

Between Bars and Brothels: 30 Schools in the “Danger Zone” [translated]

Villatoro Huezo, Clara. “Entre cantinas y burdeles: 30 escuelas en la “zona roja.” San Salvador: La Prensa Gráfica (a Salvadoran Daily). January 15th, 2006.

The following article describes conditions similar to those around Santa Luisa and the regulatory issues that maintain those conditions. Santa Luisa was not counted among the 30 schools because it is known as semi-public due to the assistance of the Daughters of Charity religious order.

Bars, brothels, drug labs, pool halls and show bars have nothing to do with education.

However, hundreds of students that will start classes tomorrow, in the city center of San Salvador, must cross streets and avenues where a large number of these businesses are located.

An investigation into the risk factors of schools by the police shows that in the municipality of San Salvador there are 30 schools labeled “most vulnerable” among the capital’s 348 educational centers.

The danger is the risk this atmosphere surrounding the schools represents for the minors, according to police.

For example, the Acción Cívica Militar School, at the intersection of Avenue Juan Pablo II and Celis Street, is surrounded by 35 brothels, three bars and a hangout for drug pushers, according to PNC (National Civil Police) data.

The list goes on with other educational institutes, public and private, where the students must commute daily between brothels, bars and drug pushers in order to arrive at their place of study.

The Problems

María Emma Posada, director of the Psychological Assistance Clinic at the Universidad Centroamericana (University of Central America, UCA), calls attention to the emergency, “In these areas the students are set-up to fall [into one of these problems]. This does not mean that they all imitate the situation, but the possibility is very high.”

Data from a 2005 study by the Anti-Drug Foundation of El Salvador (FUNDASALVA) reveals that at least half of young people with drug problems began consuming legal substances such as alcohol and tobacco at a young age.

Furthermore, they state that four in every 10 students between 12 and 17 years old consume illegal drugs.

For Posada, another important problem is that in the midst of the temptations and violence of the areas, it is possible that the students interpret as “normal” the role models and stereotypes that their surroundings present since they are at the age of identity formation.

Confronting the problem are different institutions that claim to have programs that propose solutions, but the truth is there are schools that will begin the year in conflict zones.

Institutions Throw the “Hot Potato”

Each institution claims to run programs on their own and even “compete” for their bounds.

“The sale or consumption of any type of alcoholic beverage is not permitted within 100 meters of health clinics, hospitals and educational institutions,” reads Article 13 of the Regulatory Ordinance of the Commercialization and Consumption of Alcoholic Beverages of the City of San Salvador. However, according to the very same PNC (Police), the law is not followed in many cases.

Inspector Otto Hugo Urrutia, chief of the Central Delegation Prevention Unit, affirms that there have been complaints by schools about the lack of respect for this law. “The most difficult part is that the establishments have a license and allege that they opened before the school. In those cases we cannot do anything more than reinforce vigilance because closing would compete with city hall,” assured Urrutia.

The “Responsibilities”

Ricardo Pérez, District Manager of San Salvador, recognized the problems of the schools and attributed it to the logic of the business owners. “If there is a school close to the bars, but the bars have their permits in order because they are old, we can only act if citizens denounce disturbances,” brandished Pérez.

He also assured that as a preventative measure, the municipality maintains a patrol by the Cuerpo de Agentes Metropolitano (CAM). “We do not regulate the permits of the educational institutions, maybe the ministry [of education] can do something to that regard,” he stated.

The Ministerio de Educación (MINED), by means of the National Youth Director, Silvia Martínez, assured, “We act within educational bounds. I believe that the regulation is the job of city hall in any case.” She affirmed that MINED supports the strengthening of values through diverse programs and psychological assistance, although she clarified that only 30 schools in the city have this service.