richard Maclure [rmaclure@uottawa.ca](mailto:rmaclure@uottawa.ca)

Kathryn Campbell [kathryn.campbell@uottawa.ca](mailto:kathryn.campbell@uottawa.ca)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY<sup>1</sup>

This report consists of an overview of a three-year research project that examined the social ecology of youth social capital formation in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Canada. Funded by the International Development Research Centre, the project consisted of three case studies, each conducted respectively by a research team in an urban setting in San Salvador, Managua, and Ottawa. The report begins by providing the conceptual and policy-oriented rationale for the project, followed by a brief descriptive summary of each case study. After acknowledging the contrasting social ecologies of each study, the report then highlights the commonalities of youth social capital formation in the three case studies, and concludes by outlining a number of policy and program implications arising from the research project.

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<sup>1</sup> The photos on the cover page show the football/basketball pitch of the community of Emmanuel in San Salvador, and the Royal Ritchie Drummers of Britannia Woods in Ottawa

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## Introduction: Rationale for the Research Project

In the current era of growing urbanization and rapid socio-economic change, there is general agreement that effective youth socialization and development are dependent on supportive social networks (Bassani, 2007; Hawkins, 1999). Relations with family members, peers, neighbours, teachers, and other mentors play a significant role in contributing to the well-being and life chances of young people (Gillies & Lucey, 2006; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). In addition, the institutional environments of organizations such as schools, recreation centres, sports leagues, and places of work can directly or indirectly impinge on adolescent development (Holland, et al., 2007; Weller, 2006).

Unfortunately, however, many youth growing up in situations of poverty lack adequate socio-economic support and are therefore prone to risks that may undermine their development and, by extension, the well-being of their communities and the society at large. This has led to concerns about what is sometimes referred to as a global “youth crisis” and the widespread failure to protect and promote the fundamental rights of young people (Chettleburg, 2007; Economist, 2006). Over the last two decades, therefore, many governments and civil society organizations have formally acknowledged the imperative of diminishing the risks that confront children and youth by promulgating policies and programs designed to augment opportunities for their healthy emotional, cognitive, and social development.

A conceptual rationale for expanding educational and social programs specifically for marginalized and at-risk youth is that such programs can contribute substantially to the accumulation of youth social capital, i.e., the capacity of young people to secure or increase benefits by virtue of their formal and informal relationships. Interest in the notion of social capital as a policy precept has emerged partly as a consequence of the general failure of conventional crime control approaches to curb youth crime and to address the conditions that give rise to youth crime and violence, and partly in response to the expanding discourse of child and youth rights that has gained substantial impetus since passage of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (Helve & Bynner, eds., 2007). In addition, however, in the wake of dramatic global changes in structures of employment, patterns of migration, and rates of urban expansion, there are growing concerns that these broad structural trends have contributed to widespread disintegration of the primordial social ties of family and community, and to the subsequent rise of vast pockets of social despair, crime, and violence (Forster, 2006; Olawoye, 2012; Sheptycki, 2012; Thomas, 2012). As a way to offset these social ills, policy remedies and organizational initiatives aiming to strengthen existing community ties and replace or complement weakened community structures are often proposed. An explicit purpose of such efforts is to reinforce and augment the availability of social capital for marginalized populations, particularly among the young who are often seen as most vulnerable, but also most likely to benefit from enhanced social capital.

Nevertheless, despite growing scholarly and policy-related interest in social capital,

interpretations of this concept tend to be ambiguous and ill-defined. Two sources of confusion relate particularly to the notion of social capital as a basis for enhancing the lives and prospects of marginalized youth. First, because social capital has become part of the lexicon of social policy discourse, there has been a common tendency to regard it as a collective or communal phenomenon. From this perspective, social capital constitutes a set of resources that generates social and economic benefits for entire communities, including all children and adolescents. An increase in the “stock” of community social capital is therefore assumed to be a key factor in the improvement of systems of governance and an increase in the availability and quality of youth social services such as education, recreation, and health care (Putnam, 1993). The difficulty with this perspective is that it tends to equate correlation with causation, and to discount the broader ecological dimensions of social capital formation (Koniordos, 2008; Portes & Landolt, 2000). While social capital – the ability to secure resources through social networks – may contribute to communal development, it is also generally acquired as a result of the existing availability of resources such as education and employment opportunities, and in contexts where the distribution of resources is relatively equitable. There is a distinction, in other words, between social capital as a cause and as an effect that is often not clarified when conceptualized as a communal phenomenon. To avoid a tautology between cause and effect, assessment of social capital formation should therefore heed distinctive historical and structural factors that characterize different social contexts and are likely to explain the nature of community circumstances more comprehensively (Flores & Rello, 2004).

