YOUTH VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

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ABSTRACT

The traditional approach to violence in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region has centered on a criminal justice perspective, where increasing law enforcement personnel and implementing strict punitive measures is seen as the solution. The results of such efforts have proven otherwise as trends in violence continue to rise in most countries of the region. Violence is receiving increasing attention due to its negative impact on the social and economic development of the region.

The violence in the region has its roots in the social, political, and economic conditions in which much of the population lives. Young people, comprising 30% of the LAC population, are particularly affected by these conditions and the culture of violence that ensues.

There are several current initiatives in the LAC region addressing adolescent safety and violence; most, however, are not coordinated, not based on evidence, and without systematic approaches to evaluation and monitoring. In response to recognition of this void and demand from national governments in the region, PAHO is supporting the development and implementation of violence prevention programs based on a conceptual framework that integrates
youth development, gender, human rights, and social inclusion into the ecological model.

This paper provides an update in the current situation of youth violence in the LAC region and offers a conceptual framework for understanding the underlying causes and consequences of violence affecting youth, and recommendations for action based on this framework.
INTRODUCTION

In Latin America armies of youth have been raised in poverty without family structure, living off the informal economy, and without hope of inserting themselves into productive society. Meanwhile, these youth are increasingly exposed to stimulus from the global culture, showing them the affluence that exists. This exposure, juxtaposed with their daily reality, poignantly reminds them of the increasingly fewer opportunities for those with low educational and job training attainment. This combination of increased expectations and decreased opportunity causes an explosion, pushing youth to search for other options to gain social recognition and livelihood, all too frequently resulting in involvement with drug trafficking or gangs (Oppenheimer, 2005).

Average poverty rates in the region have now reached 33% of the population (Barnes, 2005) and as the incidence of violence\(^3\) has increased, so has concern of stunted development. Violence results in many negative effects on the economy through lower accumulation of human capital, lower on-the-job productivity, high rates of absenteeism from work and school, low income, lower rates of savings

\(^3\) This paper utilizes the WHO (2002a) definition of violence: “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” Pg.4
and investment. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that the per capita GDP of the region would be 25% higher if the rates of violence in the region were equal to the global violence rates (Londoño JL & Guerrero R. 1998).

In addition, insecurity is the principal risk for companies located in the region. International companies, with the potential of infusing large quantities of capital into the region, are moving their operations to cheaper and more secure regions of the world; a trend that will only lead to an increase in the already high level of poverty.

There are several current initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean addressing youth and adolescent violence; most, however, are not coordinated, not based on evidence, and without systematic approaches for monitoring and evaluation. Frequently these initiatives approach violence from a punitive perspective, labeling it as delinquency and calling for strict punishment rather than prevention and rehabilitation.

In response to the continued rise in violence among youth and the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) - World Health
Organization (WHO) has actively promoted and prioritized youth violence prevention as a critical public health issue. PAHO is working with countries in the region to build violence prevention programs based on conceptual frameworks that address youth development based on an ecological model that incorporates a gender perspective with a focus on human rights and human capital. Such programs include collaboration with other international agencies, the health and other sectors, and call for the active participation of youth and communities in their design and implementation.

THE CURRENT SITUATION: YOUTH VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Approximately half of the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) population is under the age of 25: 21% between the ages of 10 and 19 years, and 30% between the ages of 10 and 24 years (PAHO, 2004). Every year, an estimated one million of these young men and women die – mostly through accidents, suicide, violence, pregnancy-related complications and illness that are either preventable or treatable (PAHO, 2004).

According to World Health Organization data the LAC region has the second highest rates of violence globally (36.2 homicides per 100,000 people); a rate that has more than tripled in the past 25 years (WHO, 2002). From 1984 to
2000, the number of homicides show a rising trend, with the exception of Colombia where numbers decreased slightly (WHO, 2002). Colombia and El Salvador, with rates of 84.6 and 43.4 homicides per 100,000 people respectively, have the highest homicide rates in the region, followed by Brazil, Venezuela, and Guatemala with rates between 20-30 homicides per 100,000 people, and then Mexico, Ecuador, and Panama who experience between 10-16 homicides per 100,000 people per year (PAHO, 2005). In general, a third of all homicides occur in adolescents from 10 to 19 years of age (PAHO, 2003).

