CRIME, VIOLENCE, AT-RISK YOUTH AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
by Lorena Cohan

The Latin America and Caribbean region has one of the highest levels of crime and violence in the world. While the average world homicide rate is 11 homicides per 100,000 residents, the rate in the LAC region is 36 per 100,000 (WHO, 2003). Crime and violence are now recognized as serious economic and social problems with very high economic and social costs, especially in poor urban areas. By some estimates, the region loses up to 14% of its GDP to violence. Particularly worrisome is the fact that youth in the region (typically defined as 15-24 year-olds) – and young men in particular - are disproportionately involved in violence, as both victims and perpetrators. As a case in point, the LAC region has the world's highest homicide rate of men between the ages of 15 and 29 (69 per 100,000), with perpetrators of violent crimes most often being young men between the ages of 16 and 25.

This note provides an overview of three sustainable tourism initiatives in the region that seek to link tourism-related activities with social programs that - by focusing on the most common types of risk factors - help prevent youth from becoming engaged in at-risk behavior, including crime and violence. All three of these initiatives were highlighted at the “Learning Event on Sustainable and Responsible Tourism in Latin America and the Caribbean,” which was held at the World Bank headquarters in Washington, DC from April 14-16, 2008. Although the initiatives described in this note have not yet undergone impact evaluations, they do provide promising ideas for future Bank operations that seek to link sustainable tourism and at-risk youth programs.

Factors Contributing to At-Risk Youth Behavior:

Research shows that the most common types of risk factors that contribute to youth becoming engaged in at-risk behavior can be classified into the following four categories: (i) societal (poverty, inequality, youth unemployment, ineffective criminal justice system, drug trafficking), (ii) community (lack of school access, school policies, availability of guns, prevalence of drugs, unsafe neighborhoods, and police abuse), (iii) relationships/family/peers (i.e. domestic violence, child abuse, corporal punishment), and (iv) individual (biological, i.e. being male; psychological/behavioral, i.e. degree of self regulation and self esteem; and low educational achievement; and environmental i.e. exposure to violence and conflict in the family, involvement with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco). The strongest protective factors – in other words, factors that reduce the likelihood that a young person will engage in risky behavior – have been shown to include parental and school connectedness, and positive role models.

What works to prevent youth from becoming engaged in at-risk behavior

Based on the knowledge of what are the most common types of risk and protective factors affecting the decision of youth on whether or not to become engaged in risky behavior, the following six types of programs have been identified as being most successful in terms of preventing youth from engaging in risky behavior, including crime and violence:

(i) Integrated early child development (ECD) programs
(ii) Secondary school completion
(iii) School-based prevention and mediation programs
(iv) Youth-friendly health and pharmaceutical services
(v) Use of the media for prevention messages
(vi) Improved parenting skills.

In addition, the following nine types of programs – although not supported with as much evidence as those described above – have also shown to be promising:

(i) Education equivalency and lifelong learning
(ii) Job training that includes technical skills training in addition to life skills (skills to develop the young person as a future worker)
(iii) Cash transfers for reducing risky behavior
(iv) Supervised and structured after-school programs
(v) Youth service programs
(vi) Mentoring programs
(vii) Youth employment services
(viii) Life skills training (i.e. self-concept skills, cognitive skills, and social skills)
(ix) Programs that support young entrepreneurs

How the Sustainable Tourism Industry can Help Support At-Risk Youth

The sustainable tourism industry has been a leader in the region in terms of leveraging the potential of at-risk youth, by providing them with the needed skills to develop into healthy, productive citizens, while also enabling them to make positive contributions to their communities and countries. Following experiences in Europe where tourism has been used successfully to give at-risk youth not only opportunities for life development but also for creating positive self-images, several sustainable tourism initiatives have been implemented in Latin America and the Caribbean, all of which seek to address the issue of crime and violence prevention through tourism, either specifically for at-risk youth, or for communities as a whole. These are presented here: (i) Sandals Beach Resort’s programs targeted towards at-risk youth; (ii) Panama’s Tourist Assistance Program for youth gang members; and (iii) Colombia’s Viento Solar Fundación Reserva Natural, which uses tourism to encourage peaceful and sustainable coexistence in a region troubled by conflict.

Sandals Beach Resort – Montego Bay, Jamaica

Sandals Beach Resorts can be considered a pioneer in terms of its involvement and commitment to the development of its surrounding communities. Sandals Beaches Resorts, which began their operations in 1981, requires that every resort operating under its banner adopt at least one community in close proximity to the resort. So far, Sandals Beaches Resorts have adopted 65 communities across the Caribbean. Also to its credit, 80% of the team members who are employed at Sandals Beaches Resorts are residents of the adopted communities.

Sandals Beach Resorts understands the importance of providing at-risk youth with opportunities for positive and productive activities. As such, the company has implemented several programs targeted towards at-risk youth, including mentorships, youth social clubs, safe sex programs, and community policing. Although these programs have not yet undergone rigorous impact evaluations, results so far have shown that there has been a reduction of violence among youth through gainful engagements to help them to become better citizens and people of the community.