A second source of confusion surrounding the notion of youth social capital formation relates to the supposition that the *ability* to obtain resources will inexorably lead to their acquisition. Here the confusion lies in equating means with ends. Put more specifically, while education and supportive relationships may enhance the resilience, knowledge, and skills of young people, these attributes may not necessarily translate into the acquisition of jobs or the improvement of their socio-economic circumstances. This issue of distinguishing means from ends likewise relates to the broader factor of historical and socio-economic context. As poor people are acutely aware, resources are rarely distributed equitably. Possession of strong social ties does not, therefore, inexorably lead to increased benefits. This confusion between means and ends underscores a critique of social capital as a policy agenda – that it is too often entwined with the idea of community development as a remedy or panacea for social ills that discounts the prevalence of market forces and skewed power arrangements (Koniordos, 2008; Portes & Landolt, 2000). From this critical perspective, youth social capital formation should not be examined solely within the context of local community initiatives, nor as a panacea for the resolution of youth alienation and ensuing social instability. Instead, youth social capital formation should be regarded as embedded in the social ecology of broader economic, political, and ideological factors associated with youth marginalization and poverty (Earls & Carlson, 2001; Lin, 2001).

## The Research Project: Overview of Structure and Design

The significance of social capital as a conceptual precept of policies and programs aiming to provide support for marginalized urban youth, coupled with these distinctions and clarifications concerning the nature and the limits of social capital, has served as the rationale for conducting this research project examining youth social capital formation in three different urban contexts – San Salvador (El Salvador), Managua (Nicaragua), and Ottawa (Canada). Supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the project has been conducted as three independent case studies, each focusing on a specific low-income urban neighbourhood. In El Salvador, the study was conducted by a research team at the Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP) which is situated at the Universidad Centroamericana “Jose Simeon Canas” in San Salvador. In Nicaragua, the study was conducted by an independent researcher, Melvin Sotelo, with assistance from colleagues at the Universidad Centroamericana Nicaragua (UCN). And in Canada, the study was conducted by a research team from the University of Ottawa and Britannia Woods Community House.

As a basis for ensuring comparative cohesion across the three case studies, the overall research project was guided by four questions:

- a) what are the key indicators of youth social capital formation in circumstances that pose potential risks for healthy youth development in each neighbourhood?
- b) what sorts of interventions facilitate youth social capital formation in these low-income communities?
- c) to what extent are youth in each neighbourhood able to benefit from social capital formation?
- d) what conditions are necessary to enhance or augment the benefits derived from youth social capital formation in these neighbourhoods?

The design of the study was based on the premise that youth social capital constitutes the set of resources that adolescents obtain through their relationships and social networks. These have been distinguished in this research project as *structural resources*, i.e., the entities (individual and groups) to which youth are connected, and *functional resources*, i.e., the nature and quality of the benefits that accrue from relationships (Bassani, 2007). Because of the quantitative and qualitative properties of social capital (Catts, 2007; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2007), a mixed methods approach to research fieldwork was adopted. Each case study began with a baseline review of neighbourhood circumstances that involved observations and document collection. This was followed by the administration of an orally conducted “youth social capital survey” delving into the sources and effects of support for young people living in these respective neighbourhoods. Following preliminary analysis of the survey results, the teams then explored the qualitative dimensions of social capital formation through a series of focus group interviews with youth and with the staff of various youth service organizations

working in these neighbourhoods or elsewhere in the larger urban areas.

While much of the fieldwork was conducted at the neighbourhood level of each case study site, the research teams likewise took into consideration the social ecology of youth social capital formation within each urban and national context. This was critical in view of the considerable differences in systems of governance, quality of education, income levels, employment opportunities, and availability and distribution of resources across the three urban sites. A key comparative assumption was that these differences would figure significantly in explaining the extent of social capital formation in each neighbourhood and the extent to which youth were able to benefit from the acquisition of social capital. In addition, however, a further comparative objective of the overall research project was to elicit possible insights and lessons from each case study that might contribute to more generalized academic and policy-oriented discourse on youth social capital formation in Northern as well as Southern countries.

What follows is a brief synopsis of each of the case studies as presented in the more detailed technical reports submitted by each research team. This is followed by a discussion of the differentiated effects of the ecological dimensions of youth social capital formation in the three different countries, as well as a review of several commonalities across the case study findings. The report concludes with reflections on insights and potential lessons drawn from the study as a whole.

