



Performance Evaluation

Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) Small Grants Program (SGP)

FY2012 – FY2015



Brief on Khulisa Management Services' research study on the effects of community-based youth crime prevention interventions on citizen safety and state presence outcomes in the three countries of Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama.

U.S. Department of State (DOS), Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs' Office of Policy Planning and Coordination, Strategy and Resources Unit (WHA/PPC/SRU)

Cover Photograph

Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy Belmopan - High school beneficiaries of the CARSI SGP grant titled "Innovative Training for Secondary School Teachers in Belize: Providing Educational Methods to Actively Engage Students in the Classroom and in Extra-Curricular Activities" implemented by PathLight International in Belize.



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Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy San Jose - High school participants from the entrepreneurship and English language training program implemented by Fundacion Monge in Costa Rica under the CARSI SGP grant titled “Employability Model Soy Cambio”.



What is CARSI SGP?

The Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) Small Grants Program (SGP) is a community-based crime and gang prevention program that focuses on advancing economic and social programming for at-risk youth and communities disproportionately affected by crime. It seeks to achieve this by providing educational, recreational, vocational, and employment opportunities for at-risk youth, and the larger communities in which they live.

The CARSI SGP, which focuses on Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama, is a component of the larger Central America Regional Security (CARSI) program that fits into the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. The goals (or pillars) of CARSI are:

1. **Safe Streets:** Streets free of crime and violence will foster social and economic opportunity for the citizens of Central America.
2. **Disrupt the Movement of Criminals and Contraband:** Preventing the transit of criminals and contraband to, through, and within Central America will reduce the ability of organized crime to conduct their illicit activities and perpetuate the cycle of violence in the region.
3. **Strong, Capable and Accountable Governments:** Governments free of corruption, possessing political will and maintaining properly trained and resourced law enforcement, rule of law and community action programs can counter cultures of lawlessness.

4. **Effective State Presence in Communities at Risk:** Governments must maintain law enforcement, judicial, social, and educational capacity, and services to counter the activities and influence of organized crime.
5. **Enhanced Levels of Cooperation:** Threats to citizen safety represent regional challenges, requiring the development of coordinated action plans by Central America, Colombia, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

From FY 2012 to FY 2015, CARSI SGP sought to support the first and fourth of the CARSI goals: safe streets and increased state presence in communities at-risk in Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama.

First initiated in 2012 partly in response to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) closing its operations in Belize and Costa Rica in 1996 and Panama in 2012, the program's investments of nearly \$15.5 million in foreign assistance Economic Support Funds (ESF) have impacted over 28,000 people across all countries from FY 2012 – FY 2015.

During this period, CARSI SGP funds supported 70 grants through 49 distinct local and international NGOs. Grants are managed at each target country's Embassy under the guidance and support of State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA).



What was being evaluated?

In 2018, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs' Office of Policy Planning and Coordination, Strategy and Resources Unit (WHA/PPC/SRU) commissioned Khulisa Management Services to conduct a performance evaluation of CARSI SGP-funded interventions implemented in Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama between FY 2102 - FY 2015. The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of CARSI SGP in meeting specific objectives, specifically:

1. To what extent, if any, has CARSI SGP increased citizen safety as measured both by a decrease in street crime and violence, and by citizens' perceptions in Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama?
2. To what extent, if any, has CARSI SGP improved the effectiveness of state presence (law enforcement, judicial, social, and educational capacities) in at-risk communities in Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama as measured both by a decrease in the activities and influence of organized crime and by citizens' perceptions?
3. Which, if any, of the Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) goals of the U.S. Embassies in Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama has CARSI SGP benefitted?
4. From the perspective of the embassies' leadership, to what degree do the host governments perceive Embassies Belmopan, San Jose, and Panama City as assistance donors?



Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy San Jose - High school participants from the entrepreneurship and English language training program implemented by Fundacion Monge in Costa Rica under the CARSI SGP grant titled "Employability Model Soy Cambio".

How was it done?

Khulisa utilized a mixed methods research approach to collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data (both primary and secondary) in the three target countries and at State Department in Washington DC.

