

disenfranchised youth. Some children are targeted at school, bribed with gifts, and offered high-paying jobs. Others are coerced, threatened or kidnapped. Worldwide, some 20,000 children are used as drug runners in cities.⁴² For young people, gangs can be surrogates for families and friends, or sources of fear and insecurity.

Youth in gangs are disproportionately at risk of injury or death. Like child soldiers, the youngest gang members are generally sent into armed confrontations first. On average in 2000, two people under the age of 18 were killed every day in Medellín.⁴³ Young gang members are considered expendable and are relegated to the lowest tasks, including punishing disobedience with murder. As both victims and perpetrators of violence, children in armed gangs can be particularly dangerous if they are expected to prove themselves on the urban battleground.

In addition to organized armed groups, children growing up in slums face other human security threats. High levels of infectious disease threaten their health and lives. Children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS are at particular risk of abduction into gangs or domestic servitude. Moreover, in addition to risks of organized gangs, drugs, and small arms, children living in cities are also at heightened risk of involvement in human trafficking and the sex tourism industry. According to UNICEF, about one million children worldwide enter into the sex trade every year.⁴⁴

Youth-based initiatives have emerged as a positive approach to tackling gang problems. The NGO Viva Rio in Brazil has been a leader in integrating low-income youth in demobilization and empowerment efforts. Viva Rio helps to engage youth in community activities – including weapons collections and destruction, job creation, a student radio station, a boxing club, and microcredit schemes – to keep them off the streets. In Nigeria, the Niger Delta Youth for Peace programme was established in 2002 to collect small arms for cash. In juvenile prisons of Westbury, South Africa, youth use drama presentations and peer counselling to promote drug awareness and peaceful dispute resolution.⁴⁵ Taking a preventive approach can be particularly effective, since it is more difficult to access and negotiate with youth who are already involved in gangs. In Guatemala City, for example, youth organizations played a key role in helping persuade their peers to leave gangs by challenging the widely-held perception of gangs as a “rite of passage.”⁴⁶

⁴² UN-Habitat (2004), p.139.

⁴³ COAV (2006).

⁴⁴ Olori (2003).

⁴⁵ Dowdney (2003), p.309.

⁴⁶ Winton (2004), p.90.