#### San Salvador: Emmanuel and Raúl Rivas

The study was conducted by a research team from IUDOP in conjunction with the staff of a local NGO, Fe y Alérgia, that provides social services to the two neighbourhood sites of the study – Emmanuel and Raúl\_Rivas. In view of the specific context of San Salvador, the team defined social capital as follows: “A set of tangible and intangible resources available through relationships at individual, family, community and institutional levels that facilitate the improvement of living conditions and function as protective factors that can help prevent or reduce adversities such as violence and insecurity. These resources include trust, reciprocity, social networks, and cultural norms that enable [peaceful] co-existence.” This view of social capital places singular emphasis on safety and security. In a society where violence is a major social problem, social capital is seen as key protective factor – “a set of attributes that simultaneously favours individual and group development and enables them to control the propensity to violence and to reduce its incidence and the damage that it inflicts.”

The preoccupation with security is reflected in the descriptive overview of the social problems of both neighbourhoods. The most obvious challenge is the lack of physical space. These neighbourhoods consist of small row houses lined up along either side of narrow overcrowded alleyways that are closed off by a concrete wall at one end and metal doors that are locked at night at the other. Each alleyway, or “sector”, constitutes a closed sub-community within the neighbourhood. Paraphrasing IUDOP’s description of Emmanuel, “There are no positive public spaces. Family recreational activities in the community are confined to a small sports pitch in Sector 2 of Emmanuel.” Communal

activity is therefore mostly confined to the narrow space of each alleyway, to the sports pitch, or to the grounds of *Fe y Alegría* that is situated adjacent to Emmanuel.

Both neighbourhoods are impoverished, with the average monthly family income amounting to just under \$230, which is well below the estimated national average. Family life is challenging. Through extensive interviews, youth indicated that parental communication is generally authoritarian. Dialogue with youth, and listening to the opinions of children and adolescents, are not commonplace practice by parents and other adult family members. Fathers are frequently absent, and when they are present, they tend to exercise authority in violent and abusive ways.



Above all, however, violence and lack of safety are the greatest sources of concern in the two neighbourhoods. Young people live in almost constant fear for their physical security, and at night personal safety usually translates into self-confinement within the limited space of home. Youth fear other youth from other neighbourhoods, and they fear the police. Indeed, apart from public schooling, the only other significant governmental presence in the lives of young people is the police, and this is a relationship that youth unanimously characterize as abysmal – marked by repression and violence. Because they live in Emmanuel and Raúl\_Rivas, they are stigmatized and targeted for harrassment and worse by the police. Prevention of violence, a sense of safety, and opportunities to leave the confines of the neighbourhood therefore constitute the immediate aspirations of young people.

Given these neighbourhood parameters, the sources of social capital tend to be equated with relationships that provide a sense of safety and protection. These include family members (primarily mothers, and other females such as aunts, sisters, and grandmothers), connections with friends and other members of the community (specifically those living in the same alleyways), schooling (more than half the young people interviewed were attending school), places of work (mostly specialized and low-paid trades), and participation in activities sponsored by three civil society organizations – *Fe y Alegría*, *Pro-Jovenes*, and *Servicio Social Pasionista* (SSPAS). To varying degrees, these organizations offer cultural activities, recreational sports, and technical training. They also provide safe space for peers to gather and interact. Besides specific family members,

other individuals who provide support and a sense of safety are close friends, teachers, and religious leaders.

Fe y Alegría is the most prominent of the three NGOs, and is appreciated for its outreach in “rescuing” vulnerable young people from gangs, drug use, and crime, and in helping to reduce unwanted teen pregnancies. Apart from the tangible skills training offered by this NGO, it also offers workshops designed to address problems related to self-esteem and uncertain youth identities, and to critical reflections concerning the cultural and attitudinal antecedents such as *machismo* and sexism that underlie the norms of violence and abuse.



Fe y Alegría is an important institutional source of social capital for youth in Emmanuel and Raúl Rivas, but overall the benefits of the connections with this NGO are limited. As the IUDOP study revealed, it is essentially the main institutional source of ongoing programmatic support for children and youth in the two neighbourhoods. Except for sporadic connections that a few young people are able to make through their affiliation with Fe y Alegría, it is essentially a restricted space that offers minimal additional networking possibilities. Evidence also suggests that in terms of its administration, it tends to function in a top-down manner, with very limited engagement of young people in decision-making or in the assumption of organizational responsibilities. It therefore does not appear to address the authoritarian divide and skewed power dynamics that exacerbate the marginalization and dependent nature of youth relations with adults.

Notions of youth participation do not appear to figure in the procedures of Fe y Alegría or other institutional affiliations. Consequently, while community members appreciate the material and infrastructural benefits accruing from the presence of this NGO, there is no sense of involvement in community-based development and organizational decision-making. In sum, while Fe y Alegría and other less prominent organizations are appreciated as sources of protection and safety for young people, they are essentially disconnected from government and from potential institutional networks involving other NGOs and community based organizations.