For example, Khulisa conducted extensive data analysis of multiple program documents and conducted over 130 interviews with key informants from WHA Bureau, Embassy officials, civil society leaders, and past partner implementing organizations to develop a better understanding of the program and how interventions were perceived and valued. These analyses were then enriched by data gathered through 3 focus groups (one per country), in which we engaged a total of 22 past CARSI SGP beneficiaries.

Lastly, Khulisa commissioned two surveys – targeting program beneficiaries and the general population – to gather opinions on neighborhood safety, crime, and government service provision. These surveys solicited feedback from 333 past program beneficiaries and conducted a representative sample of the general population that included 3,000 citizens across the three countries. Combined, these enabled us to identify program effects on desired outcomes and distinguish the differences by country.



What are the key results?

Overall

With an investment of \$15.5 million, CARSI SGP was successful in extending social and economic opportunities to at-risk youth from some of the high-crime, drug-trafficking, and gang-controlled areas in Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama.

The program targeted investments were influential in increasing participants' human capital and self-efficacy (e.g., education and skills training) and in creating alternative opportunities to crime and violence.

CARSI SGP impacted over 28,000 people in the three target countries. Of these, 17,544 participated in the program's soft skills and

employability trainings and an additional 7,293 in job skills training workshops.

CARSI SGP's focus in entrepreneurship and job creation enabled 1,664 youths to access job and internship opportunities and led to the creation of 322 startups. These benefits have endured and been sustainable beyond the grants. A 35% (n=116) of surveyed beneficiaries claim to have obtained a job as a result of the skills gained on the program. Likewise, nearly 20% (n=65) stated that they have started their own business using the skills gained through the program.

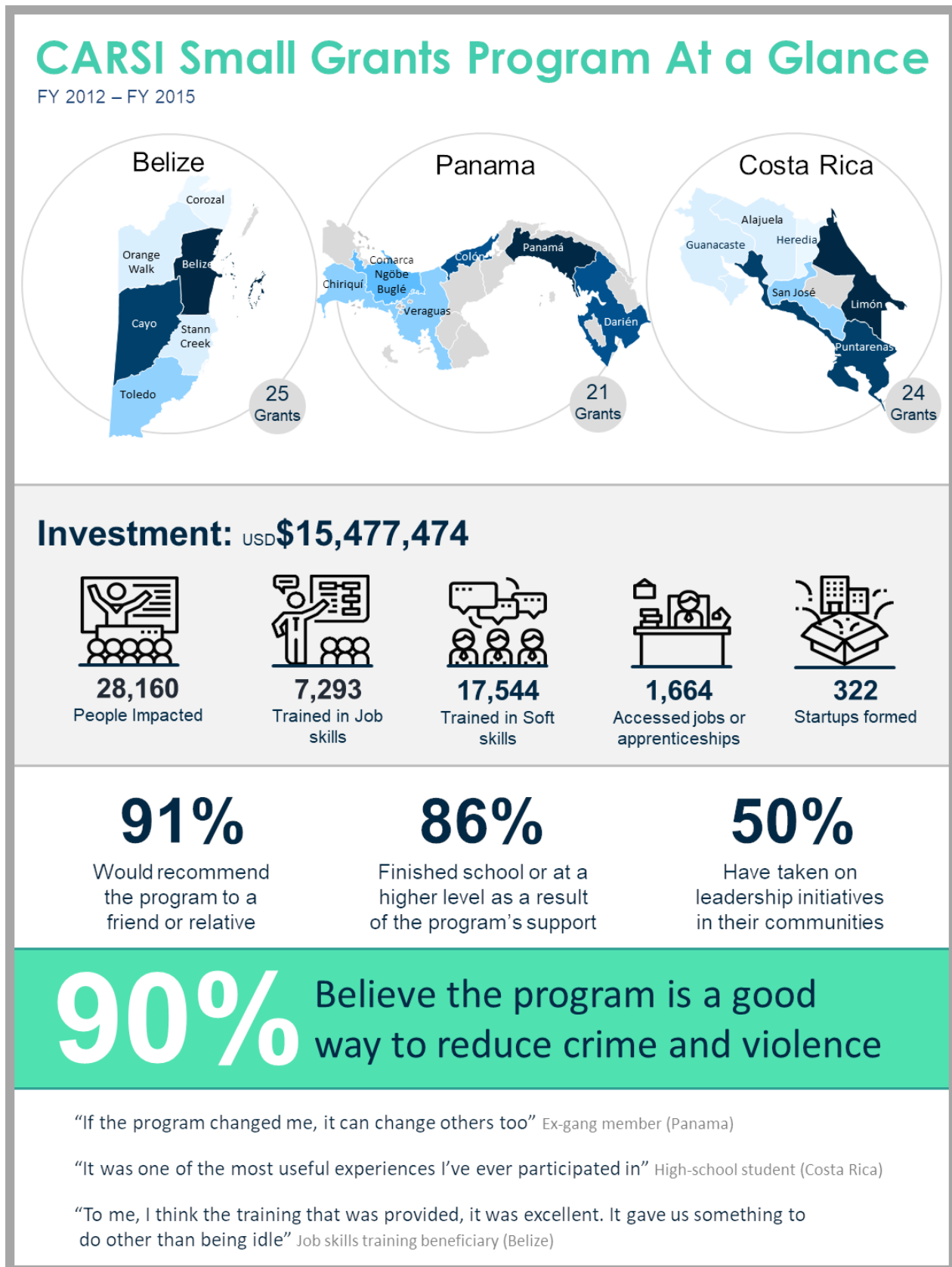
Moreover, as a result of CARSI SGP's after-school programming focus, 86% (n=285) of surveyed beneficiaries reported to have finished school or obtained a higher degree as a result of the program's support.

Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy Belmopan - *Teachers in Belize participating in the CARSI SGP grant titled: "Innovative Training for Secondary School Teachers in Belize: Providing Educational Methods to Actively Engage Students in the Classroom and in Extra-Curricular Activities" implemented by PathLight International"*





Figure 1: CARSI Small Grants Program At a Glance FY 2012 – FY 2015 Infographic





Belize

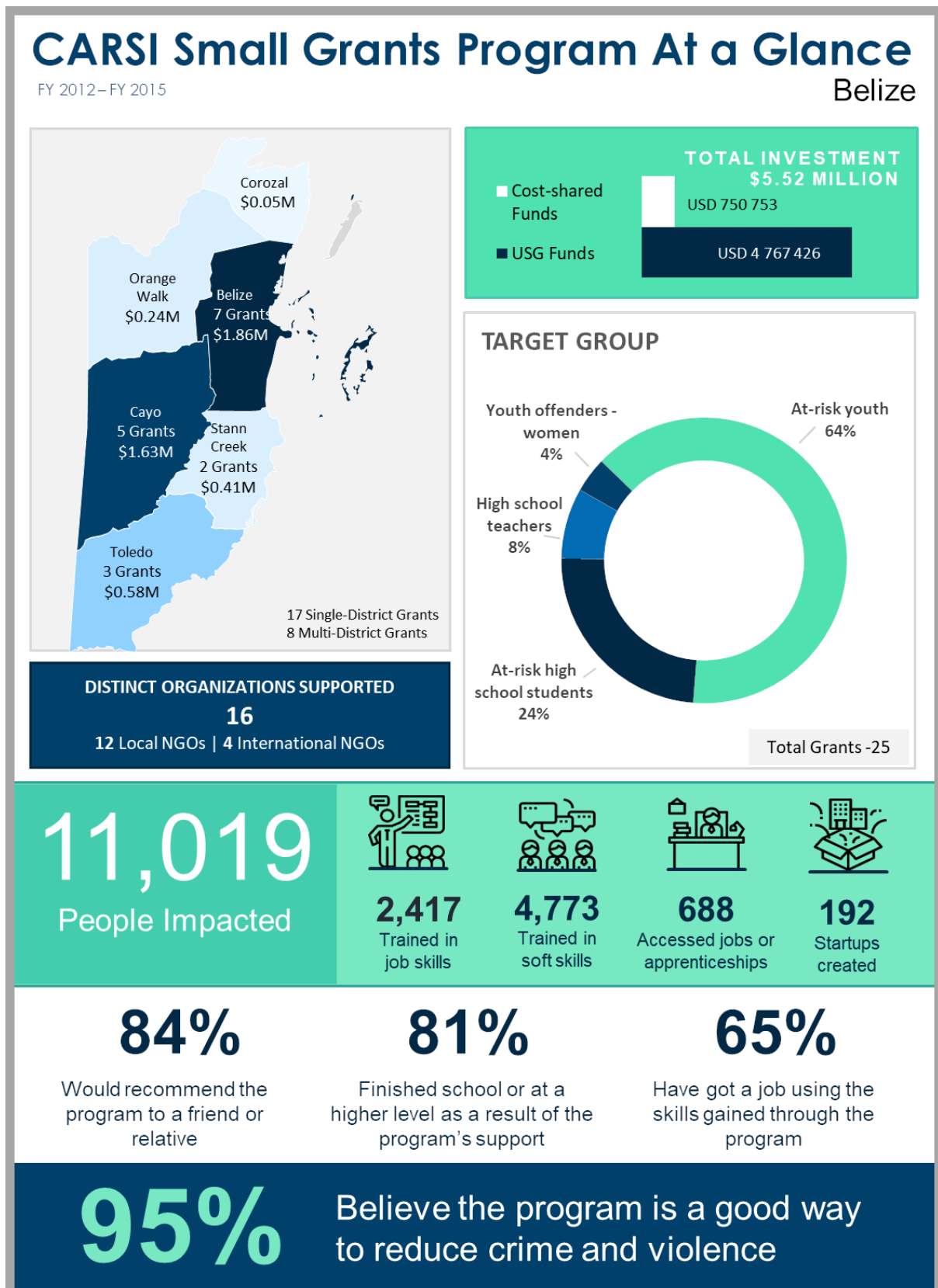
- \$4.77 million in CARSI SGP funds supported 25 grants from FY 2012 to FY 2015; 16 distinct organizations (12 local NGOs and 4 international NGOs) received grants.
- 65% (n=24/37) of surveyed beneficiaries obtained a job using the skills gained through the program. Additionally, 41% (n=15/37) still retain the job/apprenticeship they first obtained with the program's support.
- 81% (n=30/37) of program beneficiaries finished school or at are a higher grade as a result of the program's after-school programming focus.
- Investments reached 11,000 youths, of which 2,417 benefitted from job skills training opportunities and 4,773 from soft skills and employability training workshops; 688 youth accessed job or apprenticeship opportunities and 192 startups were formed.
- 95% (n=35/37) of beneficiaries believe the program is a good way to reduce crime and violence in their neighborhoods. Of these, 77% (n=27/35) believe the program's potential to reduce crime is based on keeping youth off the streets and engaged in constructive activities (e.g., extracurricular, recreational, and skills upgrading activities) and through the creation of job opportunities.



Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy Belmopan - Graduates from Belmopan Comprehensive High School and Methodist High School - beneficiaries of the CARSI SGP grant titled "Youth and Leadership Training - Cayo District implemented by PathLight International.



