Rebuilding Lives and a Culture of Peace in El Salvador

CRS’ Second Chances program works with inmates in El Salvador’s prisons to break the cycle of violence and become promoters of peace.

BACKGROUND
At Catholic Relief Services (CRS) we believe violence is the product of an unjust society, and that by addressing its root causes the cycle of violence entrapping generations of people in places like El Salvador can be broken. The Central American country signed a peace accord in 1992 after a 12-year civil war, yet peace remains a fragile concept. Salvadorans continue to struggle with violence, poverty and a lack of economic opportunities: conditions that drive people to seek asylum at the US border. In the Salvadoran prisons, violence is an everyday fact of life and the conditions in which inmates live often mirror the lives they led outside the walls. Every year, thousands of inmates are released back into society without having participated in any rehabilitation programs. Recidivism is high; too many inmates upon their release are shunned by their communities and are unable to find an employer who will hire them. They often return to a life of crime and violence and ultimately re-imprisonment. The vicious cycle continues.

THE PROJECT: SECOND CHANCES
Since the early 2000s, CRS through its YouthBuild program has worked with El Salvador’s street gangs and vulnerable youth to provide them with life skills and better employment and educational opportunities that help them become productive members of society.

In 2018, CRS extended those efforts to El Salvador’s prisons with the launch of Second Chances to prepare inmates with the life skills and job training they need to successfully reintegrate in and become

PROGRAM PARTNERS

- Directorate General for Prisons
- National Parole Board
- National Criminological Council
- Private employers like League Outfitters, CA, an apparel company that has trained and provided jobs to more than 30 former inmates

9
Number of prisons in El Salvador where Second Chances is currently active

13
Additional number of prisons that will replicate the program

670
Number of current and former inmates who have participated in the program

80
Number of prison guards trained in CRS’ Culture of Peace curriculum

600
Number of additional prison guards who will be trained
productive members of their communities. The 36-month long program, funded by the United States Department of State has two key objectives: to change violent behaviors and to prepare people for employment once they leave prison.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

Second Chances is based on the principles of restorative justice. CRS transforms the inmate’s ability to manage conflict and prepares them for productive lives after their release. Using evaluation tools developed by the Central American University, the CRS team has trained prison psychologists to identify lower-risk inmates, including former gang members, for early release and job placement programs. The program also supports inmates who are serving sentences for violent crimes by offering proven rehabilitation programs that teach anger management, communication and conflict resolution skills. Components of the program include:

Anger management. CRS is training and coaching prison officials to implement CRS’ “I Am READY!”, a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-informed (CBT) rehabilitation program. CBT is proven to reduce violence among inmates and recent parolees by teaching tangible skills. For example, “stop for six seconds” is one of the techniques our team teaches to inmates to stop and think before reacting to a tense situation.

Life skills and job skills. CRS is supporting El Salvador's National Parole Board to offer job skills, “soft” skills and employment counseling for newly released inmates. Family and social support programs, such as CRS’ Strong Families curriculum, are a critical success factor for released inmates to successfully reintegrate into their communities, particularly for those who have grown up exposed to violence in their homes.

Mentoring to promote peace. CRS’ Culture of Peace program is officially recognized as a rehabilitation program for the prisons. Graduates of the program, known as Peace Promoters, are now teaching the course for other inmates.

Dialogue. The Second Chances team also trains prison guards through its Culture of Peace curriculum to foster more positive interactions with inmates; and engages other organizations and private employers to provide parolees and former gang members with a pathway to employment opportunities in their communities.

CHANGE AND PEACE ARE POSSIBLE

More than 600 inmates in 9 prisons have gone through the program, with positive results.

Manuel*, an inmate in one of the prisons we worked with, recently shared his experience in using the six-second technique to intervene in and defuse a confrontation between two rival groups, avoiding what in the past would have resulted in violence and, likely, deaths.

“The six-second technique that was taught us, led me to make the right decision,” he said. “I realized that it is not with a sword, nor with sticks that others respect you. Dialogue is more important.”

“Many of us experience violence in our homes, where the parents were drug addicts, or alcoholics, or had fathers who mistreated our mothers and that environment led us to commit crimes,” Manuel added. “Before, I didn’t know how to handle my anger. Through these trainings we have realized how we should treat our family, ourselves and others.”

“Now we are partners on the same boat, rowing together and moving this place forward. One day we will be released and become productive people who will not be cast aside, nor marginalized, but rather, be seen as different people because the Culture of Peace has given us that opportunity.”

Second Chances proves that lives can change, people can choose peace over violence, and a nation traumatized by war can heal, if only given another chance.

*Name changed for security.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can ensure that peace-building programs like Second Chances continue to thrive by supporting the advocacy efforts of CRS in urging the U.S. government to maintain international cooperation resources for development. It is through these types of resources that programs such as Second Chances can transform lives. You can also make a donation to CRS in support of Second Chances and other CRS programs that help people build better lives in El Salvador and other countries around the world affected by war, violence and poverty. Visit www.crs.org to learn more.