



## Prevention

# Preventing Violence<sup>1</sup>

**B**ecause of its multiple causes and consequences, addressing violence requires implementing measures in several different sectors. No single formula can be applied to all situations of violence. A myriad of proposals for action have been put forth, many have been shaped by the author's discipline. These proposals can be divided up into two major groups: actions geared towards violence *control* and actions geared towards violence *prevention*. The field of criminology and the judicial approach have made significant contributions to the first group, while the field of epidemiology and the public health approach have emphasized prevention-focused methodologies.

### What Is an Epidemiological Approach?

Epidemiological surveillance is the systematic gathering, analyzing and interpreting of specific data to be used in the planning, execution and evaluation of programs against violence. It consists of four stages:

1. Defining the problem and collecting reliable data
2. Identifying causes and risk factors
3. Developing and implementing interventions
4. Analyzing and evaluating the effectiveness of violence prevention interventions (Mercy, et al. 1993).

Epidemiology is a particularly useful tool for creating readily accessible information systems—at the local, regional and national levels—which help to reduce underreporting of violent deaths and injuries and identify the risk factors associated with these acts (Lozano, 1997).

### Prevention and Control: Two Separate Approaches or Part of the Same Continuum?

The terms prevention and control are often catchwords associated with opposing sides involved in the on-going effort to solve the problem of violent crime. The pro-prevention camp seeks to solve the problem by fighting poverty and implementing other measures known as “soft” solutions. The pro-control camp feels the solution lies in stepping up law enforcement efforts and building more prisons, measures that have been dubbed “hard” solutions. But in reality, prevention and control are both part of the same continuum where effective punishment, albeit a “hard” solution by nature, can actually become an effective deterrent for preventing some types of violent behavior in the future. Prevention actions therefore should not be defined only by the type of intervention, but also by the effects of interventions on future behavior (Sherman, 1998). (Also see Technical Note 6).

### Cost-Effectiveness of Prevention

Data from industrialized nations show that prevention efforts can be more cost-effective than control actions (Buvinic, Morrison and Shifter, 1999). In the U.S., for example, it is estimated that between \$6.00 and \$7.00 dollars could be saved on control programs for every dollar invested in prevention. Despite this finding, at

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## The Sooner the Better

Preventive action is most effective when taken as early as possible in an individual's life and/or as soon as violent behavior begins to emerge.

the beginning of the 1990s, 94% of U.S. federal funds were spent on fighting crime after the fact (McDonald, 1992). Following the pattern set in the U.S. and many other industrialized nations, violence control and victim treatment programs predominate in Latin America as well. Since prevention efforts are still in their infancy in the region, no information is available regarding costs and very little information is available on the impact of these programs. Even in industrialized nations where prevention programs have a longer history, well-designed models for the evaluation of the impact of such programs are still few and far between (Sherman, 1998).

## Prevention Strategies

Prevention strategies are geared towards decreasing risk factors for violence and/or increasing protection factors. (In Technical Note 3 some of the main risk factors for violence are summarized.) Prevention actions can be analyzed according to four dichotomies:

- ▶ Modify structural or triggering factors
- ▶ Modify social or situational factors
- ▶ Modify specific risk/protection factors (focused programs) or modify a set of factors (comprehensive programs)
- ▶ Target the entire population (primary prevention), high risk groups (secondary prevention), or violent agents or their victims (tertiary prevention)

**Structural and trigger factor prevention.** Reducing poverty and inequality are two measures that will reduce violence in the long run. This can be achieved by modifying labor market incentives, increasing access to employment, and by reducing perceptions of relative deprivation. It is especially important to increase economic opportunities for disadvantaged youth because this sector of the population represents the majority of victims and victimizers of social violence. Raising women's productivity and incomes is a potentially powerful tool for reducing domestic violence

against women, since this may redress the unequal power relationships which frequently generate violence.

Triggering factor prevention measures are geared towards altering events that may immediately trigger or instigate violence; examples include preventing access to firearms, alcohol and drugs. (See Note 6 for examples of this type of prevention measure.)

Prevention focused on trigger factors will have a greater impact on violence in the short run than do structural prevention measures.

**Social and situational prevention.** Social prevention entails actions taken to decrease the likelihood that individuals belonging to high-risk groups become victims or agents of violence. Such action involves social development programs such as pre and post natal care of at-risk or low income mothers; early childhood development programs; creating incentives for disadvantaged youth to complete their high school education; and peaceful conflict resolution courses for high risk groups (Bottoms, 1990). Situational prevention, on the other hand, focuses on preventing potential victims from being victimized by attempting to eliminate the opportunity for this to happen, making it more difficult and risky, and less worthwhile for the offender to commit a violent crime. These actions include erecting physical obstacles, controlling access to places and mounting surveillance systems in order to inhibit commission of criminal acts in specific places (residences, businesses, public spaces, etc.). It also involves actions designed to make it less profitable to commit crime and to control vandalism that itself may generate crime. (Chinchilla and Rico, 1997).

