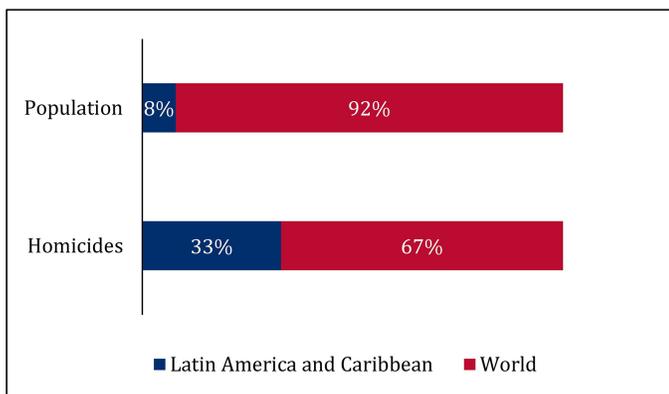


WHAT WORKS TO PREVENT LETHAL YOUTH VIOLENCE IN THE LAC REGION: A GLOBAL REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH¹

The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region has some of the highest rates of interpersonal and community-based violence in the world, accounting for one-third of all homicides despite being home to less than 10% of the world’s population (Exhibit 1). El Salvador, Jamaica, and Venezuela have the highest homicide rates in the region, exceeding 50 deaths per 100,000 people in 2017, with some municipal homicide rates in these countries exceeding 130 deaths per 100,000 people. But the region is not without hope. Colombia, for example, has transitioned from being known as the murder capital of the world to having a homicide rate lower than that of 15 cities in the United States. Although improvements in community safety in Colombia demonstrate that the incidence of violence can be reduced, an understanding of the most effective ways to do so in the Latin American context is incomplete. The most recent effort to document evidence from the region found a paucity of rigorous research on the effectiveness of intervention, leaving policy makers to look to other global regions for reliable evidence to guide prevention planning.

Exhibit 1. Homicide in the LAC Region²



This brief presents summary results from a global evaluation of evidence and the remaining gaps in programs that directly or indirectly aim to prevent violence affecting young people, ages 10–29.³ To inform USAID’s policy making in the LAC region in order to prioritize research and evaluation funding and develop a strategic research agenda, this mapping identified existing evidence from impact evaluations and systematic reviews as well as key gaps where little or no evidence has been available. It also examined research areas in which there have been few studies to identify where new primary experimental and quasi-experimental studies could add value.

What Did the Study Analyze and How?

Mapping involved identifying and culling more than 450 systematic reviews, rapid evidence assessments, and research syntheses down to 46 articles that were published (or in process) globally between 2000 and 2017 that showed statistically significant effects of violence prevention interventions on individuals between the ages of 10 and 29. Most were syntheses that analyzed results across multiple studies; more than 1,300 studies were examined. Most of the syntheses were systematic reviews with meta-analyses (46%). Of the 46 studies included, 65% examined research on interventions conducted in high-income countries, and less than one-fifth presented research conducted in the LAC region.⁴ Almost half (41%) of the 46 studies were reported in 2016 and 2017, with only 20% of studies reported between 2000 and 2010.

What Are the Study's Findings?

In addition to many interventions that were not described by name, this study reviewed 229 distinctly named interventions at the primary (17%), secondary (13%), tertiary (26%), and multi- (44%) intervention levels. Overall, the study examined several core aspects of each intervention:

1. **Focus**—The most common foci of interventions were gun violence prevention studies (13%), school-based violence prevention studies (11%), and studies that examined published literature on any type of violence prevention approach excluding gun and gang violence (9%).
2. **Person vs. place-based**—Most studies (72%) examined interventions that were person-based and not tied to any physical or social environment.
3. **Participant demographics**—Individuals between the ages of 10 and 18 years of age were most commonly involved in interventions (**age**); most studies reported results for both male and female participants (**gender**); and most interventions (63%) involved students in school settings, followed by parents (35%) and justice-involved people (24%) (**characteristics**).
4. **Settings** included schools (63%), neighborhoods (44%), social service providers (35%), homes, (26%) and community corrections (i.e., day treatment) settings (24%), as well as secure correctional facilities (20%) and law enforcement settings (13%). **Implementers:** School staff (68%) and social service workers (61%) were the most commonly named interventionists;⁵ and structured curriculum (59%), training (24%), and structured program activities (21%) were the most heavily implemented **components**.
5. The most common **outcomes studied** were some type of violence against persons, followed by violence according to place, and changes in skills related to intervention objectives.

Outcomes discussed in the studies reviewed were almost evenly split between positive intervention effects (52%) and a mix of positive, negative, or no effects (48%). Of the studies that reported overall positive intervention effects, more than one-third

(38%) acted across multiple prevention types, one-third (33%) targeted tertiary levels of prevention, one-fifth (21%) involved primary prevention programs, and slightly less than 10% focused on secondary prevention. Among articles that described mixed effects for violence prevention interventions, which typically showed an improvement in knowledge or attitude, behavioral outcomes did not follow suit; no programs had harmful or negative effects. Almost all these studies reported substantial limitations that affected how the research was conducted, the most common issue being the quality of individual studies included in systematic reviews.

