



Basic Facts

Basic Facts about Violence¹

Did you know that ...

- In Bogota, 57% of all reported homicides take place on weekends and 68% take place between 6:00 P.M. and 6:00 A.M. (Camacho and Camargo, 1998)
- In Rio de Janeiro, the three days of the week when most incidents of domestic violence take place are Mondays, with Saturdays and Sundays following behind in second and third place respectively. The most high-risk time of day is between 8:00 A.M. and 6:00 P.M.
- In Costa Rica, 74% of all homicides are committed by acquaintances of the victim (data for 1996), whereas in the USA 53% are committed by people who are strangers to the victim (data for 1992) (Carranza, 1997).
- In Latin America, most homicide victims are young men, 69% of whom are between the ages of 15 and 29 years old (Sanjuan, 1999).
- In El Salvador, 60% of the prison population is under 30 years of age, and 45% has not completed primary school (Cruz and Romano, 1998).
- In Rio de Janeiro, in 1996, 1 out of every 3 children polled had been assaulted and one half had witnessed an assault (Cardia, 1997).
- In Colombia, the murder rate of children between the ages of 10 and 14 years doubled between 1979 and 1994, rising from 1.2 to 2.8 per 100,000 children (Franco, 1999)
- In Santiago Chile, 63% of all eighth-graders reported in a survey that they have been victims of violence in their home, and 34% stated that they were subjected to severe physical abuse (Larraín et al., 1997).
- Also in Santiago, Chile, more than 40% of all adult women responded in a survey that they have been victims of some type of abuse (Larraín, 1999).

What Is Violence?

Violence is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Because it takes on so many different shapes, it defies easy definition. The most widely used definitions of violence usually weave in the dimensions of the degree of intention behind the behavior as well as the gravity of its consequences. In keeping with this line of thinking, a commonly accepted definition states that violent behavior is “any behavior of individuals

who attempt, threaten or actually inflict physical or any other type of injury” (Reiss and Roth, 1993 p.2). This definition of violence includes suicide as the most extreme manifestation of self-inflicted injury, but excludes violence resulting from accidents. It also includes psychological and sexual injuries, which tend to be more pervasive than physical injury in cases of domestic or interfamily violence. This definition also encompasses violence carried out against non-related

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individuals who are strangers to the perpetrator (interpersonal violence) as well as violence against inanimate objects (vandalism).

By not addressing the lawful or unlawful nature of violent behavior, this definition encompasses both acts of criminal and non-criminal violence. Omission of the legal dimension of violent behavior stems from the fact that an act of violence may or may not constitute a violation of existing law and, consequently, may or may not be categorized as “criminal” behavior by the criminal justice system [of any particular jurisdiction]. Examples of acts of non-criminal violence would be domestic violence in some countries and, in many instances, violence perpetrated by the State. Examples of non-violent (or “victimless”) criminal acts would include corruption, non-violent theft or robbery and non violent prostitution. See Table 1.

Why Is It Important to Speak of Violence and not only Violent Crime?

First and foremost, because certain violent acts, such as domestic violence, may be against the law in some countries but lawful in other countries.

Secondly, because there is a causal relationship between criminal and non-criminal violence. Violence is a learned behavior, and a main school of violence is the home, which, for the most part, is an environment where violent behavior (including corporal punishment) is not viewed as unlawful. Being subjected or exposed to chronic abuse during childhood is an important precursor to adult violence (Berkowitz,

1996). Moreover, violent childhood behavior predicts violence during adulthood, once consistent patterns of violent behavior manifest themselves during the early stages of life. (Huesmann et al., 1984). Children, for example, may start to exhibit violent tendencies in abusing or torturing animals. Even though this type of behavior is not against the law in many countries, it constitutes a significant precedent to the development of adult violent behavior.

Consequently, to limit the scope of action in violence prevention efforts solely to violent crimes would be to turn a blind eye to one of the causes and, by extension, also to one of the most important ways of combating it.

What Forms Does Violence Take?