**Focused and comprehensive prevention.** Usually no distinction is made between these two types of prevention efforts; however, it can be useful to speak, on the one hand, about prevention actions targeted towards a single or very few risk factors of violence, such as weapons control or child development programs for high risk groups and, on the other hand, about comprehensive prevention efforts which address a broad range of risk factors (see the experience of the mayor's office of Bogota, Colombia in 1995-1997 later in this note). The literature on violence prevention seems to reflect the consensus that because violence has a variety of causes, it must be addressed using several concurrent measures both in the realm of prevention as well as control. From the operational standpoint, however, it is also recognized that complex programs consisting of a variety of measures and requiring inter-institutional coordination are difficult and expensive to implement.

Table 1.

**Bogota City: Civic Culture Program, 1995–97**

Between 1995 and 1997, Bogota invested nearly 130 million dollars (3.7% of the city’s total investment budget) in a citizen education program implemented cooperatively by different city departments. Although having many components, the program was also unified under a common philosophy. Based on the premise that the three systems that regulate human behavior—law, culture (on a collective level) and morals (individual behavior) were disconnected—the objective of the program was to strengthen self-regulation of collective and individual behavior by closing the gap between both of these types of behavior and the law.

Actions taken in this program included:

- Creation of a monthly “Violence and Crime” newsletter with updated reports and statistics on crime;
- Education on the use of alcohol and the enactment of the dry law (*ley zanahoria*) which mandated that establishments serving alcoholic beverages close at 1 a.m.;
- Voluntary disarmament with the collaboration of the church;
- Increasing the number of family social service centers (“comisariás de familia”) from 6 to 13;
- Strengthening neighborhood watch groups under the auspices of the police;
- Providing specialized training to 4,750 police officers in order to make the police force more professional;
- Community workshops (“*semilleros*”) attended by citizens in order to raise consciousness about rules of civil coexistence and receive input for proposals to amend the city of Bogota’s code of police behavior;
- Placing restrictions on the use of fireworks.

Some of the apparent results of these actions were:

- A drop in the annual homicide rate from 72 to 51 homicides per 100,000 persons;
- A reduction of 9.5% in the number of homicide victims with the presence of alcohol in their blood during the first year of the program and of 26.7% during the second year;
- 2,538 weapons were turned in and were melted down to make baby spoons under the voluntary disarmament campaign and, as an apparent result of this program, over the following three months common homicides dropped between 23% and 30%.
- Nearly 18,000 people participated in the community workshops (“*semilleros*”) and offered nearly 30,000 proposals that were summerized in a “Civil Charter” (*Carta de Civilidad*).
- The number of children injured by fireworks at Christmastime was reduced to less than a third of the figure from previous years.

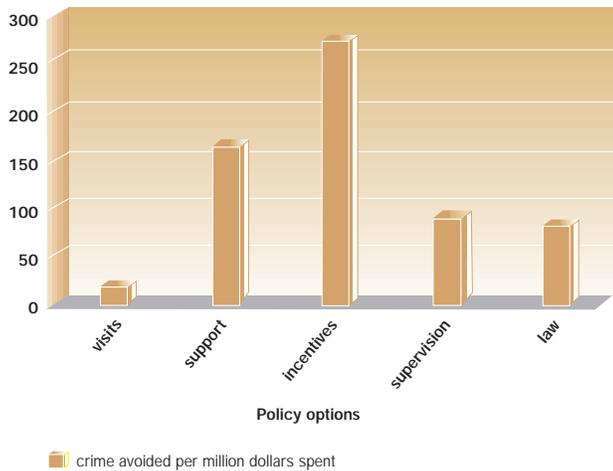
*Source Mockus, Antanas. 1999. “Armonizar Ley, Moral y Cultura,” draft paper prepared for the IDB.*

Unfortunately, no information is available on the relative merits of focused prevention programs versus comprehensive prevention programs. Were it available, such information would be very useful for the design of violence prevention programs.

**Primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.** Primary prevention means prevention targeted towards decreasing risk factors and increasing protection factors

among broad population groups (for example, adult women, high school students, etc.) Secondary prevention focuses on groups that have a high risk of exhibiting or developing violent behavior (such as economically and socially disadvantaged youth). Tertiary prevention is geared towards individuals that have exhibited or have been victims of violent behavior, in order to avoid repeat offenses or to prevent re-victimization.