The accessibility to firearms has a pronounced impact on violent deaths. The WHO estimates that firearms are implicated in about two-thirds of all homicides (WHO, 2001). Between 1985 and 1994 in the United States of America, where over 70% of youth homicides involve guns, homicide increased 77% from 8.8 to 15.6 per 100,000. Similarly in Mexico, where guns account for approximately 50% of all youth homicides, rates remained high over this period, rising from 14.7 homicides per 100,000 to 15.6 per 100,000 (with 80% at the end of this period involving guns) (WHO, 2002).

Suicide is a frequently ignored and underreported tragedy impacting youth and adolescents. Young people are
particularly vulnerable to the kinds of stress that promote mental instability. The extreme manifestation of this instability is suicide. Available data suggests that in the Americas 18% of suicides are attributed to persons aged 15-24 years, the majority of whom are male (except in Cuba). However these numbers are often underreported (Weaver & Maddaleno, 1999).

Mortality as a result of road traffic accidents in LAC is also one of the highest globally – for example, in El Salvador the mortality rate reaches 41.7 per 100,000, 41.0 in the Dominican Republic and 25.6 in Brazil (WHO, 2004b). Impact in the region equals over 3 million for young men and 1 million for young women in disability adjusted life years (DALYs) lost (WHO, 2004a). Twenty-three percent of all traffic accidents occur in the 10- to 19-year age group, and it is estimated that for every death caused by a traffic accident, 10 injuries occur (PAHO, 2003).

In Central America and Mexico, traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among adolescents, followed by homicides and suicides (PAHO, 2004). Accidents are the primary cause of death for young women aged 10-14 years and 20-24 years, and intoxication is the leading cause of death for 15- to 19-year old females (PAHO, 2000b). In the English-speaking Caribbean as a whole, the number one
cause of death for adolescents is also traffic accidents with violence as the second cause of death. In South America, homicide is the primary cause of death of adolescents (PAHO, 2004).

In all countries globally, young men are both the principal perpetrators and victims of homicides (WHO, 2001). Between 80 and 95% of youth deaths are young men – homicide being the primary cause of death among men 15 to 34 years old, in many LAC countries (PAHO 2001). Compared to women, young men are disproportionately impacted by suicide, road traffic accidents, and injury. For example, compared to women in the 15-19-year age group, men are 2.5 times more likely to die by suicide, 3.8 times more likely to die in accidents, and 6.5 times more likely to die by homicide or injury (Tuirán et al., 2000).

The magnitude of violence among youth is not only reflected in mortality rates due to suicide, homicide, and traffic accidents, but also in less visible forms of violence, resulting in morbidity. For every young person killed by violence, there are an estimated 20 to 40 young people injured and needing hospital treatment (WHO, 2001). Hospital records from Central America and Mexico in 2000 show that 49% of hospital admissions were adolescents (PAHO, 2004). Leading causes of admissions were:
obstetrics (29%), trauma, including violence (11%), and mental health (7%). From 1996-2000 in the English-speaking Caribbean, the leading causes for hospital admission were: obstetrics (27%), violence and sexual abuse (22%), and HIV/AIDS and TB (20%) (PAHO, 2004). In South America, hospital records show that 20% of admissions for the period 2000-2002 were adolescents (PAHO 2004). The leading causes were: obstetric care, including abortion (31%), Acute Respiratory Infections (ARI), including influenza (14%), and trauma, including violence (11%).

Yet another vicious form of violence, endured primarily though not exclusively by women, is sexual and intimate partner violence, including sexual coercion. Surveys around the world indicated that 10 to 69% of women report being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives (WHO, 2001). Dating violence or violence perpetrated by a family member is particularly prevalent among young women. Available evidence in some LAC countries suggests that one in four women report sexual violence by an intimate partner, and up to one third of girls report forced sexual initiation (WHO, 2001). The Caribbean Adolescent Health Survey found that by 18, one in 8 adolescents had been sexually abused (Blum & Ireland, 2004). Girls are two times more likely to be
sexually abused than boys, and all street children are particularly vulnerable to sexual and other forms of violence (Weaver & Maddaleno, 1999).