### Nicaragua: Salomon Moreno

Salomon Moreno is a social environment of cyclical risk for young people. It is a community defined by poverty, unemployment and low-paid work, family fragmentation, virtually no space or opportunities for organized recreation, and inadequate availability of social programs and services. As outlined in the case study, it is likewise a neighbourhood that lacks a sense of communal solidarity. In this context, frustration and despair have generated a culture of routine violence and drug abuse that further exacerbates family stress and the cycle of poverty. In sum, it is a neighbourhood characterized by a paucity of capital – economic, cultural, and social. Consequently, the notion of youth social capital formation in Salomon Moreno relates essentially to the fortification of youth resilience in avoiding the spiral of violence, crime, and drug addiction. This is usually achieved by attending and succeeding in school or in obtaining a steady job, or both.

This focus on youth resilience is critical, because as the study highlights, despite the generally bleak environmental scenario, there are, or have been, sources of support that have helped to enhance youth resilience and have enabled some young people to secure educational and occupational benefits. These sources of support can be grouped into five primary categories – family (generally mothers); schooling; the NGOs which have offered intermittent community-oriented activities in the neighbourhood over the years; the Evangelical (Protestant) church; and occasional interventions initiated by several government entities. In each case, however, the five categories of support are limited in their efficacy by numerous constraints, all related in one way or another to poverty and lack of resources.



Most families are burdened by the pressures of unemployment or low paid employment, and by frequently tenuous parental ties. The fathers of many children have abandoned their families, leaving mothers and older children responsible for income and household management. Family relations are often strained as well by common instances of domestic violence, and by alcohol and drug abuse. Such is the significance of family relationships for the development of young people that CEPREV, an NGO that has

worked in the community over the past decade, has focused much of its attention on family education, with a particular objective of reducing domestic violence and fomenting alternative strategies of anger management and the exercise of parental authority. This focus on the family appears to be well-founded, for evidence from the study clearly demonstrates that youth socialization is very much shaped by the extent of family support, particularly from mothers. The implication is that more support for families and for mothers, and heightened sensitization of fathers and other family members, would likely enhance youth social capital formation in the neighbourhood.

Schooling is likewise both highly significant and deeply flawed as a source of youth social capital in Saloman Moreno. The study highlights the obvious goal-oriented nature of formal education, and the merits of simply being in school as opposed to languishing at home, drifting in the streets, or toiling at low skilled, low paid work. In addition, the mentorship of some individual teachers is deemed to be highly beneficial for young people, both in terms of affection and confidence-building, but also in terms of occasional resource assistance that has enabled young people to continue in school. Yet as the study also reveals, the efficacy of teacher mentorship and the institution of schooling are severely hindered by the paucity of educational resources as reflected in outworn and inadequate school infrastructure, classroom overcrowding, lack of books and pedagogical materials, and low salaries and lack of professional development for teachers. A further handicap is the lack of teacher/parent communication and limited parental engagement in children's education. Similar to its conclusion concerning support for families, the study affirms the necessity of strengthening the education of children and adolescents in Salomon Moreno, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as a basis for improving youth social capital formation.



The three NGOs cited in the study – Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (CEPREV), Fundación Nicaragua Nuestra (FNN), and Don Bosco – have extended diverse forms of social assistance in the community, but have done so largely in a fragmented and intermittent manner. Consequently, for the most part they appear to have had a limited effect on community development or in establishing long term mechanisms of support for young people. Many interlocutors in the study were only vaguely aware of these organizations, and could not refer to any particular activities sponsored by them or

benefits accruing from them. It does seem, however, that a little over ten years ago, a coalescence of NGO and government initiatives did help to curtail youth gang activity in Salomon Moreno, and to this day youth gangs have not reappeared in any visible form in the neighbourhood. Yet this joint thrust at reducing youth gangs did not translate into further collaborative endeavours for a variety of reasons: changes in local government leadership; limited NGO resources and the decision to focus on other priority areas in other neighbourhoods; the tendency to regard other organizations as competitors for scarce resources and external funding, and hence the inclination to favour institutional autonomy over institutional collaboration.

As the study reveals, one nongovernmental organization does appear to have had a stronger degree of influence among young people in Salomon Moreno. This is the Evangelical (Protestant) Church (*Iglesia evangélica*). To a large extent the positive influence of the church is due to four factors: the permanence of the church as a neighbourhood institution, the relative strength and continuity of its resource base, its evangelical mission of extending spiritual succour to the community, and the ongoing presence of the church pastor in the life of the community. Interview data revealed that affiliation with the Evangelical Church, and relationships developed with the pastor and others in the church congregation, have proven to be beneficial for young people, both in terms of their psychological and spiritual wellbeing, but also in terms of guidance and motivation to steer clear of drugs and criminal behavior and to pursue their education and efforts for dignified work. Nonetheless, as the study also indicates, despite its contribution to the neighbourhood, the church has relatively little collaborative relationship with other secular organizations, thus confining its effectiveness within the parameters of its own institutional mandate.