In light of the myriad of diverse forms it may take, violence or violent acts can be categorized according to different variables which are not always mutually exclusive of each other:

- ▶ who the victims of the violence are (children, women, the elderly, the disabled)
- ▶ the violent agent (gangs, young people, drug-traffickers, crowds, policemen)
- ▶ the nature of the violent act (physical, psychological, sexual)
- ▶ the intention of the perpetrator (instrumental or emotional)
- ▶ when the violence is instrumental, the motive of the perpetrator (political, economic, social, ethnic or racial)

Table 1:
Crime versus Violence: a few examples

Behavior	Legal Definition	
	Criminal	Non Criminal
Violent	Armed robbery Assault Rape by a stranger Murder	Domestic Violence* Rape within a marriage* Corporal punishment
Non violent	Non violent robbery or theft Non violent prostitution Bribery/Corruption	—

*in some countries

Source: Buvinic et al., 1999

- ▶ the place where the violent act is committed (urban or rural)
- ▶ the relationship between the victim and the aggressor (relatives, acquaintances, strangers)

Because of the particular implications that two of the variables have for policy design, namely, the relationship between the victim and the aggressor and the intent of the perpetrator in committing the violent act, both of these variables are explored further below.

1. **The relationship between the victim and the aggressor.** Since both the study of the causes of violence, or its etiology, as well as the strategies to combat it vary widely, it is particularly useful to divide violent acts into two broad categories based on the relationship between the victim and the aggressor:

- ▶ Domestic violence is defined as any violence between people who presently share, or have shared, kinship or blood ties, a formal marital or consensual relationship, or a union as a couple.
- ▶ Social violence is defined as any violence that occurs between individuals who share no kinship or blood ties, or have no marital or consensual relationship.

Many forms of domestic or interfamily violence are socially acceptable; attempts at measuring this type of violence are largely inadequate (partly because it takes place in the privacy of the home); and very little is done to combat it. We are by no means implying that great strides have been made in combating social violence. Nevertheless, since this type of violence mainly takes place in the open or on the street; it is more widely and readily recognized; it has been the subject of more legislation and the target of many more control and prevention actions; and is easier to measure or quantify.

2. **The intention of the person committing the violent act.** Another basic way to categorize violence for the purpose of designing strategies to combat it is to divide it into two major types according to intent:

- ▶ Instrumental violence is defined as any violence perpetrated in order to attain a goal other than the violence itself.
- ▶ Emotional (expressive or hostile) violence is defined as any violence in which the aggressive response, causing harm, is in itself the goal of the violent behavior.

The distinction between these two types of violence reflects two different underlying models of behavior: the rational model favored by economists and the emotional model espoused by psychologists. The rational model suggests that prospective criminals look at the costs and expected benefits of the crime and decide to proceed with committing the criminal act or not on the basis of whether the benefits outweigh the costs. The second theory, on the other hand, explains violent behavior as a result of biological predispositions and learned behavior which, together with emotional states (frustration, stress) and/or aggressive stimuli, trigger violent behavior. In this model, individuals do not carefully weigh expected costs and benefits. Consequently, the punitive measures that are usually designed to confront the rational criminal (for example, increasing the likelihood of offenders being arrested by increasing police presence, increasing the likelihood of conviction, improving criminal investigation efforts) will not wholly deter individuals who react with emotional or hostile violence. If the goal is to reduce emotional violence, where psychosocial and cultural variables play a more important role than rational variables, then prevention is the appropriate course to take as opposed to punishment and detention.

In real life, both instrumental and emotional motives often explain violent behavior; this accounts for incidents of unbridled or extreme instrumental violence. The rational model offers a better explanation for certain types of violence (such as drug-related violence); whereas, the emotional model provides a better explanation for other types of violence (for example, school violence or violence triggered in soccer games).

Who Are the Main Perpetrators of Violence?