In addition to programs targeted towards at-risk youth, Sandals Beach Resorts also runs various other types of community development programs, including: (i) providing technical and financial support and employment to fishermen, mechanics, farmers, and carpenters in the surrounding communities; (ii) staging reading fairs, medical fairs, environmental fairs, wellness fairs, and evening classes for residents; (iii) helping farmers become organized into cooperatives so that they are qualified to receive loans and other government benefits; and (iv) running its own HIV/AIDS Program, installing condom-dispensing machines in Sandals Resorts and in surrounding communities as well.

Sandals’ Outreach Program provides local communities with youth support programs.

Sandals’ Outreach Program also includes support to local farmers and artisans.
Tourist Assistance Program – San Felipe, Panama

San Felipe, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, is located in the old quarter of the San Felipe district, which is home to the historical, political, and financial center of Panama City. The San Felipe Tourist Assistance Program came about as a result of community leaders’ trying to reduce the high rate of youth delinquency in their neighborhood. These community leaders joined efforts with the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES), the police department, municipal authorities, the Church, as well as other community groups working with at-risk youth to create the program, which was launched in 2005 and which brought together over 200 youth gang members from four of the most aggressive gangs in the area (Ciudad de Dios, Chacales, Hijos Pródigos, and the Hot Boys).

The primary aim of the program was to try to change the negative perception that the youth held of tourists who were visiting the historic San Felipe neighborhood. Gang members cited their own scornful views of the tourists as their main reason for targeting tourists. The Tourist Assistance Program trained youth for an 8-month period, providing tourism-related skills (i.e. how to interact with tourists; background on history of the area); psychological and sociological support (i.e. ‘life skills’ such as self-esteem, motivation); free health care; as well as technical skills training, such as carpentry. Program administrators included psychologists, sociologists, social workers, as well as the tourism police.

The program faced several challenges, given the fact that its participants were former gang members, including: guaranteeing the security of the youth participants from rival gang members; dealing with violent deaths that occurred during the course of the program; drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases, and malnutrition among the participating youth.

However, with the budget of US$100,000 covering salaries for two and a half years and uniforms, the program managed to bring about new projects involving other young men and women from the area, new environment, and new aspirations, thanks to psychological aid to boost self esteem and motivation.

Viento en Popa Restaurant. Ecotourism promotes different employment and business options for the youth.

Viento Solar Fundación Reserva Natural – Colombia

Viento Solar Fundación Reserva Natural is a non-profit organization based in Colombia that promotes efforts to conserve nature and to improve the livelihoods of peasant communities, and develops options to live a more conscious and meaningful life, as a way of contributing to the consolidation of models of peaceful and sustainable coexistence. Members of the Viento Solar Fundación Reserva Natural include the Colombian Association of Civil Society Natural Reserves (RESNATUR), the National Network of Agro-tourism and Ecotourism Services (AGROECOTUR), and the Von Humboldt Institute Sustainable Ecotourism Network. What makes RESNATUR different from other eco-tourism operations is its location in the Magdalena valley of Colombia – right in the heart of guerrilla-paramilitary conflict. RESNATUR has achieved not only a form of environmentally-sustainable tourism, but a conflict-resolving tourism as well by virtue of its transformation of an area which Colombians avoided at all costs for safety reasons into one where they come to vacation in peace. Residents on both sides of the conflict have joined to put down their arms and offer security to the tourists, who in turn stimulate incomes and a sense of pride of place.

RESNATUR currently comprises 280 natural reserves, which are established throughout the country, and which, by promoting awareness, commitment, and social responsibility, encompass 64,000 hectares of conservation and social sustainability for peace. The AGROECOTUR Corporation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to sustainable development that respects the country’s community and cultural dynamics. Its objective is to promote the development and conservation of ethnic...
and peasant communities in conflict areas, through the implementation of a strategy aimed at integrated management, coordination, and strengthening. AGROECOTUR specifically works in two areas: (i) Biodiversity conservation; and (ii) Social development (productive/income-generating projects such as eco-tourism, agro-ecology, and handicrafts; health and basic sanitation; and education and culture). Its eco-tourism activities seek to promote awareness among the local population of the importance and opportunities of eco-tourism for economic, social, and cultural development, as well as seeing eco-tourism as an alternative for development and social equity, by providing different employment options than war/conflict-related activities. Specific activities include the participation of the local population, job, training, strengthening of cultural identity, and responsibility for protecting the environment.

Viento Solar is promoting ecotourism as part of its strategy of sustainable development and social equity, so that peasant youth can find sustainable and meaningful options for the future. Agro-ecotourism can strengthen nonviolence and generate different employment options than those of war-related business. In fact, Viento Solar’s ecotourism activities are contributing to creating tourism related jobs in the area such as boat crews, tour guides and restaurant staff. As such, Viento Solar’s work has generated direct impact in reducing violence in a very conflictive area by strengthening the communities economically and socially.

**Potential for the Future**

The initiatives described above all demonstrate the potential of the sustainable tourism industry to support the development of youth across the region and to reduce tension in conflictive areas. Improving the current situation of at-risk youth cannot be done with a single strategy: multiple, holistic, and cross-sectoral approaches are needed. Programs which have been proven to be most effective so far, and which the sustainable tourism industry could specifically focus in the future include: (i) job training in combination with life skills training; (ii) cash transfers to provide incentives for good behavior; (iii) supervised and structured recreation programs; (iv) youth service programs; (v) mentoring programs; (vi) programs that provide youth with job search skills; and (vii) programs that provide youth with entrepreneurship skills.

**About the Author**

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