Homies Unidos, El Salvador

Peer Education with Gang Members: Protecting Life and Health

By Magdaleno Rose-Avila

Homies Unidos was created in 1996 in El Salvador by rival gang members who came together to find a better and safer life without violence. The organization is dedicated to providing educational and employment opportunities for young men and women (ages 8-35, although a majority are under the age of 24), so that they can find ways out of their violent lifestyle.

The twelve-year war in El Salvador caused millions to flee to the United States. Salvadoran parents worked two or more jobs, and their children were left to fend for themselves. In order to survive racism and alienation, children as young as eight or nine often turned to the streets, where they were recruited, sometimes forcibly, into gangs, which became their instant friends and family. With the end of the war, many young Salvadorans were deported to their home country, and with them took the language, hairstyles, clothes, signs and discipline of the US gangs. This expulsion added more violent gang members into a less organized and violent local gang culture already in existence in El Salvador.

Gang members live an accelerated life style; many do not reach their 25th birthday. They readily experiment with intravenous drugs, tattoos, unprotected sex, and violence, and seek to have a family and children before they are killed. They do not fear death; in fact, they accept it as an early interruption to their lives. Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, are not considered major factors in an already shortened life expectancy. Not only are they at risk for HIV due to their drug use, tattoos and unprotected sex, but gang members often lack access to health services and education. Many injured gang members are turned away from hospitals and clinics whose staff fear them, linking them with HIV/AIDS and/or violence.

The founders of Homies Unidos knew that they had to address both the physical violence, and the violence that comes with infections and illness. Thus they began the difficult task of convincing gang members of the need for protection during sex via an educational program to teach about sexually transmitted diseases. Homies’ director Jorge Rosales, developed workshops to reach out to our teenage population; the first of which was held during a weekend retreat, with 25 gang members. The gang members directed jokes and outrageous questions to Jorge, but at least he had their attention. Jorge found that he needed to be better at connecting with the gang members and translating medical terminology into street slang. The program decided
to use gang members familiar with the lifestyle, slang, and codes of conduct of gangs, to reach their own peers.

Claudia Reyes, a gang member now in her second year of medical school, has taken over all of the organization’s health-related programs. She has instituted an inoculation and blood typing program for members and beneficiaries; most youth have not had basic inoculations, and blood typing is crucial so that in the event they are injured in an accident or through gang or police violence, they will be able to get a blood transfusion immediately. Claudia has recruited other medical volunteers from her school and clinics, as well as obtained free vaccines and informational materials for the program.

Many gang members also seek information on health issues related to their sexual activity. They are most concerned about STDs, and may ask for condoms. This new openness about STDs has given rise to more educational efforts, namely a peer education program on STDs. Claudia also leads this program, training new peer counselors and working to develop a core group of youth trainers and educators.

The obstacles to peer education are numerous. Gang members and youth at high risk are reluctant to sit in workshops; Homies often coaxes them into participating by relating it to their self-interest and to specific cases that all know of in the community. There is also reluctance to talk about personal things, yet at the same time conversations about sex are not taboo. The program has had to find a space in the life of gang members where they feel comfortable and are willing to hear new information. Since most do not plan to live long, Homies Unidos works to provide a vision of a better and longer life so that youth have a reason to care about their health.

Lessons Learned

- Programs that want to reach an at-risk youth audience must look to youth leadership from the target population and train them to become the experts. Youth look to their peers and identify more readily with them than they do others. At Homies, youth serve as peer educators, as well as board members, fundraisers, and program staff.
- Programs must provide information appropriate to the level of knowledge and skills of the community, as well as use the slang of youth. Written information should be handed out to reinforce the messages of the training.
- Programs must make condoms available to youth, so that availability is not an excuse for lack of use.
- Programs should target young women. Sessions should emphasize negotiating skills so they can say no to unprotected sex, reinforce their self-esteem, and show them how to use condoms.
• Programs like this need to reach out to and raise awareness in the larger community, because youth pass on the education to family and friends.

Sexually transmitted diseases are a form of violence that can be diminished through education and practice. At Homies Unidos, we are changing—and saving—young people’s lives.

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Images for this issue on this disk:
Homies2.jpg
Homies4.jpg
Homies3.jpg
Homlogo.jpg

Captions:
(Homies2.jpg): Small group discussions give young men the opportunity to talk with their peers about health and other concerns.
(homies4.jpg): The inoculation program provides vaccines for members.

(homies3.jpg): Rap music is a popular venue for communicating messages that young people can relate to.

Text for highlight box: "If we are the problem, then we can be the solution." Hector Pineda, President, Homies Unidos