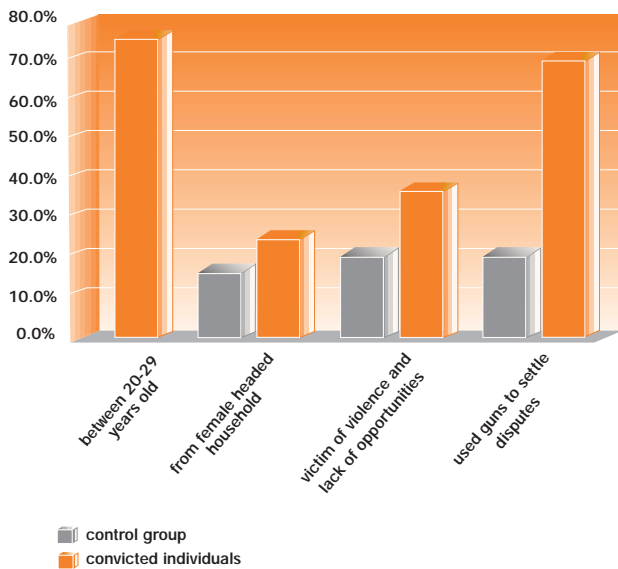
Although no homogenous pattern in the distribution of violence can be established, it is evident that, in the large urban centers of Latin America, the map of homicide incidence tends to mirror the location of those socially, economically and culturally underprivileged. This tendency underscores the perverse link between violence, poverty and inequality (Silva, 1999; CEDEC, 1996). Victimization, therefore, tends to be more frequent, more serious, and have more negative consequences among the poor than among the better off segments of the population.

Women are at higher risk of being the target of violence at home than in the street (Lozano, 1997); children are exposed to violence (and the opportunity to learn it) at home, in the street and at school. High number of students carrying weapons to classrooms, witnessing or being the victims of assaults by their classmates or teachers has been reported in the Region (DeRoux, 1995).

Teenagers and young people are frequently the victims and perpetrators of violence. The outbreak of homicides does not affect all young people equally. Underprivileged, uneducated youngsters who live in large suburban areas are at the greatest risk of encountering violence (Sanjuan, 1999).

Less is known about the perpetrators of violence, partly because a high percentage of homicides and assaults in the region remain unsolved. Available statistics show (see graphs 1 and 2) how young the victimizers were, as well as how vulnerable they were in their family situation and how easy it was for them to gain access to firearms. This last variable is a high risk factor for the commission of fatal acts of violence.

Graph 1.
The Profile of Convicted Murderers in Cali

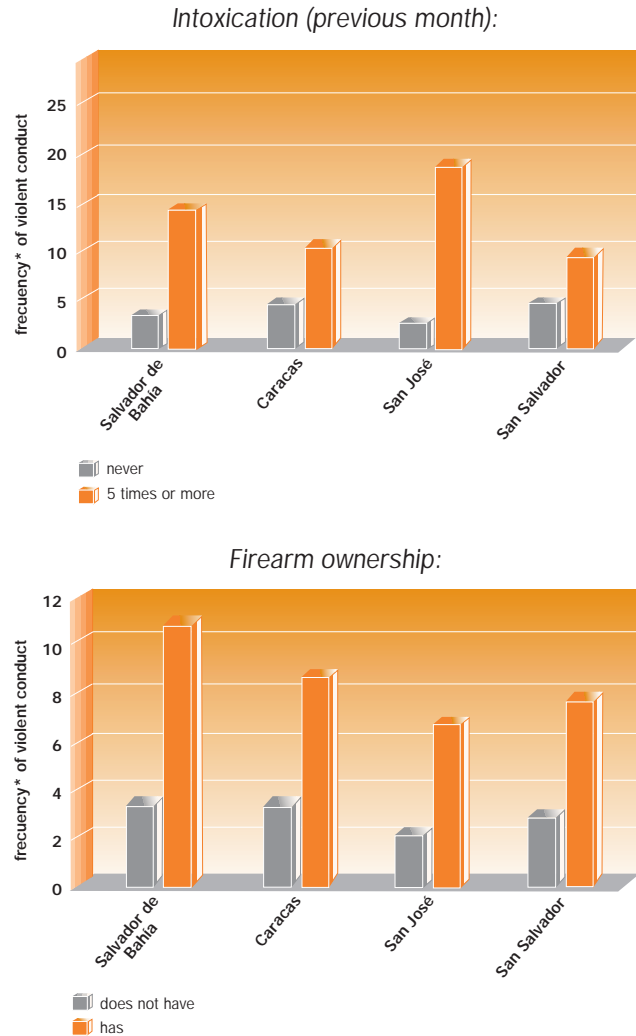


Source: CISALVA. 1998. Dimensionamiento de la violencia en Colombia. Universidad del Valle, Facultad de Salud. BID, Documentos de Trabajo de la Red de Centros, R-339.