We found the overall quality of the research syntheses to be mediocre, although the results of individual studies reviewed were moderately credible. We also assessed the limitations of these studies, including those stated by each study's authors and those observed in the mapping coding process. These limitations ranged from small study sample sizes, nonrepresentative program participation, and data collection quality issues to poor overall study designs, potential researcher bias, and a dearth of longitudinal studies.

This study revealed several key research gaps:

1. **Region:** There were only one systematic review and three single studies from the LAC region, ranging from mixed effects to effective outcomes.
2. **Topic:** There were very few studies of interventions or research focusing on females as either perpetrators or victims of violence, and no studies assessed environmental design impacts on violence directed toward youth in our target population or examined any spillover effects from place-based approaches (e.g., Hot Spots policing).
3. **Population:** Only one study examined violence prevention outcomes based on gender differences. Employers were rarely included in studies.
4. **Outcomes:** Individual behavioral outcomes were rarely measured; knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and skills were the most common ways that studies measured the impact of intervention.



When violence was measured in studies, it was typically done at the community level.

5. **Research design and quality:** Several studies did not have a clear theoretical approach or research questions, and their impact on violent or nonviolent behavior was not a primary outcome of many interventions. Furthermore, many studies measured violence in ways that made it difficult to conduct systematic analysis of outcomes across interventions. Very little information on the fidelity of studies built into outcomes analyses was included, while many weaker methodologies that lacked specificity on implementation characteristics were sometimes associated with stronger (more positive) treatment effects.

What Does the Study Mean for Policy, Practice, and Future Research?

The results of this evidence gap analysis provide several key insights to inform the USAID and stakeholder research agenda and program planning efforts to reduce and prevent youth violence in the region. First, given that most violence prevention and reduction initiatives are exported into the LAC region from middle and high-income countries, there is an imperative for researchers to accurately and completely document the implementation process (including cost) so interventions can be implemented according to design and have the best chance of producing comparable results in other places.

Secondly, in the field of violence prevention, there is tremendous variation in the way researchers define and measure youth violence and community-based violence, and across the body of research on the topic there is an unwieldy number of outcomes and contexts to sort through. No single program, strategy, policy, or practice can address all the outcomes and contexts in the field of violence prevention research. In addition, when one program, practice, policy, or strategy is deemed effective, the specific outcomes measured in the research behind the intervention are often not obvious enough to let policy makers or practitioners know whether an intervention might be a good solution for the specific

types of violence and contexts that they are trying to manage.

Third, the results of this study demonstrate a need to improve the way that research is conducted to enhance the credibility of results on which to base future programmatic or policy decisions. Guidance on which outcome indicators to target in future evaluations of violence prevention programming in the LAC region would enable USAID to more rapidly increase the body of evidence for prevention strategies in the region. The fact that many of the same communities face persistent violence speaks to the need for donors, policy makers, and researchers to invest in longitudinal examinations of violence in these persistently dangerous places to understand how such patterns of violence develop, why they persist, and how some communities make remarkable strides to overcome long histories of community-based lethal youth violence.

Finally, this study highlights the challenges to conducting randomized controlled trials (RCTs)—often regarded as the gold standard for social science research—in that they are not always the best approach in the context of the real-world situations in which programs operate and people live. For example, finding a control group among tertiary risk youth, the group targeted by the most promising interventions, is difficult due to sampling, ethical, and legal considerations. There is also the larger issue of controlling the intervention environment itself, which is critical for an RCT to operate properly, because community-based violence occurs in interactions among people, places, and time that are not isolated from each other. Thus, it becomes even more difficult to keep the controlled intervention of the RCT from seeping into and influencing other individuals, essentially erasing meaningful differences between treatment and control conditions. Because of these difficulties, the evidence base for lethal youth violence interventions aimed at tertiary populations is limited to quasi-experimental studies that examine community violence trends over time rather than changes in individual behavior or propensities for violence; and even these studies are few. The result is that evidence reviews tend to focus on studies of



primary and secondary prevention interventions that can support more rigorous research designs—even though these programs do not appear to have the impact on lethal violence that tertiary programs produce. Therefore, evidence gaps continue to grow over time when studying the difficult contexts presented by community-based lethal youth violence interventions.

Although these settings may not be conducive to experimental designs, this does not mean that high-

quality research that examines the causes and correlates of lethal violence cannot be done in these contexts. More investment by donors, policy makers, and researchers is needed over longer periods of time to develop more resilient research methods and designs not limited to traditional RCTs that can be sensitive to the community context while providing statistical precision to measure the precursors and outcomes of lethal youth violence.

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² Muggah, R., & Tobon, K. A. (2018). *Citizen security in Latin America: Facts and figures*. (Strategic Paper 33.) Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Igarapé Institute.

³ Campie, P., Tanya, M., & Udayakumar, C. (2019, November). *What works to prevent lethal youth violence in the LAC region: A global review of the research*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

⁴ Eight studies (17%) did not report the country of study location.

⁵ Six studies did not provide information on the person(s) responsible for implementing the intervention.