

# Evidence in Crime & Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean



## Identifying ways to reduce Crime & Violence

Through our work with partners in Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) and globally, IPA has succeeded in finding organizations with innovative solutions for reducing crime and violence, and working with them to refine, pilot, scale, and evaluate their programs. IPA has also worked with governments in the region to support, design, and test new strategies to

address their security challenges. Our experience has led us to believe that tackling crime and violence in the region requires more than identifying programs to evaluate. Rather, we must develop long-term, iterative partnerships with local actors that identify the critical sources of insecurity, and design, pilot, evaluate, and scale effective solutions.

### Summary

- » LAC is the most violent region in the world, and is home to 41 of the world's 50 most dangerous cities. The region accounts for 8 percent of the world's population but registers 37 percent of the world's homicides.
- » The evidence on how to best improve citizen security and reduce crime, violence, and homicides in the region is limited. Existing evidence is primarily from high-income countries, and many of the evaluated solutions to date have at best modest impacts on crime and violence reduction. As a result, policymakers in the region have little guidance on what strategies can help address their cities' and counties' biggest security concerns.
- » IPA is working with academics and implementing partners to find effective solutions to crime and violence in the region, with very promising results.
- » Still, there are many lines of research worth pursuing to better understand crime and violence in the region. IPA is committed to supporting research along these lines to help policymakers address this problem.

# Research Fund for Homicide Reduction in Latin America and the Caribbean

Since 2019, IPA's Peace & Recovery Program has been collaborating with policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to build evidence on homicide reduction in LAC, funded by the Open Society Foundations' Latin America Program. Our research fund is supporting some of the first rigorous studies on the impact of homicide reduction interventions in the region. More information about this fund can be found at [poverty-action.org/peace](https://poverty-action.org/peace).

## Evidence in Reducing Crime and Violence in LAC

### 1 Policing

#### Improving Security through Concentrated Policing and Municipal Clean-Ups in Bogotá, Colombia

**Researchers** Christopher Blattman, Daniel Ortega, Donald Green, and Santiago Tobón

**Timeline** 2016

**Status** Completed

**Study type** Randomized Evaluation

Police forces in cities tend to focus their efforts on the highest-crime areas, but increasing state presence in the highest crime spots may simply displace crime to other areas, leaving overall crime levels unchanged. In Bogotá, researchers partnered with the city government to measure the impact of concentrated policing and increased municipal clean-ups on crime reduction and displacement. **The evaluation found that the two approaches reduced crime on targeted streets when implemented together, but not when implemented alone.** While most crime, particularly property crime, appears to have shifted to nearby streets, there is suggestive evidence that violent crimes, especially homicides and rapes, decreased citywide due to the intervention.

Read more [here >>](#)

#### The Effects of Procedural Justice Training for Police Officers in Mexico City

**Researchers** Rodrigo Canales

**Timeline** 2017-2018

**Status** Completed (preliminary results)

**Study type** Randomized Evaluation

Public insecurity and widespread mistrust of police among citizens is associated with decreased police legitimacy, which has negative consequences for effective policing. Research

METROPOLITAN POLICE OF BOGOTÁ



has demonstrated that when police officers interact with citizens following principles of procedural justice, citizens' perception of trust in the police increases, which enhances legitimacy and efficacy. The question remains as to how a police force can institutionalize procedural justice. In this study, the research team worked with the Ministry of Public Security of Mexico City to evaluate the impact of procedural justice training for police officers. **Preliminary results suggest that the training had significant positive impacts on how police officers perceived and practiced the principles of procedural justice.** Results also help reveal how the training achieved its effects, thus providing important insights into likely avenues for effective police reform.

Read more [here >>](#)





## 2 Organized Crime

### The Impacts of Intensive Municipal Governance and Community Organization on Gang Governance in Medellín, Colombia

**Researchers** Christopher Blattman, Gustavo Duncan, Benjamin Lessing, and Santiago Tobón

**Timeline** 2018-2021

**Status** Completed

**Study type** Randomized Evaluation

Urban armed groups, especially criminal gangs, are a growing threat to peace and economic growth in cities across the world, and often exert state-like powers such as enforcing contracts, policing, and taxing businesses. In partnership with the City of Medellín and community officials, researchers introduced a co-designed program of intensified government outreach and service delivery to test the impact of increased municipal governance on the roles and legitimacy of local gangs and the state. **Results show no evidence of a decrease in gang rule. Accompanying quasi-experimental evidence suggests that this is related to how gangs operate: it appears that state presence provokes a strategic response by gangs to protect their interests in that area.** This dynamic reflects a defining characteristic of criminal governance: whereas conventional wisdom suggests that crime flourishes where the state is weak, instead criminal governance is almost always embedded within and subject to state power.