An increase in gang related violence in the region has become one of the most visible forms of youth violence. Gangs provide a social space for their member. Too often however they also engage in violent behavior (WOLA, 2005).

Overall estimates of gang membership vary considerably. Estimates range from 30,000 to nearly 400,000, including an estimated 30,000 to 285,000 in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua alone (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005; Franco, 2005). According to the Caribbean Adolescent Health Survey (1997), one in 11 adolescents reported belonging to a gang and an additional 10% said they had in the past (Blum & Ireland, 2004). It is also estimated that an additional 50,000 youth are sympathizers—i.e. those youth who do not currently participate but are at high risk of doing so (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005).

**UNDERSTANDING YOUTH VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Violence among young people used to be exclusively approached from a criminal justice perspective (WHO,
2005); however, an increased understanding of the complexity of the root causes and factors perpetuating youth violence calls for actions utilizing broader perspectives. In accordance with this need and recognition of the multidimensionality of the issue, PAHO promotes a public health approach to youth violence prevention and a conceptual framework based on the ecological model that integrates an understanding of developmental characteristics specific to adolescents and the environmental context, including the role of gender socialization.

The Ecological Model

The ecological model offers a framework for understanding behavior—in this case violence—within a complex social context. The model is based on the concept that no single factor alone is the cause of violent behavior, but rather shared risk factors exist. The elements of the model include individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and political factors. These factors combine to deliver a comprehensive picture of the root causes of youth and adolescent aggressive and violent behavior, and how these behaviors are perpetuated.

As the most basic unit of social organization, the family is the setting where behavior is first learned (PAHO,
2003). Individual characteristics contribute to the way in which these lessons are accepted and/or acted out. During adolescence the behaviors and values of peers become increasingly important (PAHO, 2003). At the institutional level, schools play a primary role in the socialization of young people, and public policy sets the stage for the prevailing culture and the level of support committed to adolescents (DuRant, Pendergrast & Cadenhead, 1994; Markowitz, 2003).

Drawing on global research using the ecological framework, Table 1 provides a summary of risk factors by ecological level shown to have an association with youth and adolescent violent behavior.

INSERT TABLE 1.

Changing demographics coupled with increased poverty exert significant pressure on the family, which in turn significantly impacts how the socialization and learning process occurs (PAHO, 2003). Furthermore, a combination of factors has weakened the informal community support once available to young people and as a result youth, especially those from marginalized communities, are
increasingly left with the influences from the street as their primary source for socialization.

In general marginalized communities—those where there are low levels of social control, a concentration of youth, a concentration of poverty, more families under economic stress, more families with weak structure, alcohol and drug abuse prevalent, and social disorganization—there exists a greater probability that the residents are exposed to violence (Lorion & Salzman, 1993). These ‘toxic environments’ of chronic violence are frequently found in conflict and post-conflict countries (El Salvador, for example) as well as those where the drug trafficking factions are in conflict with the police (Brazil, for example) (Lorion & Salzman, 1993).

Studies analyzing the effect of prevailing cultures of violence have linked previous exposure to violence to future involvement in violence, whether as a victim or perpetrator (Liddell et al, 1994; Kostalny & Garbarino, 1994; Garbarino & Kostalny, 1996; Diehl et al, 1993; Lorion & Saltzman, 1993). The extent to which a young person is exposed to physical violence, social unrest, displacement and warfare can also have a decisive influence on that young person’s health and development (Shakoor & Chalmers, 1991; PAHO, 2003).
The age of exposure to violence also makes a difference. During the first decade of life, a critical period in development, children are initiating their exploration of the world, commencing by developing strong attachments to their parents and then creating social links with others. Intrafamilial violence can inhibit the capacity of children to create affective ties and develop independence (Howard et al, 2002). Children who are exposed to violence show more psychological regression and physical symptoms as a result of their exposure to violence, notwithstanding the physiological effects of being a victim of violence (Howard et al, 2002). Adolescence show a wider range of symptoms including physical, psychological, mood, values, and behavior, especially in school (Howard et al, 2002).