Figure 2: Belize's CARSI Small Grants Program FY 2012 – FY 2015 Infographic





Costa Rica

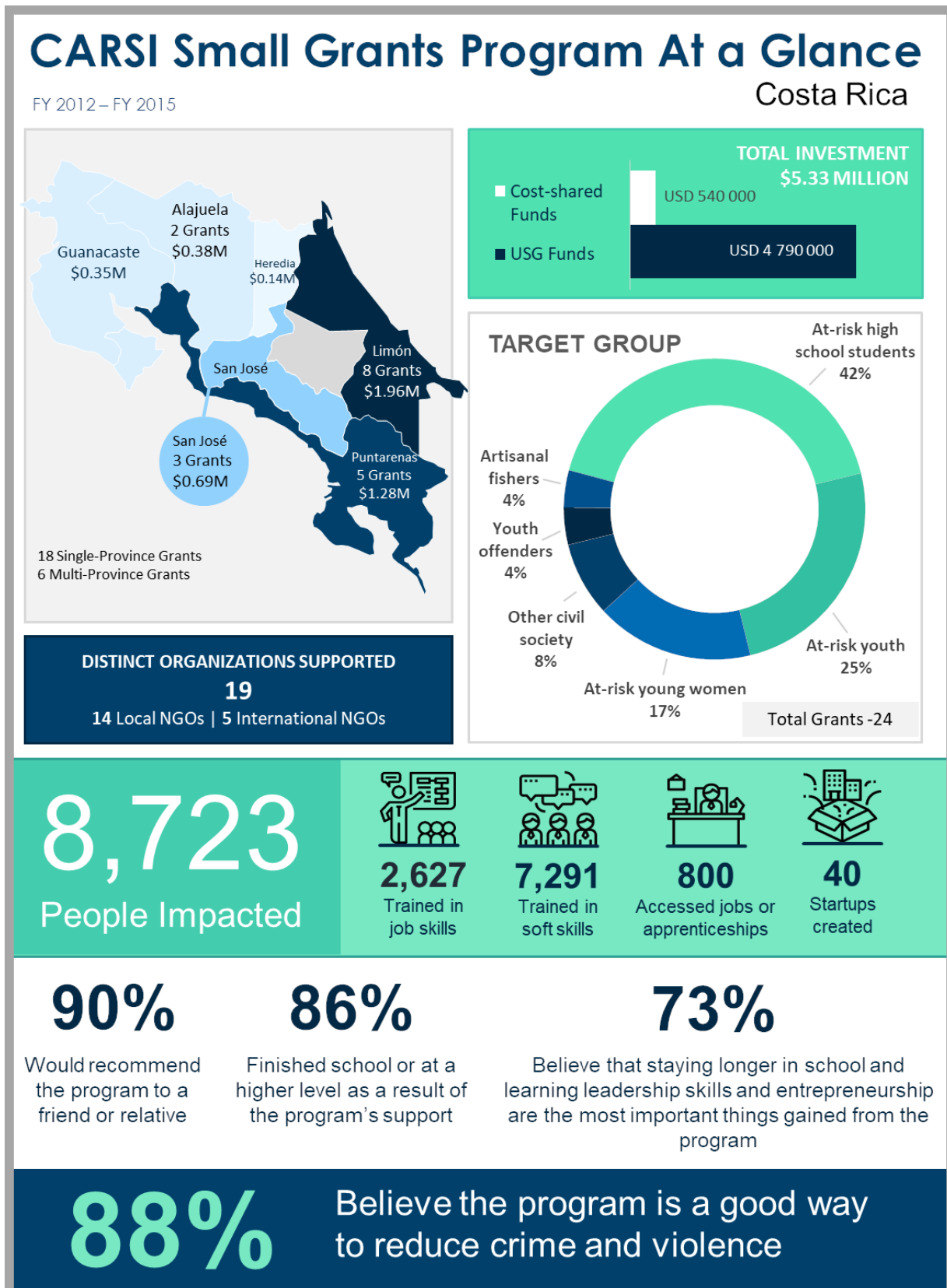
- \$4.79 million in CARSI SGP funds supported 24 grants from FY 2012 to FY 2015; 19 distinct organizations (14 local NGOs and 5 international NGOs) received grants.
- 73% (n=146/200) of beneficiaries believe that staying longer in school and learning leadership skills and entrepreneurship are the most important gains from the program.
- 86% (n=172/200) of beneficiaries finished school or at are a higher degree as a result of the program's after-school programming focus.
- Investments reached over 8,700 youth, of which 2,627 benefitted from job skills training opportunities and 7,291 from soft skills and employability training workshops; 800 youths accessed job or apprenticeship opportunities and 40 startups were formed.
- 88% (n=175/200) of beneficiaries believe the program is a good way to reduce crime and violence in their neighborhoods. Of these, 88% (n=154/175) believe the program's potential to reduce crime is based on keeping youth off the streets and engaged in constructive activities (e.g., extracurricular, recreational, and skills upgrading activities) and through the creation of job opportunities.



Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy San Jose -High school participants from the entrepreneurship and English language training program implemented by Fundacion Monge in Costa Rica under the CARSI SGP grant titled "Employability Model Soy Cambio".



Figure 3:. Costa Rica's CARSI Small Grants Program FY 2012 – FY 2015 Infographic





Panama

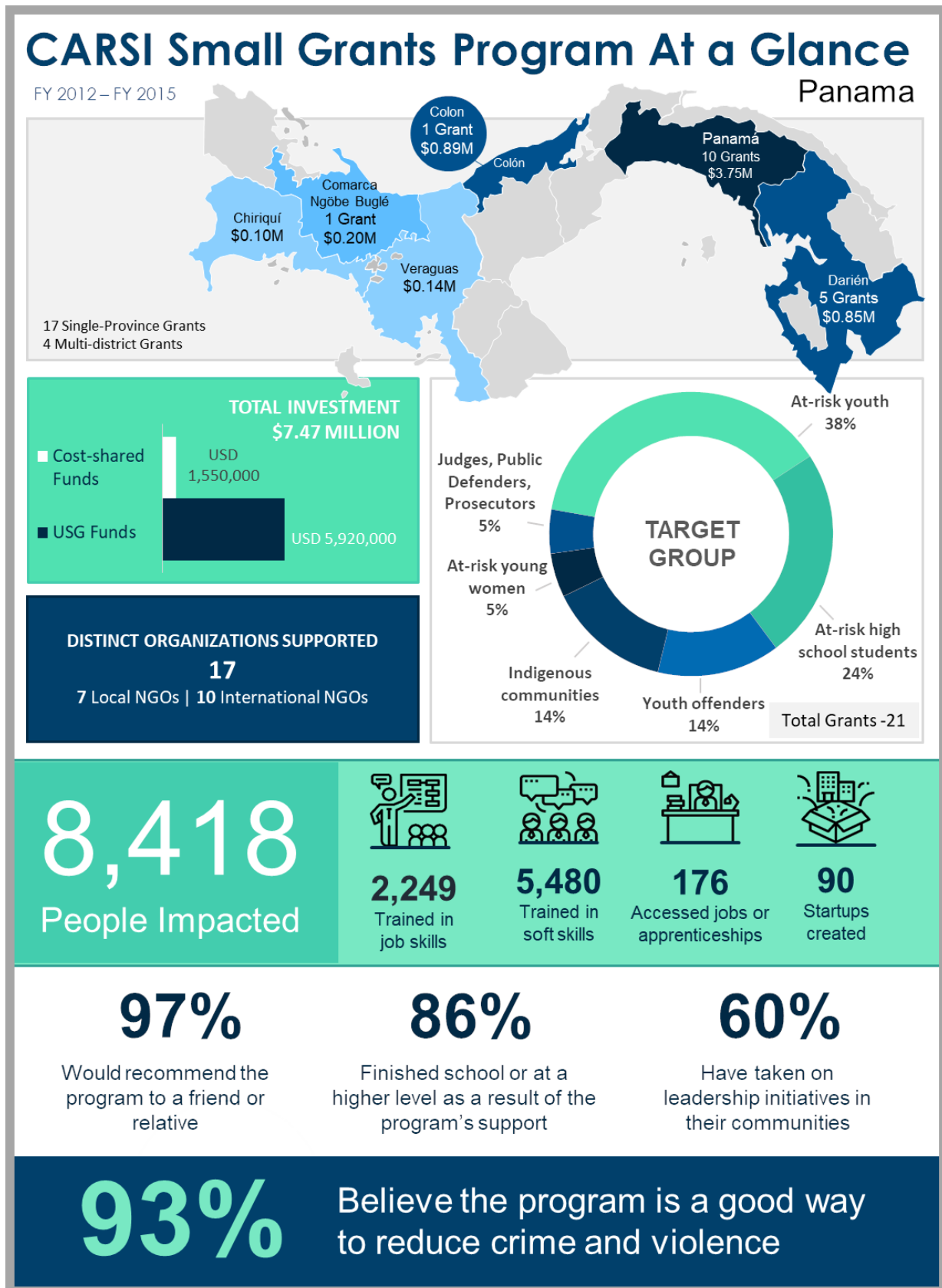
- \$5.92 million in CARSI SGP funds supported 21 grants from FY 2012 to FY 2015; 17 distinct grantee organizations (7 local NGOs and 10 international NGOs) received grants.
- 39% (n=37/96) of beneficiaries obtained a job using the skills gained through the program. Additionally, 21% (n=20/96) still retain the job/apprenticeship they first obtained with the program's support.
- 86% (n=83/96) of beneficiaries finished school or at are a higher degree as a result of the program's after-school programming focus.
- Investments reached over 8,400 youths and citizens, of which 2,249 benefitted from job skills training opportunities and 5,480 from the soft skills and employability training workshops; 176 youths accessed job or apprenticeship opportunities and 90 startups formed.
- 93% (n=89/96) of beneficiaries believe the program is a good way to reduce crime and violence in their neighborhoods. Of these, 94% (n=84/89) believe the program's potential to reduce crime is based on keeping youth off the streets and engaged in constructive activities (e.g., extracurricular, recreational, and skills upgrading activities) and through the creation of job opportunities.

Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy Panama City - Youth beneficiaries of International Republican Institute's Youth Engagement Incubator sponsored by CARSI SGP in Panama





Figure 4: Panama's CARSI Small Grants Program FY 2012 – FY 2015 Infographic





What are the findings?

Citizen Safety

- Across the three countries, CARSI SGP proved to be a valuable crime and violence prevention tool. On a micro-level, the program might have positively influenced neighborhood crime and violence outcomes, particularly in reducing the likelihood of youth becoming involved in criminal behavior (e.g., drug use/sales, crime, and violence). In fact, 90% of surveyed program beneficiaries believe that CARSI SGP is a good way to reduce crime and violence in their neighborhoods.
- CARSI SGP addressed pull factors that leave young people vulnerable to gangs and violence, specifically the lack of educational opportunities and unemployment. CARSI SGP provided demand-driven skills training opportunities to 7,293 youths; of these, 1,664 young people accessed apprenticeships or employment opportunities and a total of 322 startups were created.
- Through after school programming CARSI SGP kept youth off the streets, thus lowering their propensity to engage in criminal activities. Over 6,000 children and youth from some of the most dangerous and socio-economically disadvantaged communities benefited from this programmatic component. Most importantly, as a result of this support, 86% (n=285) of beneficiaries surveyed indicated to have either finished school or obtained a higher degree.



Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy San Jose - High school participants from the entrepreneurship and English language training program implemented by Fundacion Monge in Costa Rica under the CARSI SGP grant titled "Employability Model Soy Cambio".

- CARSI SGP did not have a discernable impact on macro-level indicators of crime and public perceptions due to (1) the size and concentrated geographic scale of program interventions, and (2) because the size of program effects may be hindered by macro-level social forces that disproportionately impact locations targeted by CARSI SGP, such as high crime violent rates, low economic development, unemployment, and ineffective public service provision. It did, however, provide successful programming models for host governments to scale up.