Read more [here >>](#)

### Understanding Gang Recruitment in Medellín, Colombia

**Researchers** Christopher Blattman, María Rodríguez Aranzazú, Pierre-Luc Vautrey, and Santiago Tobón

**Timeline** 2021-TBD

**Status** In Progress

**Study type** Randomized Evaluation

Organized crime and gangs are among the most serious problems facing cities around the world. At the heart of the problem lies the understanding of how gangs recruit members. Information about gang membership as an occupational choice is limited. What factors lead people to join gangs, and how can governments prevent recruitment into gangs? In Medellín, Colombia, a city characterized by a high presence of gangs, researchers are conducting a study to understand youth motivations, identify youth at risk of recruitment, and test different interventions to prevent children and adolescents from joining gangs.

### The Impact of Military Policing Program in Cali, Colombia

**Researchers** Robert Blair and Michael Weintraub

**Timeline** 2019-2021

**Status** Completed

**Study type** Randomized Evaluation

In Latin America, governments commonly use their armed forces to combat high homicide rates, especially in urban areas. Advocates view these strategies as necessary to bring violent crime under control and allow social programs to take root, while opponents counter that militarized policing undermines human rights and exacerbates insecurity. However, little rigorous evidence exists on either side of this debate. This study evaluated the impact of a militarized policing program that deploys intensive, recurring army patrols to neighborhoods with high homicide rates in the city of Cali, one of Latin America's most violent cities. **The program did not reduce crime while patrols were ongoing, and it exacerbated crime after the intervention was complete. It also appears to have increased human rights abuses by the police,** likely in the course of making arrests. It did not have an effect on citizens' reports of crime victimization, nor did it improve subjective perceptions of safety, except among business owners.

Read more [here >>](#)

### The Effects of Focused Deterrence: Implementing Ceasefire in Mexico City

**Researchers** Rodrigo Canales

**Timeline** 2019-TBD

**Status** In Progress

**Study type** Randomized Evaluation

A focused deterrence approach to fighting crime and violence involves identifying specific offenders or groups and working with communities and law enforcement to target sanctions and incentives to shift the offender's behavior. Evidence in the US suggests that this type of intervention can decrease serious violent crime. Operation Ceasefire, implemented in Boston in 1996, is one of the best-known instances of the focused deterrence approach. In Mexico, researchers are working with Mexico City's Ministry of Citizen Security and the National Security Commission to adapt and evaluate a focused deterrence intervention called "Ceasefire" (Alto al Fuego).



IMF PHOTO / JOAQUIN SARMIENTO

## Where next?

IPA is looking to generate evidence across the region that can effectively guide strategies on crime and violence reduction. Informed by our ongoing partnerships, project development efforts, and consultations with crime and violence experts, IPA has identified the following priority areas of research that can lead to high crime and violence-reduction returns:

### 1. *Finding “violence vaccines”:*

What kinds of interventions can disrupt cycles of violence and reduce participation in violence in later life? Promising “vaccines” include cognitive behavioral therapy, sports programming, social-emotional skills development for children, and social norms messaging. Research not only has to identify “what works,” but must find the mechanisms that drive impact and test the best intervention combinations.

### 2. *Disrupting organized crime and gangs without backfire:*

We estimate that a quarter of all homicides in the region are related to organized crime and gangs. Cities and national governments lack policies and tools beyond violent crackdowns, and many responses risk provoking gang-state and gang-gang conflicts. What other strategies are available? How can programming reduce the economic returns from organized crime?

### 3. *Building police and military capacity and restraint, and strengthening selection processes:*

To what extent can interventions like body-worn cameras, cognitive behavioral therapy, citizen accountability systems, or training build more capable and accountable security forces, and reduce police and military violence and killings? Do these interventions improve citizens’ perceptions of their safety? Who joins the police in LAC, and how can selection processes be designed to attract the right people?

### 4. *Understanding incarceration and improving rehabilitation:*

Incarceration rates in LAC have been rising dramatically. What is the impact of penitentiary policies on the coordination and spread of violence? What programs can disrupt criminal networks that may be coordinated from prisons? What are effective ways of reintegrating former prisoners into society and preventing recidivism?

### 5. *Improving judicial effectiveness:*

To what degree do ineffective prosecution processes, bureaucratic requirements, and slow or corrupt judges reduce the cost of committing crimes, violence, and homicides? What judicial effectiveness improvements can be made to increase the cost of engaging in crime and violence, and augment citizens’ perceptions of the justice system?

### 6. *Addressing illicit economies:*

To what extent do illegal economies, like illicit mining, deforestation, and drug trafficking fuel crime, violence, and homicides? How can these economies be disrupted, both locally and by addressing cross-border criminal networks?

### 7. *Protecting and creating accountability for vulnerable groups:*

How can interventions be designed with the needs of vulnerable groups in mind, including women, ethnic minorities, migrants, and LGBTQ+ individuals? What interventions can ensure accountability for crimes and violence committed against these vulnerable groups, including femicide? What supplemental protection interventions are needed?

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Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. IPA designs, rigorously evaluates, and refines these solutions and their applications together with researchers and local decision-makers, ensuring that evidence is used to improve the lives of the world’s poor. Our well-established partnerships in the countries where we work, and a strong understanding of local contexts, enable us to conduct high-quality research. This research has informed hundreds of successful programs that now impact millions of individuals worldwide.