Increasing globalization, in general, and more specifically the internationalization of communication, has greatly facilitated the ability of youth to participate in the global culture. Globalization has enabled youth to have increased awareness of potential opportunities (Rodriguez, 2005). This juxtaposed with the present precarious conditions that most youth in the region face, however, causes great frustration (Rodriguez, 2005). Often the discouragement that youth feel prompts them to drop out of school - for example, a mere 30% of
youth in El Salvador and 15% in Guatemala and Honduras attend school (Centro de Estudios Guatemala, 2005). In addition, the rejection of youth from the labor market, linked to the lack of training - directly related to the deficiency of the educational system - further restricts their development (Rodriguez, 2005).

Structural factors promoting social exclusion together with increased interaction with different classes and visibility of the differences in the lifestyle of those who live in rich and poor neighborhoods in the same city, divide the social fabric, propagates stigma, and causes an explosive reaction among young people (Rodriguez, 2005). For example, the health system excludes young people by not taking into consideration their specific needs. Adolescents and youth get sick much less frequently than children, public policy, which is much more concerned with treatment of disease rather than health care, has traditionally neglected the specific needs of young people (Rodriguez, 2005). Young people who unfold their identities through diverse forms of violence are expressing their rejection of the society of which they have been excluded (Rodriguez, 2005).
Youth development

Adolescence is the period during which individuals face the task of establishing an identity and interpersonal bonds beyond the family; learning to handle growing sexual maturity in a responsible manner; and developing the capacity for economic viability, including education, skills, attitudes, and habits (PAHO, 2003).

Rodriguez⁴ (2005) succinctly describes four main defining characteristics of adolescence: 1) the transition⁵ to adulthood; 2) achieving emancipation and autonomy; 3) constructing one's own identity; and 4) intergenerational relationships. As adolescents endure the process of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, they move from complete dependence on their parents/guardians to autonomy. During this process young people work to develop their own identity, separate from their parents or guardians, while attempting to integrate themselves into society.

⁴ Ernesto Rodríguez, a Uruguayan sociologist, ex president of the Iberoamerican Youth Organization and current Director of the Latin American Center on Youth, conducted a study in six Latin American countries on youth violence for GTZ and PAHO.
⁵ Although adolescence is referred to as a transitory process, it should not be considered a "phase". Adolescents have their own set of resources, constraints, prejudices, experiences, and vulnerabilities that require unique support to adults and children.
This trajectory towards adulthood can be confronted with several challenges as roles and responsibilities change in accordance with increased autonomy. In this process adolescents and youth increasingly interact with society, one that is growing and almost always in conflict. Older generations, namely the adults with whom youth interact, are already integrated in the social dynamic and assume the role of guiding youth to become adults. Adults play a delicate role in facilitating this transitory process (the process of increasing youth autonomy and the consequent changes in roles) within the context of the society at large (and its conflict) (Rodriguez, 2005).

Furthermore today’s society is increasingly complex, technical and multicultural, which increases demands on young people in terms of education and training (PAHO, 2003). The length of adolescence has extended to the mid-to late twenties, and the pathways to adulthood have become less clear (PAHO, 2003).

In youth violence discourse, the life-course persistent developmental pathway, described in the WHO World Report on Violence, is used to explain the continuity over time in aggressive and violent behavior among children, young people and adults (WHO, 2002). This perspective defines individual characteristics of youth who engage in violence
either as life-time offenders (those who have underlying tendencies to aggressive behavior), and those who are adolescent (limited offenders who generally do not show any evidence of high levels of aggression or other problem behaviors during childhood) (WHO, 2002). The latter is more common, negating perceptions that violent behavior can be predicted in childhood and highlighting the critical need to understand the factors that lead to the explosion of aggression during adolescence.

Socialization

The socialization process - the transfer of norms, values, and customs from adult society to new generations commencing at the inception of life - plays a critical role in the development of youth both at the individual level as well as part of the broader social context (Rodriguez, 2005). As young men and women go through the process of developing their identities, they do so according to the norms, values, and expectations of adults within their society.

The process of socialization is carried out by agents of socialization, namely family, school, mass media communication, and peers (Rodriguez, 2005). Traditionally the central agent has been the family; however, changing family dynamics, including the disintegration of the
family unit and interaction between the nuclear and extended family, has resulted in other agents, primarily the school system and the mass media, assuming a more predominant role in the transfer of norms and values (Rodriguez, 2005). Mass media has attracted young people through much more engaging methods that simultaneously provides entertainment, and transmits values and norms, often in contradiction to those transmitted by family and school (Rodriguez, 2005). Peers have always played a decisive role in the socialization of adolescents and youth and they are generally the only influence not regulated by adults (Rodriguez, 2005).