Improved State Presence

- CARSI SGP provided catalytic investments that led to increased access of participants to public school services, thus reducing school dropout and enhancing state presence. CARSI SGP engaged 6,103 children and young people in school programs, counselling, individual hallway follow-ups, sports activities, and in a variety of cultural and recreational activities. These grants led to children displaying more positive attitudes towards school, improved school retention rates, and increased academic success.
- CARSI SGP's investments played a key role in providing targeted training and capacity building assistance to host governments, especially to areas where host governments lacked resource allocation. In Panama, for example, the American Bar Association (ABA)'s grant provided training to nearly 240 judges, public defenders, and prosecutors to strengthen their capacity to advance Panama's accusatorial justice system adopted in 2012. This assistance was critical to advancing Panama's judicial sector reforms.
- In Costa Rica, political currency gains enabled the program in Costa Rica to achieve political support from various sectors to advance the signing of the Open Data bill. This outcome was facilitated through the support of the Trust for Americas' grant entitled "Empowering Collaboration between Civil Society and Government to Improve Transparency and Open Government" which provided specialized technical assistance and expertise to the Vice Ministry of Political Affairs. The office of the Attorney General and the Ministries of Justice and Finance created online resources containing public data from each institution, thus increasing transparency and strengthening accountability.
- Host governments adopted CARSI SGP models, especially in Costa Rica. The evaluation identified that effective collaboration opportunities with the Vice Ministry of Peace and Ministry of Education played a critical role in the implementation and subsequent adoption of two of the CARSI SGP sponsored models. Fundacion Paniamor's Girasoles model to working with at-risk women has been identified as a framework that complements the Vice Ministry of Peace's integral approach to crime and violence prevention. Similarly, the success of Fundacion Accion Joven's school dropout preventive model in increasing school retention in the provinces of Limon and Puntarenas led to endorsement from the Ministry of Education and extension of the model to 17 new schools.



Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy San Jose – High school participants of Fundacion Accion Joven's school dropout prevention and employability model in Limon, Costa Rica.



Mission's Integrated Country Strategy (ICS)

As a programming intervention, CARSI SGP interventions are designed to contribute to U.S. Embassy strategic priorities and broader U.S. security objectives in target countries and the region, including the Integrated Country Strategies (ICS). While U.S. Embassy mission objectives are unique to each country context, the evaluation identified two overarching areas for which CARSI SGP may have contributed to the ICS goals in the three countries.

Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy San Jose - High school beneficiaries from Fundacion Monge's Employability Model Soy Cambio grant sponsored by CARSI SGP in Costa Rica



Contributions to Rule of Law

CARSI SGP supported the strengthening of the rule of law by extending social and economic opportunities for underserved youth and at-risk communities as alternatives to illegal activities. The program's heavy focus on after-school programs, leadership development, and job-skills training has provided participant access to over 1,600 job or apprenticeship opportunities; more than 6,000 youths persisted in school through in-school and after-school mentoring activities; and youths increased participation in their communities by leading transformation projects such as over 60 neighborhood cleanups, painting of classrooms and murals, and rehabilitation of parks.

Strengthening of Civil Society

Through its multi-faceted approach, CARSI SGP indirectly assisted in strengthening civil society by facilitating the creation of an ecosystem of NGOs to jointly develop and co-create intervention models with U.S. Embassies and host country stakeholders to address some of the root causes that leave at-risk youth vulnerable to crime and violence. These grants had a catalytic effect in fostering the development of alliances and convening actors from civil society, private sector, and local governments. This especially holds true for Costa Rica's funded interventions where greater collaborations between the business community and governments facilitated an environment that enabled the program to yield gainful employment opportunities for participants as well as the adoption of two CARSI SGP-sponsored model interventions by the Ministry of Justice and Peace and Ministry of Education.



Photo Credit: U.S. Embassy Panama City - Youth beneficiaries of International Republican Institute's Youth Engagement Incubator sponsored by CARSI SGP in Panama

Perception of U.S. Embassies as Assistance Donors

As a policy instrument, CARSI SGP has enabled U.S. Embassies in the three target countries to maintain continued engagements with civil society organizations, especially in the absence of permanent USAID missions. CARSI SGP has

contributed to a perception of U.S. Embassies as strategic and highly influential assistance donors, at least from the perception of Embassies themselves. However, the increased focus on U.S. security objectives resulted in an increase in the perception of Embassies as a "security donor" and less of a "development donor".

