INSTITUTE FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
Proposed Student Research: Northwestern University Community-Based Research, 2018

**Project:** Adolescent Pregnancy and Social Exclusion among Nicaraguan Immigrants near Costa Rica’s Northern Border

**Key terms:** Migration, adolescent pregnancy, health care exclusion, transborder issues, youth, women

**ICADS General Description**

The Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS) has been working for 30 years in Central America to increase understanding of the region within a historical perspective; to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of root causes, forms and dimensions of underdevelopment and injustice; to stimulate critical evaluation of current development strategies, analyzing their effects on women, children, the poor, and the environment; and to search for alternative methods, policies, and strategies.

The mission of ICADS is two-fold:

- To educate participants about Central America by teaching Spanish and by offering academic programs that utilize a theoretically critical perspective as well as hands-on experience to help students deepen insights into current social, political and economic realities and their effects on the environment and society, especially the poor and marginalized.
- To provide support to organizations and communities throughout the countries where we work; especially to groups that have demonstrated a commitment to learning and/or are dedicated to social justice work in areas such as education, healthcare, human rights, anti-hunger issues, and environmental issues.

ICADS regular programs include internship opportunities with community organizations, and field research to help students explore topics related to social and environmental well-being. A strong staff of people from both Central and North America accompany students as they learn about themselves and the world.
Community Partner Description

CENDEROS (Center for Social Rights for Immigrants)

CENDEROS developed out of connections with the US Peace Corps, the University of Costa Rica, and the Central American University in Nicaragua. Its mission is to improve the quality of life for Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica as well as in cross-border zones. Through several civil society organizations, CENDEROS works on public policy and public participation issues, prevention of gender violence, dengue fever, and substance abuse, among other topics. One of CENDEROS main methods of work is to train youth and women to be health promoters with other youth and women. In addition, CENDEROS works with many government institutions in Upala, a municipality of Costa Rica that borders Nicaragua, including the Ministry of Public Education, Costa Rica’s comprehensive public healthcare system, the municipality of Upala, the Ministry of Health, and others. In addition to carrying out health fairs on both sides of the border, CENDEROS’ other projects include: community gardens and nutrition, suicide prevention, waste management, dengue prevention, and domestic violence response and prevention (especially in a border region where laws and institutional intervention can be more complicated than normal).

Social Issue Description

Despite Costa Rica’s high health indicators in most categories, it has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in Latin America, and the rate is increasing each year. Teen pregnancy often leads to girls dropping out of school and having difficulty finding work, thus continuing the cycle of poverty. Nicaraguan immigrant teenagers are disproportionately represented in this category. The government institutions that respond to the issues surrounding teenage pregnancy include Child Protective Services (PANI), the National Women’s Institute (INAMU), the Mixed Social Assistance Institute (IMAS), as well as other institutions such as the national police and health care system.
Research Project Description

The objectives of this project are to explore the possible connection between teenage pregnancy among Nicaraguan immigrants and exclusion from the Costa Rican public health care system. Specific objectives include learning about the participation of Nicaragua immigrant women in the Costa Rican health care system, understanding the context of teenage pregnancy in Upala, and isolating social exclusion from other possible factors that may be related to teenage pregnancy. (In 2017 a CBR Fellow began work on this project and made some preliminary conclusions. CENDEROS and other community members in Upala are interested in continuing this research. Ways to expand the project would be to refine the focus to Nicaraguan women, look for trends over time, identify other risks factors, etc. These can be decided upon in collaboration with ICADS and CENDEROS).

Community Partner Participation

CENDEROS works with a network of 56 health promoters at the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, women who are trained in addressing domestic violence and other issues affecting women. CENDEORS also has founded a Network of Immigrant and Transborder Youth, young people who have been trained in the same topics and who also work to train other youth through tools such as theatre, dance, and community research. These young people have conducted a census on gender and migration issues in their region, and would be a potential source of support to the Northwestern research student investigating teenage pregnancy. The youth could meet with the Northwestern student and discuss both objectives and methodology, and could possibly provide a team for data collection (further costs implied). A CBR Fellow would also have the opportunity to work with medical personnel at local clinics and hospitals.

Impact of this Project on the Community

The community of Upala is largely made up of Nicaraguans, as this area of the country was largely not accessible by road in Costa Rica for most of the country’s history. The rivers that connect the two countries provided a way for the area to be mostly populated by Nicaraguans. Today there is more attention paid to the Northern region of Costa Rica, of which Upala forms a part, with a stronger institutional presence. However, this institutional presence does not mean that all members of the community are included equally.
The exclusion of Nicaraguans in a transborder region with no official border checkpoints is a topic of great concern for CENDEROS. The Costa Rican government has approved a special identification card for transborder citizens, allowing them to move freely between the two countries in the 4-mile-wide border strip, though no person has yet been awarded this card. By understanding more about to what extent the important social issue of teenage pregnancy may be related to social exclusion in the area, CENDEROS can conduct focused political advocacy projects to seek change that would positively affect the region.

**Research Mentor and Mentorship Structure**

ICADS Research Mentors are Gabriel Vargas (Lic. in Sociology) and Matt Dearstyne (ICADS Assistant Director). The ICADS mentors will be the primary academic mentors during the project, and will help to develop objectives and provide feedback on the review of the literature. The ICADS mentors are based in San Jose and will be in contact with students via phone, email, and visits during the data collection phase of the project. The community mentors, in this case the leaders and health promoters of CENDEROS, will provide on-the-ground support during the data collection phase, providing feedback on objectives and methodology, as well as logistical and cultural support during the time in the field.

**Methodology**

This project will employ mixed methods, both statistical research using census data and institutional information about women’s health, and qualitative research using interviews or focus groups in the community of Upala. The qualitative methods will be determined in conjunction with the youth and women health promoters of the region.

Because underage, immigrant, pregnant women are a particularly vulnerable population, a researcher may consider not to talk to this group directly; instead, interviews or focus groups can be done with members of the community to learn about their perspectives, and mothers who are adults. By talking to adult mothers that may have become pregnant in their teens, the research could also focus in addressing trends over time and identifying other risk factors.

**Student profile and skills, including language requirements**
The student carrying out this type of research must be proactive and open minded. He/she must have an interest in Latin American studies and culture, and a sensitivity toward gender, youth, and intercultural issues. A background in Social Sciences is highly recommended, as well as knowledge in cultural studies, gender studies, health care or psychology, and transborder studies.

Intermediate/advanced Spanish needed.