There is heightened social pressure during adolescence which pushes boys and girls to prove their “manhood” and “womanhood”, respectively, most often according to traditional gender norms (Barker, 2000). The socialization of gender plays a prominent role in determining the types of behaviors and interactions in which young men and women participate to define themselves as women and men.

Traditionally in LAC, young men are socialized to believe that proving manhood to his peers involves proving strength and virility, reflected in the statistic that in 2000, 84.5% of hospitalizations resulting from violence, were male (Instituto Promundo, 2005). The traditional
patriarchal culture, prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean, propagates inequality between men and women, and legitimizes violence as a way in which to solve conflicts, in both private and public spaces (Instituto Promundo, 2005). A study conducted by Instituto Promundo and Instituto NOOS in 2003 in Rio de Janeiro, 25.4% of men aged 15-59 years admitted using some kind of physical violence against their partners, and the age group 20-24 years had the highest incidence of such violence (Instituto Promundo, 2005). Studies on the socialization of boys suggest that in comparison to girls they spend more time outside the home - presenting both benefits, in terms of mobility and exposure to new things, as well as risks. The primary risk to boys is related to behavior and socialization promoted by the male peer group (Barker, 2000).

Biological differences between boys and girls also contribute to behavior differences. Comparison studies of boys and girls during childhood show that boys under the age of 5 are more physically impulsive and aggressive than girls. Girls have more perceptual, cognitive and verbal skills which allow them to analyze and anticipate adult demands and conform to adult expectations (Bardwick & Douvan, 1990). From a very early age boys are frequently reprimanded for their behavior and therefore learn to
affirm their identity from an early age without relying on the acceptance of others (Bardwick and Douvan, 1990). Girls, on the other hand, learn to seek approval for their actions. As a result girls remain compliant and particularly susceptible to molding by culture, for example, relying heavily on media images about the body for their self-esteem, or seeking acceptance by a partner even if that partner is violent towards them (Bardwick and Douvan, 1990). Young women are taught to become docile, submissive, and caretakers. Many girls stop expressing themselves in school and keep silent in order to draw less attention to themselves (Machoian, 2005).

Women, however, are not passive actors in the socialization process; but rather, they often play a primary role in socializing their sons and daughters as part of their role in supporting their path towards adulthood (Barker, 2000). Women as partners also propagate the norms of traditional patriarchy through demanding qualities in their partners that fall in line with the narrow definitions of manhood pervasive within society (Barker, 2000).

Social integration and visibility
Although there is considerable diversity among adolescents, as they move through the process of
developing their identity, asserting themselves and gaining visibility becomes critical in validating themselves as an integrated participant in society, whether it be through participation in organized socio-political movements or other types of groups. Youth who are denied access to or who are not able to integrate into productive society are forced to find other ways in which to define themselves and assert their identity.

Rodriguez (2005) categorizes youth and adolescents into four broad categories according their level of social visibility:

The first group he describes is University students who act as the traditional prototype for youth. For decades, students were the only young people who participated in the social and political scene in the region (Rodriguez, 2005).

Urban youth, generally inhabitants of growing marginalized communities, have been excluded from advanced educational opportunities. This group possesses completely different methods from their university peers to organize themselves. The urban youth tend to form street corner hangout groups or gangs, often unfolding identities with activities linked to diverse forms of violence, namely in
response to the society from which they have been rejected (Rodriguez, 2005).

Rural adolescents and youth enjoyed some privileges in the 1930s and 1940s when they were well organized and visible. Since the 1940s and 1950s they have been loosing visibility, resulting from growing urbanization and social modernization which has made rural youth a minority in most countries in the region (Rodriguez, 2005).

The final group described by Rodriguez is female adolescents and young women who are affected by a double (age and gender) or triple (due to ethnicity or poverty) social exclusion (Rodriguez, 2005). Young women find difficulty in asserting their collective identity because they do not fall within the youth or women’s movements and carry the weight of conservative tradition in terms of domestic and social roles (Rodriguez, 2005).