**Graph 1.**  
**Serious Crimes avoided per million dollars invested in several different early intervention programs, compared to serious crimes avoided as a result of California's "three strikes and you're out" law (1998)**



visits: home visits and childcare programs  
 support: parenting training and therapy for high risk families  
 incentives: monetary and non-monetary incentives (for periods of up to 4 years) to motivate disadvantaged youth to graduate from school  
 supervision: supervision of young people who have exhibited criminal behavior  
 law: three strikes law that legislates harsh prison sentences for offenders that have committed three felonies  
 Source: Greenwood, Peter. 1998. *Diverting Children from a Life of Crime*. Santa Monica: RAND (Also see Technical Note 6)

## Institutional Settings for the Development of Prevention Actions

- ▶ Families and homes
- ▶ Schools and child development centers
- ▶ Communities
- ▶ Municipalities
- ▶ Labor markets
- ▶ Healthcare centers
- ▶ Police forces
- ▶ Criminal justice system agencies
- ▶ Places (where there is a social organizational structure in a defined space)
- ▶ Media

In the paragraphs that follow, prevention actions in some of these institutional settings are discussed. See the latter part of this note and Note 7 (on domestic violence) for a description of similar actions in other settings.

**Municipalities** are in a good position to coordinate agency efforts in crime and violence prevention. City governments can promote business forums on citizen safety; draw up community action plans for violence prevention; and create crime and violence prevention councils. In France, such councils manage central government funds and become involved in both crime

**Table 2.**  
**Successful crime prevention measures in the U.S.**

Based on a systematic review of more than 500 scientific evaluations of prevention practices targeted toward different population groups, the following actions have proven to be effective in crime prevention:

- For infants: frequent visits by social workers and other professionals to high-risk homes.
- For preschoolers: classes combined with weekly home visits by teachers
- For high-risk pre-teens: family therapy and instruction for their parents
- For schools: structural reorganization to facilitate innovation; effective dissemination and reinforcement of clear and consistent rules of behavior; social skills training for children
- For ex-offenders: vocational training
- For high crime areas: extra police patrolling
- For employed perpetrators of domestic violence: arrest at their workplace

Source: Sherman, et al. 1998

**Table 3.**  
**Violence Prevention Actions by Sector**

**Education**

- Teaching conflict resolution skills in school programs
- Creating non-sexist school curricula and using non-sexist textbooks
- Carrying out cognitive interventions (anger management, cognitive self control, moral reasoning, social perspective-taking)
- Improving school climate (properly handling students in classrooms, establishing school policies and rules, ensuring school safety, reducing bullying)
- Implementing technical education or vocational programs to help reduce school dropout rates and provide improved opportunities for students entering the labor market
- Increasing cooperation with health clinics, police and social service agencies
- Organizing peer mediation programs

**Health**

- Providing greater access to reproductive health care services
- Improving detection of victims of violence in healthcare settings (clinics, hospitals, doctor's offices)
- Improving recording and reporting of incidents of violence
- Conducting home visits to low-income mothers with newborn babies
- Providing information on violence prevention to women who use medical services (especially reproductive health services)
- Creating alcohol and drug abuse programs
- Supporting healthy baby/healthy mother programs
- Implementing peer counseling programs to warn teenagers about the dangers of a violent lifestyle

**Justice**

- Creating decentralized alternative dispute-resolution centers
- Incorporating violence prevention activities into sectoral judicial reform projects
- Enacting laws or regulations to restrict the sale of alcohol at certain times of day and on certain days
- Entering into national and international agreements to control the availability of guns
- Implementing judicial system reforms to reduce levels of impunity
- Providing training to judicial system personnel on domestic violence

**Police**

- Implementing community policing and/or problem-oriented policing
- Providing police training, including domestic violence and human rights components

*(Continued on next page)*

Table 3.

## Violence Prevention Actions by Sector (*continued*)

- Increasing cooperation with other agencies
- Organizing voluntary programs for taking guns out of the hands of the civilian population
- Solving and prosecuting more cases in order to reduce impunity for the perpetrators of crime
- Pursuing affirmative action in the recruitment of police
- Improving information gathering, record keeping and reporting of crimes

### Social Services

- Conducting workshops for couples on how to resolve conflicts in a non violent way
- Providing social skills training
- Establishing high quality daycare centers
- Organizing mentoring programs for high risk teens
- Creating parenting programs (including setting limits for children's behavior, mediation and non-violent conflict resolution)
- Providing comprehensive community services (for example, recreation centers)

### Media

- Mounting information campaigns to change norms regarding violence
- Reducing violence in TV programming, especially children's programs
- Providing training for journalists on how to report crime
- Providing media training programs on domestic and social violence

### Housing and Urban Development

- Incorporating safety issues in housing construction programs and neighborhood improvement programs (street lights, spatial configuration, parks, etc.)
- Building sports and recreation facilities
- Building facilities for neighborhood organizations

### Civil Society

- Providing training to non governmental organizations in order to bring about greater cooperation with and monitoring of police reform efforts
- Generating private sector support of violence prevention initiatives
- Subsidizing/funding of non governmental organizations in the provision of early childhood development programs
- Implementing programs for at-risk youth
- Involving the church and other community groups in efforts to change prevailing attitudes and socially accepting norms regarding violence

Sources: Dahlberg (1998); Rosenberg and Mercy (1991)

analysis and the design of crime prevention strategies (Waller, et al. 1997).