Government initiatives have largely emanated from three sectors: the police, the Ministry of the Family (MIFAMILIA), and the Youth Secretariat (*Secretaria de la juventud*). Yet these initiatives have largely been sporadic and short term, dependent on individual leadership and limited resources. There has been relatively little coordination with NGOs and other civil society organizations, and no concerted engagement of local community leadership beyond political posturing. Indeed, a difficulty underlying the lack of government/civil society collaboration has been the tendency towards the politicization of government initiatives and of community responses to state interventions. Political polarization is a feature of state activity in Nicaragua, and this has tended to hinder efforts to ensure a more apolitical collaborative role of government in community development efforts.



In sum, the case study in Salomon Morena highlights both the substantial disadvantages and risks confronting most youth living in the community and the corresponding limitations of social capital formation in this neighbourhood context. Yet many youth appear to be resilient, and gang activity has been more or less non-existent in the community for over ten years. The sources of social capital formation, tenuous as they are, have been clearly identified, and this points to two fundamental policy directions required for strengthening these sources – more resources directed towards improving the quantity and quality of the sources of social capital, and much more coordination among all the key institutional entities to which young people are affiliated and upon which they depend for their development.

#### Ottawa: Britannia Woods

This study was conducted in the low-income multi-ethnic social housing community of Britannia Woods. The study was conducted in conjunction with the staff of Britannia Woods Community House (BWCH), along with the assistance of several youth from the neighbourhood. By day Britannia Woods is a visibly peaceful neighbourhood, but at night drug trafficking has long been a source of consternation, particularly among parents concerned about the welfare of their children. Although outbreaks of violence are rare, on a few occasions the community has been the scene of stabbings and gunshots, and this has attracted media attention and fostered popular perceptions of the community as a flashpoint for crime and violence.

In addition to the common methodological approach of all three case studies noted above, in order to gain insights into the social ecology of youth social capital formation, this study also entailed an analysis of the published mandates of various Ottawa city youth social assistance agencies and a series of interviews with several youth service personnel.



Findings from the survey, reinforced by the focus group interviews as well as through the extensive knowledge that BWCH staff have of the neighbourhood, confirmed that the majority of youth living in Britannia Woods have had to deal with challenges that most urban Canadian young people do not confront. Close to 75% of the youth interviewed in the survey were first generation immigrants, and for the majority English or French is a second language. Most of them had experienced transitions from one residence to another before their families were able to obtain social housing in Britannia Woods. More than half the youth surveyed lived with single mothers, and a smaller number lived with single fathers or other relatives. Many parents or household heads were either jobless or were engaged in low paid shift work.

Although Britannia Woods is stigmatized by its reputation as a focal point of crime and violence, and while youth are sensitive to being typecast as “ghetto” inhabitants by non-residents and peers from other neighbourhoods, a clear majority of them indicated that they were quite content to live in the neighbourhood. Personal relationships were rated highly among the youth, with the greatest appreciation expressed for the support provided by mothers and by close friends. Youth also accorded high ratings to BWCH staff, and to numerous teachers and other adults and mentors whose purposeful relationships with young people demonstrate a desire to accommodate and support them.

Apart from personal relationships, all youth in Britannia Woods have access to generally excellent schooling, and most have participated in various learning and recreational activities made available by BWCH in their own neighbourhood. Many have also had easy access to a number of community recreation centres outside of Britannia Woods, and some have participated in organized sports leagues and as members of musical and artistic groups. A number of youth have also had part-time work opportunities, particularly during the summer months, and many regularly attend places of worship as venues for socializing and reflection. In effect, through an array of personal and institutional connections, youth in Britannia Woods have access to a host of structural resources both within as well as outside their immediate neighbourhood context.



Findings from the survey and focus groups also revealed that youth have benefited substantially from the social resources acquired through these connections. The survey results show consistently high levels of school attendance and, despite some youthful complaints about particular teachers, correspondingly high levels of appreciation for school. Given the explicit mandate of schooling – the provision of formal education and socialization for long term productive citizenship – the educational success of almost all youth in Britannia Woods has been both a source and an outcome of social capital. Similar results and conclusions stem from the evidence of participation in, and appreciation for, other institutional connections, all of which are oriented towards engaging youth in learning, recreation, and social activities that foster skills development and goal-setting in safe social environments. In a neighbourhood whose reputation has been tarnished as a site of drug trafficking and periodical violence, the fact that the great majority of young people have not been drawn towards youth gangs or into the cycle of illicit drug dealing and violence is itself a positive outcome of the acquired social capital that facilitates access to other more benign benefits.