Youth political participation is reflective of the amount of social inclusion and visibility experienced by diverse groups of youth and adolescents (Rodriguez, 2005). The periodic perceived apathy of youth in political participation results from: 1) the distance of institutions from youth; and 2) disenchantment produced by institutions that are increasingly marked by monotonous
routines, which contrasts with the way youth think. Corruption and other similar practices generate further frustration with the system, thus pushing youth away even more (Rodriguez, 2005). When youth feel that they have the possibility to instigate positive change, they participate (Rodriguez, 2005). Although the extent that youth participate in the political process is variable, it is an indicator of the extent to which young people feel they can integrate into productive society.

In addition to youth participation, agency, self-efficacy and social protection of human rights are also paramount to enabling youth integration into society, especially in LAC — a region characterized by social inequalities, class hierarchies and the social exclusion of non-dominant groups, including youth, women, and indigenous people (Rodriguez, 2005). There are numerous barriers for youth, leading to strong trends in social exclusion. For example, the distribution of goods in society is disproportional, favoring adults, who are active in the population, and elderly, through pension schemes, and prejudicial to children, adolescents, and youth, including exclusion from employment opportunities and access to health services, among others (Rodriguez, 2005). Similar limitations do affect older adults, however, studies about poverty in the LAC region show that these
issues affect youth disproportionately in comparison with adults and elderly (Rodriguez, 2005). Conflicts between youth and older generations stem from the tensions of youth wanting to assert themselves and be heard within a non-youth friendly society (Rodriguez, 2005).

**Finding a Space for Social Recognition: Gang violence**

When the broader society produces a hostile social dynamic, youth and adolescence tend to group themselves where they feel most comfortable: with their peers (Rodriguez, 2005). Growing residential segregation also contributes to the formation of youth groups that base their identity around a specific neighborhood or corner (Rodriguez, 2005). Gangs have increasingly become one of the only spaces where youth can gain social recognition.

Gang violence, also categorized as collective violence, has become one of the most visible forms of youth violence in the region today, especially in Central America – where between 20 and 50% of all violent crimes are attributed to gangs (WHO, 2002; Out of the Underworld, 5 January 2006). Gangs range from social grouping to organized criminal groups, however, they are generally associated with violent and criminal behavior and they are not concerned with hiding their identity or the consequences of their actions (WHO, 2002; Centro de Estudios de Guatemala,
2005). It is through this membership that young people are given a space to assert themselves, albeit frequently through violence.

In general, gang members are poor, young, marginalized, mostly living in urban areas, unemployed and not in school (expelled or dropped out), and have experienced some form of violence in their past (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005). Mass migration from rural to urban areas, lack of social alternatives, lack of control over left over weapons, weak justice systems, corruption, and drug trafficking in the region also contribute to the development and activity of gangs (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005).

Although there is some contestation, the rise in gang violence seems to coincide with the end of the armed conflicts in Central America in the 1990s (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005; Papachristos, 2005; Out of the Underworld, 5 January 2006). During the conflicts youth fought and died for both sides. Many immigrated to other countries in search of work and economic opportunities. When peace was reached, many ventured back with the hope that they could return to school or work. Many were disillusioned that they did not have better living conditions or greater social visibility. Many
other young people faced deportation for their criminal activity in the United States of America and the termination of their protected refugee status. The migration patterns helped spread the influence of gangs from Los Angeles, where gangs started forming in the 1970s among marginalized youth from Latin America (mostly from Mexico and El Salvador) (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005).

It is overly simplistic, however, to blame the development of gangs on armed conflict or neighborhood segregation alone. For example, in Nicaragua where a long armed conflict ensued, gang activity is relatively low, while in Honduras, a country that did not experience a long conflict, high levels of gang activity persist (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005; Franco, 2006).