The **police** can play a key role in crime and violence prevention at the community level, by working together with the community in analyzing and setting strategies that are needed in order to prevent violence. The philosophy of community policing has been applied successfully in several different cities of the U.S. and Europe. In some neighborhoods of Latin America, community policing programs have recently been implemented. Their successful implementation is contingent upon several factors such as their ability to change the entrenched model of centralized management based on a hierarchical chain of command, as well as their ability to overcome the constraints on human resources that are common throughout the region (Neild, 1998; Fruhling, 1998).

The **media** is commonly viewed as instigators of violence because of the increasing amount of violent programming on television, the movies and in newspapers and magazines. Nevertheless, the media can also play a critical role in preventing violence by controlling or censoring extreme examples of violence; including messages of non-violence or peaceful coexistence in commercial television programs and films (for example, soap operas can be a useful tool to

condemn the practice of domestic violence by writing this into the story line); sending specific messages and conducting information campaigns on television and in theaters; and providing journalists with training on issues of violence in the media and responsible reporting of violent crime (OPS, et al. 1998). In Cali, Colombia, the Center for Research on Health and Violence at the Universidad del Valle designed a communication program called “Mejor Hablamos” (“How about talking instead?”), which involves disseminating real-life stories of peaceful conflict resolution through the media at the local and national levels. The program has been given an award for its high quality and recognized as making a significant impact on violence reduction (Sanjuan, 1999).

There are several **defined settings** where violence tends to be a recurring event such as residences, places where money is transacted, stores, street corners, and other public places. The appearance of physical and/or social disorder within a defined space gives the impression that the situation is out of control and such an atmosphere can help to trigger violence. Kelling and Coles’ “broken window” theory (1997) addresses this issue, emphasizing the collaboration of police and community in the restoration and maintenance of order in neighborhoods in order to prevent and control violence (Eck, 1998).

**Peaceful societies invest in:**

- Universal pre- and post-natal healthcare coverage
- Childcare and early childhood development programs
- School-based non violent conflict resolution programs
- Access to productive employment and sports activities for the low-income teenage population
- Media campaigns against social and domestic violence
- Actions to reduce drug and gun markets, such as implementing voluntary civilian disarmament campaigns
- Restricted hours for the sale of alcoholic beverages
- Community policing and strengthening of ties between the police and the community
- Specialized and on-going training to police officers and strengthening preventive policing
- Judicial reform in order to make the justice system more accessible and effective
- Crime prevention measures at the community level, including anti-crime architectural design, lighting and monitoring
- Actions to reduce poverty and inequality

## Challenges in the Field of Violence Prevention

It is probably apparent to the reader that the science of violence prevention is still in its infancy. Even in industrialized nations, where prevention programs have a longer history, very little is known about the efficiency and effectiveness of such programs. Readers may have also noticed that prevention in these countries has mainly been focused on crime rather than violence. This crime-focused view, unfortunately, has left a significant void in the prevention of one type of violence which quite often is considered to be of a non criminal nature, that is, domestic violence, in itself an important risk factor for violent crime (for more details, see Technical Note 3). In Latin America and the Caribbean very little has been done in the field of prevention and even less is known about the costs and results of actions that have been implemented. The design and implementation of prevention programs, including serious evaluations of cost-effectiveness, are a challenge that the region should assume in order to curtail the increasing rates of violence.

### Web Sites:

International Center for the Prevention of Crime  
[www.crime-prevention-intl.org](http://www.crime-prevention-intl.org)

Rand Corporation [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)

Educational Development Center, Inc. [www.edc.org](http://www.edc.org)

Florida State University, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice [www.criminology.fsu.edu-cj.html](http://www.criminology.fsu.edu-cj.html)

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence  
[www.colorado.edu/cspv](http://www.colorado.edu/cspv)

Consejo Nacional para la Prevención del Crimen  
[www.ncpc.org/spec.htm](http://www.ncpc.org/spec.htm)

National Criminal Justice Reference Service  
[www.ncjrs.org](http://www.ncjrs.org)

Also see: Roth, Jeffrey A. 1994. *Understanding and Preventing Violence*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Research in Brief, February.

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