Contributions to the Study of Violence

The study of violence cuts across many different disciplines. This has given rise to a variety of perspectives and provided many insights into the causes of violence and possible solutions. The following section outlines some of these contributions:

Graph 2:
Individual Characteristics Associated with Violent Behavior



*beating a non family member

Source: Orpinas, Pamela. 1999. Proyecto Activa 3, from the series: Investigaciones en Salud Publica. Washington, DC: OPS.

Ethology. As a result of the scientific study of agonistic behavior in animals and by that we mean behavior (including aggression) whose common function is adaptation to situations of physical conflict among members of the same species, ethologists have found a basis for aggressive behavior in animals in physiology and the adaptation to environment (Lorenz, 1966). Ethologist have suggested that there is a “normal” dimension to aggressive behavior linked to adaptation, but have also emphasized certain environmental conditions that give rise to pathological violent behavior in the animal kingdom, such as high population density (in experiments with rats by J.B. Calhoun, 1962 and other experimentation) and maternal affection deprivation (in experiments with chimpanzees by H. Harlow).

Biological Sciences. Breakthroughs in medical and scientific technology are helping to uncover empirical evidence of biological influences on violent human behavior. The possible effects on violent behavior of genetic predisposition, neurobiological processes, endocrinological mechanisms, cerebral abnormalities and pharmacological influences from drug and alcohol abuse, have all been topics of research. Man's comparatively greater aggressive behavior than women is partly rooted in endocrinological differences between the sexes. Some of the most exciting recent breakthroughs involve the possible link between violent behavior and neurobiological abnormalities at an early age which are preventable at an early age, including infantile cerebral trauma (stemming from abuse and accidents), deficient prenatal care, and exposure to neurotoxins such as lead (see research of B.D. Perry, 1996; D.P. Farrington, 1997; A. Raine et al., 1997). Increasing understanding of a possible neurobiological basis for violent behavior has made it clear, nevertheless, that such behavior is seldom due only to physical anomalies, but rather is the result of interaction between both biological and environmental factors.

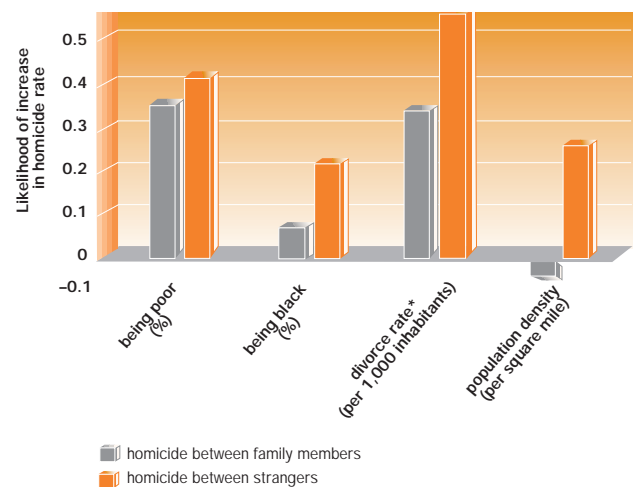
Psychology. The field of psychology has made its greatest contribution in explaining how individuals learn aggressive behavior (without necessarily being genetically predisposed to it) and what specific individual and environmental features incite (or inhibit) aggression. The theory of social learning (A. Bandura, 1973 and collaborators) stresses the role played by observation and imitation (of both real-life and fictional, media-created role models) in learning violent behavior and, hence, the importance of the family and the media. Insight on the role of frustration and stress in triggering aggressive behavior has been gained from studies on human emotion. And, lastly, research on learning processes through classic conditioning has shed light on the potential of aggressive stimuli in the environment to incite violent behavior, including violent scenes in movies and television and firearms (studies by L. Berkowitz, 1996 and his collaborators).

Sociology. More than half a decade of sociological analysis has revealed the importance of socioeconomic, ethnic or racial, and cultural variables as well as of social disorganization in explaining violent crime. Empirical evidence shows that both poverty (or absolute deprivation) as well as inequality (relative deprivation) have a violence-triggering effect. (See graph 3). Inequalities stemming from racial background generate social conflicts and are a root cause of criminal violence. The field of sociology has also highlighted the role of cultural norms in perpetuating violence

(through subcultures of violence). Studies on the the relationship between violence and social disorganization at the community level (measured by means of high migration and divorce rates, among other factors), and emphasis on the importance of formal and informal institutions of social control in reducing violence, date back to the days of E. Durkheim's work.