Increased participation in gangs is not necessarily a reflection of youth choosing to engage in a violent lifestyle, but rather a result of a lack of choices in general. A study conducted in El Salvador by the Universidad de Centro America de El Salvador found that 84.8% of gang members would leave violence in exchange for employment or education (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 2005; Franco, 2006).
Rather than attack the root causes of youth violence and gang formation — lack of employment, weak educational systems, social exclusion, among others — current trends in anti-gang policy are based on punitive measures, most notably the ‘mano dura’ (hard hand) policy introduced by El Salvador’s president Tony Saca, who altered the penal code to categorize gang members as terrorists thus allowing authorities to take many more liberties in arresting and punishing anyone thought to be associated with a gang (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala 2005). For example, this policy allowed police in El Salvador to detain young people with tattoos based on the assumption that tattoos equate with gang affiliation. In addition to the ‘mano dura’ policy, decision-makers are calling for increased punishment of minors, arbitrary detentions, and the death penalty (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala 2005).

Another approach, termed the ‘mano amiga’ approach initiated by the Panamanian President Torrijos aims to provide at risk youth with positive alternative to gang membership (USDOS, 2005).

Protective factors and resiliency

Just as the ecological model predicts negative consequences based on factors occurring at different levels of the model, there are also some characteristics
or factors that act as protective factors influencing positive outcomes. These factors acting to protect youth from negative influences, emerge from studies on resilient youth. (Grotberg, 2001). The term resiliency was adapted to the social sciences to characterize those people who despite being born and living in situations of high-risk, develop psychologically healthy (Kotliarenco, 1997).

Protective factors exist at every level of the ecological model and are established prior to the individual being exposed to a stressor, thus altering how that stressor affects the person (Kotliarenco, Cáceres, & Fontecilla, 1997). They include: at the individual level, self-esteem and a sense that one’s efforts will produce the desired effect; at the family and community levels, the absence of marital discord, family cohesion, a good relationship with at least one parent, and connectedness – perceived good relationships and trust with parents, peers, and some other adults; and at the socio-political level, a sense of social integration, attachment to institutions, such as school and church, ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts, and commitment to civic engagement (PAHO, 2003).
Through the promotion of resiliency, young people can develop the tools necessary to alter how the hardships imposed by their social reality impact them, or remove those barriers all together. Preventing youth from engaging in or becoming victims of violence requires promoting the aforementioned protective factors.

THE COST OF YOUTH VIOLENCE: FEAR, INSECURITY & STAGNATING DEVELOPMENT

The economic costs of violence include direct costs (destruction of physical property and assets, and the loss of human lives, incarceration, and health sector costs) as well as indirect costs (lost of investment opportunities and forgone earnings) (Moser & van Bronkhorst, 1999), notwithstanding, the long-term impact of violence on the development youth, whether they are victims, witnesses, or perpetrators.

Although current data on the cost of youth violence in particular is scarce, general estimates of the cost of violence serve to draw a picture of the magnitude of violence on the development of the region. A study conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank in 1999 estimated that the cost of crime in the region, including the value of stolen property, at approximately $16.8 billion per year or 14.2% of the region’s GDP (Moser & van
These estimates include the effects of violence on productivity and investment, as well as the impact on employment and consumption. Other social costs, namely losses in human capital through loss of life or injury, add an additional 4.9% loss to the regional GDP (Moser & van Bronkhorst, 1999).

As a result of the high levels of violence and corruption, international investment is increasingly reluctant to enter the region. A study conducted by the Council of the Americas found that companies located in the region spend an average of six to eight percent of their annual operating budgets on security, in comparison to only two to four percent in Asia (Council of the Americas, 2004). Corruption adds to this fear of investment.

One business has flourished as a result of fear and insecurity: private security. There are currently 2.5 million private guards in Latin America. In Bogotá, Colombia, where kidnapping is prevalent, there are 7 private guards for every policeman/woman and in São Paulo, Brazil there are three times as many private guards than state police (Council of the Americas, 2004).

**ACTIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS**
Violence and injury among youth and adolescents have roots in social, political, and economic conditions in the environments in which the young people live. When societies do not support and protect the rights of their young people and fail to provide healthy environments in which to develop, issues such as violence, drug use, and HIV, ensue.

In response to the rise in violence and its imminent impact on the economic development of the region, calling for timely and effective intervention, PAHO advocates for action under the following five guiding principals:

a) Develop and implement evidence-based and theory-based interventions and evaluate them.

b) Focus on the promotion of health and wellbeing and violence prevention.

c) Build on what exists at the country and local levels.

d) Utilize a gender perspective.

e) Involve youth and community participation in policy and program development.