When asked in the survey to identify specific difficulties that they faced, the majority of youth either stated that they had no serious problems or they pointed to difficulties in school, largely to be interpreted as the academic and social challenges that most students face in schools. This was confirmed when the great majority of youth respondents identified school academic achievement alongside the acquisition of jobs and money as their short term goals. For all of them, the primary long term goal is the same – attainment of satisfying steady employment. In their current context, they are all fully apprised of the necessity of education and skills development to achieve such a goal. From the perspective of BWCH staff who have extensive familiarity with many youth in the neighbourhood, it was clear that the great majority of these young people were confident that through a combination of ongoing support and personal effort they would achieve these goals.

### Contrasting Structural Circumstances

As the studies in El Salvador and Nicaragua demonstrate, the communities of Emmanuel, Raúl\_Rivas, and Salomon Moreno are freighted with myriad social and economic difficulties that are in fact offshoots of broader structural problems that extend well beyond the limits of these communities. The issues of poverty, unemployment, domestic

abuse and family fragmentation, high levels of crime, drug trafficking and violence, and corresponding sentiments of insecurity and fearfulness are all derivatives of historically limited economic development, stark income disparities, governance by and for entrenched elite interests, a weak middle class, and the politics of polarization and violent conflict. These are circumstances that have led to widespread corruption, mistrust, and the incursion of organized crime and youthful neighbourhood gangs.

All of this constitutes a phenomenal set of structural barriers that militate against impoverished communities and the prospects of young people growing up in such communities. They also serve as major constraints for the establishment of institutional initiatives capable of providing collaborative and sustainable forms of social assistance for young people. Exacerbating these structural constraints, in both El Salvador and Nicaragua, for historical and cultural reasons, violence is a normative feature of popular discourse, both as a means of legitimate control and as a form of extra-legal resistance. In these circumstances, youth social capital formation tends to be regarded as mainly a basis for cultivating resilience and eschewal of the cycles of crime, violence, and drug abuse.

In stark contrast, in Ottawa it was clear that youth in Britannia Woods are for the most part availed of ample social capital that stems from multiple relationships and opportunities. As discerned in the interviews conducted with youth service providers and the mandates of various youth service organizations, it is evident that youth social capital formation has been a function of what Pierre Bourdieu captured in his conceptualization of *field*. Throughout the city of Ottawa a field of child and youth support that engages hundreds of organizations and community groups, many of which are directly or indirectly supported by both municipal and provincial governments, has become a staple of civic life. It is a field that connects professionals, volunteers, and myriad private and corporate donors, all united by a common discourse that espouses investment of time and resources for the development and wellbeing of marginalized and low-income youth. This is a goal that is reinforced by the city's Poverty Reduction Strategy which emphasizes "building a community of inclusion and belonging".

Yet as the study also concludes, the strength of the field of child and youth support in Ottawa is itself a function of an affluent socio-economic environment. Ottawa is fortuitous in having the combination of a strong local economy (albeit with pockets of poverty), generally high levels of education and civic awareness among its population, with many opportunities for further education for adolescents and adults alike, popular media that are reasonably informative and balanced in their coverage of local issues and events, and vigorous connections between civil society and municipal and provincial levels of government. The political, economic, and social dynamics of the city clearly help to sustain the field of child and youth support, and by extension youth social capital formation in Britannia Woods.

Yet conversely, the field of youth support is an offshoot of a strong collective sense of the interconnectedness of individual, community, and regional wellbeing that permeates Ottawa's urban political economy. As revealed in this study, youth social capital

formation is part of this broader social ecology that involves the coordination of multiple activities and services, outreach among local communities, ongoing advocacy and media savvy, a constant quest for resources, and vigilance of the multiple sources of risk that prey on adolescent vulnerability..

In contrast, as noted above, in both San Salvador and Managua youth social capital formation remains constrained by profound structural barriers. In addition, there is a singular lack of a civic field of youth support in both these Latin American cities. For this to occur would require a combination of local and political leadership generating a concerted professional as well as popular commitment to youth that would be tantamount to a burgeoning social movement. Such an endeavour invites further inquiry and social activism.

### Commonalities of Youth Social Capital Formation in the Three Case Study Sites

Despite the extraordinary differences across the three urban contexts in which these three studies were undertaken, they nonetheless have helped to draw attention to the contours of youth social capital formation that are common across the three case study sites. In effect, the studies have identified five shared aspects of youth social capital that can serve as a basis for both scholarly rumination and policy deliberations.