Economics. Taking its lead from G. Becker's studies (1974 and 1992), the perspective offered by economics has expanded the theory of individual rational choice to explain crime and stressed the major role that incentives (rewards and punishments) play in criminal behavior. The main thesis is that criminals are rational agents whose behavior is an optimal response to rewards as well as anticipated punishments that may result from committing a criminal act; punishment being viewed in terms of the likelihood of being caught, convicted and serving time in jail. This view of the rational offender stresses how important having well remunerated employment is in preventing violence, inasmuch as a well-paid job would make the anticipated rewards of unlawful criminal behavior less appealing, as well as emphasizing how an effective judicial system and police force acts as a helpful deterrent to crime. Other recent contributions made by economics include quantification of the costs of violence (see Technical Note # 4), as well as the social costs and benefits of different anticrime policy options; initial studies on crime

Graph 3.
Effects of Social Indicators on the Homicide Rate in 168 Large U.S. Cities 1980-1984



*proxy to measure social disintegration

Source: Williams K.R. and R. L. Flewelling, 1988. The Social Production of Criminal Homicide: A Comparative Study of Disaggregated Rates in American Cities, in American Sociological Review, 53, 421-431.

and social capital (Dilulio, 1996); and attempts at explaining the geographic concentration of crime in larger cities (Glaeser and Sacerdote, 1996).

Political Science. Political science research has emphasized that politically-motivated violence is a symptom of the erosion of the effectiveness and legitimacy of government and a message to government stating that not only is all not well in society, that certain segments of the population are disgruntled or frustrated enough to actually break the law for the sake of bringing about change. Political scientists have also focused the spotlight on the disequilibrium that emerges between what people aspire to and what they are capable of attaining. This occurs when rapid economic change raises expectations of economic growth, but population growth outpaces the rate of economic growth. This is what D. Lerner (1963) calls “the revolution of frustrated expectations”, which creates conditions conducive to violence.

Public Health Science. The field of epidemiology has offered a method for the design of violence prevention programs. In this method, risk and protection factors are identified in specific scenarios and serve to predict the likelihood that a person will be a violent agent or a victim of violence. This methodology is based on the notion that the more risk factors in an individual's profile, the greater is the likelihood of violence in a specific setting and, conversely, the more protection factors, the less the likelihood. In Colombia, R. Guerrero (1997) successfully used the epidemiological approach when he was mayor of Cali, (see Technical Note # 5). The science of public health has made further contributions by providing a method for calculating how many healthy years of life are lost as a result of violence (see, for example, R. Lozano's work in Mexico in 1997), and by identifying public health measures designed to prevent violence and to treat victims of violence.

Criminology. As a result of the interdisciplinary, scientific study of crime as a social phenomenon, this science has provided insight into the causes and possible solutions to crime, the latter being focused primarily on deterrence as a mechanism of crime control. The criminology community emphasizes the deterrent effects of incremental sentencing and jail terms as a crime prevention tool and, in view of how easy it is to get away with crime, poses the question of why there are no more crimes committed and why there are no more criminals (see, for example, Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). One current line of thinking in the field of criminology has placed greater emphasis on the link between crime and the biomedical sciences, whereas another school has placed greater emphasis on its link

with sociology; both, however, have focused on the study of crime and its consequences as well as the criminal in specific scenarios or settings.

It may be apparent to the reader that the different disciplines greatly contribute to the study of violence by explaining the phenomenon on different levels or from different angles that range from the perspective of the individual to the social or political points of view. A variety of perspectives is more useful than just one viewpoint and provides a better explanation for certain types of violence (for example, bar brawls, drug-related violence, violent demonstrations, etc.) and this variety also offers different methodologies and ways of focusing on combating violence. All the disciplines make invaluable contributions to gaining insight into and dealing with the phenomenon. The great challenge that lies ahead in the fight against violence is to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective in order to effectively reduce it.

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