Based on the current situation in the region, country experiences, and the proposed framework, the following are recommendations for continued action in youth violence
prevention (where advances have been made examples are included):

a) Development and support of national youth policy

Although a critical first step, policy development must be complimented with resources in order to provide true commitment. Countries in the region should be encouraged to develop national youth policies using the proposed framework and a gender perspective with the active involvement of youth in the process. Through such support the Dominican Republic has already developed a national youth policy and has supported this policy by allotting 1% of the national budget and 4% of the municipal budget in order to do so.

b) Strengthening youth services

As mentioned in the previous text, youth violence is a multidimensional issue requiring a multisectoral approach for prevention. Strengthening justice, education, recreational, and health services with an emphasis on protection, promotion, and prevention creates a youth-friendly environment which promotes social inclusion. Chile, for example, has achieved 75% attendance in secondary education by committing to universal access to education. They also offer universal access to health services. Nicaragua has an innovative approach to law
enforcement that focuses on preventing crime and rehabilitation (Franco, 2006).

c) Human resource development in youth violence prevention
Build the capacity of human resources, from diverse sectors working with youth, to develop and implement effective programs based on evidence and theory, is essential in supporting young people at all levels of the ecological model. PAHO has developed three capacity building programs that support such learning.

(i) Youth Choices and Change: A framework for guiding the development and implementation of effective programs based on evidence and theory that can be evaluated.

(ii) TEACH VIP/ Youth: A curriculum on violence and injury prevention specific to the Latin American reality with an elaboration on the specific needs of youth, intended for students of public health, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and other professionals that work with youth or injury and violence prevention.

(iii) Strengthening Families: Love and Limits: A curriculum developed to improve the health and development of adolescents aged 10 to 14 years, and prevent risky behaviors through the promotion of communication between parents and their children.
d) Media involvement and partnership

The media plays a powerful role within society with the ability to influence behavior, opinion, and values. Journalists and other media professionals can be crucial allies in disseminating best practices and influencing public opinion. In Colombia efforts have been made through a workshop uniting health and media professionals, to collaborate in addressing violence.

e) Build networks and strategic alliances

Regional networks and strategic alliances, including the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence, which includes a strategic alliance among PAHO, Center for Disease Control (CDC), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Organization of American States (OAS), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank, have allowed for collaborative effort in addressing violence from a multidisciplinary perspective and working with various sectors at the national and regional level. Next steps include furthering these efforts to support the development of networks at the national and community levels.

f) Data
There is a scarcity of useful data regarding youth behavior in the region. Data needs to be desegregated and surveillance should be incorporated into national information systems.

g) Mobilize resources and partner with the private sector at local, national, and regional levels

Although the government has an integral role in ensuring its population access to public goods, the private sector has the potential to be a key ally in opening opportunities for young people as productive members of society and supporting community development.
REFERENCES


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"Out of the Underworld" 5 January 2006. The Economist [print edition].


Table 1: The Ecological Model: Risk factors associated with youth violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecological Level</th>
<th>Risk Factors associated with youth violent behavior (WHO, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Impulsiveness; poor behavioral control; attention problems; low intelligence; and low levels of achievement in school; nervousness and anxiety are negatively related to violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Poor monitoring and supervision of children by parents; use of harsh physical punishment to discipline children; sexual abuse; parental conflict in early childhood; poor attachment between parents and children; large number of children in the family; mother who had her first child at an early age; low level of family cohesion; low socioeconomic status; having delinquent friends (causal direction questioned)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and Society</td>
<td>Presence of gangs, guns, and drugs in community; living in urban areas (especially for boys); lack of opportunity for social or economic mobility, within a society that aggressively promotes consumption; interrupted schooling, combined with low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and cultural</td>
<td>Lack of social integration; high levels of social inequality; rapid demographic changes in youth population; modernization; emigration; urbanization; exposure to media violence causes (limited evidence for short-term rises in aggression and no evidence over long-term); cultures which fail to provide non-violent alternatives to resolve conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Decline in the enforcement of law and order; weak legal framework; lack of social protection; low confidence in police; lack of economic safety net</td>
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