#### *The Prevailing Tension of Risk and Protection*

In all three case study contexts – low-income communities – a continuing preoccupation for concerned parents and youth service providers is presence of potential and actual risks that confront young people who are not availed of opportunities to develop in healthy, constructive ways, and who lack the means to connect with such opportunities. The potential risks are extensive and generally – although not universally – associated with poverty. First and foremost they begin with problems associated with the household, notably family disruption and limited family resources due to unemployment or low paid employment, but generally as well barriers to education and recreation. These difficulties in turn can give rise to a sense of alienation and psychological distress, and a propensity to be drawn into risky behaviours – crime and violence, gang membership, unprotected sexual activity, and drug abuse. Regardless of the relative prevalence of these risks, a key impetus underlying youth social capital formation is the socialization of young people in ways that will initially protect them from such risks, but more significantly will provide them with the resources and wherewithal to withstand these risks and pursue developmental paths that are beneficial to their short-term and long-term wellbeing.

#### *Institutional Continuity*

The three case studies also highlight the significance of continuity in relationships. This is as applicable to institutional support as it is to supportive individual ties. Despite the experiences of family fragmentation and other difficulties associated with family life that were identified by many youth who were surveyed in these studies, family relationships are perennial, and therefore, not surprisingly, the majority of young people in the three

studies referred to family connections, and particularly the role of the mother, as singularly important. After family, schooling is the institution to which most children and adolescents are affiliated for several years at least, and here again the daily connection with school and concurrent relationships with teachers are deemed to be significant.

Nevertheless, while family and school are important for youth in low income communities, what is equally apparent in all three case studies is the value of the ongoing presence of other institutional supports mechanisms – notably *Fe y Alegría* in Emmanuel and Raúl Rivas, the Evangelical Church in Salomon Moreno, and Britannia Woods Community House in Britannia Woods. To varying degrees, each of these community-based organizations is valued by young people not just for the programs that they offer, but as well for the continuity of the relationships that they facilitate. In contrast, organizations that provide activities for short periods of time but offer no longevity in terms of their presence do not have the same positive impact.

In addition, however, whereas continuity of specific institutions is important, even more effective is the continuity of *institutional collaboration*, particularly when the nature of collaboration is oriented towards ongoing youth support. This was more evident in Ottawa, where a common field of youth support has emerged.

### *The Imperative of Safe Spaces*

An aspect of youth social capital formation in all three contexts is the imperative of safety, and particularly physical spaces that enable young people to congregate, play, socialize, and learn free from fears of immediate tangible and intangible violence. Access to safety is a resource that is itself beneficial – physically and psychologically – and facilitates the acquisition of other resources. Despite the varied difficulties that many families experience in all three of the case study sites, it was apparent that many young people do consider home and family as places of safety. While biological parents are generally regarded as primary caregivers, in all sites mothers tend to play the dominant role in ensuring the home as a safe haven for children and adolescents.

Yet family and home by themselves are insufficient, largely because safety within the family is limited to a micro-level. In addition, what appears to be critical for youth social capital formation is the existence of public spaces of safety. Schools are ostensibly the most prominent of such spaces, largely because of their educational mission and the length of time that children and adolescents spend in school classrooms and on school grounds. Yet there is ample evidence worldwide that schools can be, for many young people, sources of coercion, consternation and violence. Equally important, and sometimes more so, are spaces that are provided and organized by various forms of youth social assistance – community centres, churches, and numerous easily available sites that offer recreation, sports, arts, entertainment, and informal socializing (“hanging out”), all of which offer protection from unpredictable violence and other forms of risk.

### *Mentorship*

The three case studies all highlight the significance of older individuals who provide children and adolescents with care and guidance. Invariably many of these individuals are parents, notably mothers, but as well other older family members – grandparents, aunts and uncles, and older siblings and cousins. Again, however, family mentors are situated at a micro-level, and although they generally facilitate connections and the establishment of relationships beyond the family sphere, it is mentorship within the context of non-family relationships that appears to be crucial for young people in the three case study sites. Relations with specific teachers, with community youth workers, and with religious leaders are commonly cited as having fortified young people with confidence and direction, and with the capacity to build on and extend the resources of education and social networking that are available to them.

### *Youth Agency*

All three case studies likewise provide clear evidence of youth agency – the propensity of young people to reflect on their circumstances, and accordingly make choices and take actions that befit these circumstances as they see them. When availed of the opportunity to attend school, particularly when this is reinforced by good quality teaching and family support, invariably children and youth opt to continue regularly with their schooling, with a better than even chance of succeeding academically. Conversely, where the chance for a good education is diminished because of poor conditions at school and lack of family support resulting from a host of reasons ranging from parental disinterest to household poverty, there is much greater likelihood that children will abandon school in favour of seeking work to augment family income. In situations where opportunities for school, recreation, and work are severely restricted, and where the avenues for remuneration and a semblance of dignity lead to crime and gang membership, there is a much higher probability that youth, particularly males, will opt for this latter line of action.

Youth actions are strongly affected by prevailing structures and forces within their social environments. When opportunities and constructive support are denied to them, children in low-income urban situations are vulnerable to a plethora of risks, and many will drift into actions that mirror sentiments of alienation, frustration, and resistance. The notion of *structuration* – the interconnectedness of structure and agency – is pertinent to a consideration of the lives of young people in each of the three case studies.

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In view of these common features of youth social capital formation, it is reasonable to assume that despite considerable contextual differentiation across the different neighbourhood sites, the three case studies offer cumulative insights that suggest or confirm several constructive policy directions and program strategies for enhancing the long term welfare of youth.

## Policy & Program Implications

Social capital formation is a useful conceptual and empirical rationale for developing and investing in social programs that generate constructive activities and supportive relationships for young people, particularly those who are living in situations of poverty and socio-economic alienation. The expansion of youth social capital, and hence the capacity of young people to secure or increase socio-economic benefits by drawing on the skills and knowledge accruing from social networks, is clearly a more enlightened policy approach to youth poverty and the potential for youth crime and violence than are conventional (and ultimately wasteful) punitive crime control approaches to youth containment. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that social capital formation must not be considered as a panacea for youth or for the communities and the broader social context that must respond to urgent youth needs. Policies and program initiatives directed towards the strengthening of various forms of capital within the context of neighbourhoods and households cannot be expected to function as counterweights to the structural barriers of poverty, unemployment, and organized crime. Similarly, relations of trust, cooperation, and collaboration, which are inherent precepts of social capital formation, cannot be sustained in environments where violence is a primary form of conflict resolution, and where social atomization, the politics of polarity, and winner-take-all competition nullify effective civic association and mobilization.

That being said, the results of this collaborative research do suggest that there is room for local level initiatives that can make a difference for young people at local levels and, by extension, for their communities. Drawing upon the three case studies, therefore, this report concludes by proposing that youth social capital formation has considerable merit as both a means and an end of community development interventions. For this to be truly effective, however, in all contexts youth social capital formation as a policy approach requires the following:

- a) adequate and sustainable resources for all supportive endeavours, but most notably for children's schooling, for after-school recreation, and for various forms of nonformal learning and skills acquisition activities, all in areas that afford safety;
- b) substantial forms of support for families, such as free and easily available parental education, and for increased family outreach, communication, and consultation with family heads of household (notably mothers);
- c) the active participation of families and – most significantly, in acknowledgment of youth agency and the inherent longing for young people to participate, to learn, and to attain a sense of dignity – youth themselves in decision-making and implementation of community-level interventions that are designed to enhance their wellbeing.
- c) enhanced long term institutional collaboration at all levels, and among diverse governmental and nongovernmental sectors, whereby the allocation of resources and social assistance is founded on principles of sharing and mutually determined

comparative advantage rather than on competition and autonomous proprietorship.

- d) the cultivation of a shared civic “field” of youth support, tantamount to a social movement, that is bound by a common discourse of the universality of the rights and fundamental worthiness of all youth.

### Post-Project Activities

This project has generated interesting findings that will contribute to scholarship on youth social capital and, we believe, to reflections on youth-related policy formulation and program implementation. In addition, the project has led to the establishment of an excellent working relationship among the three research teams. Consequently, during the next year substantial time will be devoted to disseminating the results of this research project and to exploring further collaborative activities.

Dissemination will consist of the following:

- publication of a jointly authored paper which elaborates on the themes of this report in a forthcoming special edition of the *International Journal of Children’s Rights*;
- presentation of a paper at the 2013 LASA conference which elaborates on the themes of this report – title of the proposed abstract: *Youth Social Capital Formation in El Salvador and Nicaragua: Case studies of prospects and limitations*
- publication of several articles focusing on each of the case studies in national and international journals;
- publication of a book-length manuscript of the Nicaraguan case study, which will be preceded by a series of post-project seminars with government and NGO representatives designed to review the project results and discuss policy and program implications.

Exploration of collaborative activities will consist of the following:

- Given the successful involvement of several Britannia Woods youth in the Ottawa case study, the possibility of developing a youth-inspired action research project in conjunction with Britannia Woods Community House will be explored.
- In line with team discussions at the IUDOP office in El Salvador in July 2011, we will explore the possibility of developing a collaborative project on the relationship between police and youth in low-income neighbourhoods, with a particular focus on ways to enhance the constructiveness of this relationship in terms of safety and social capital formation.

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