

# WHAT WORKS TO REDUCE HOMICIDES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN?

UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA DE LAS EVALUACIONES DE IMPACTO

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean face the highest homicide rates in the world, which primarily victimize young men, generally through firearms. This underscores the urgent need to develop effective public policies to reduce lethal violence. However, the region has implemented relatively few homicide prevention programs, and only a portion of these have been rigorously evaluated.

Often, interventions in the region are based on programs transferred from the United States or Europe, which come from contexts very different from those in Latin America. This systematic review addresses that gap, offering a critical and evidence-based approach to the impact of interventions implemented in Latin America and the Caribbean.

## Objectives

The primary goal is to identify which interventions have proven to work, which do not work, which are promising, counterproductive, or have inconclusive results. Furthermore, the review addresses the methodological challenges encountered in evaluating these programs. The aim is to inform the public debate, contribute to the formulation of more effective interventions to reduce homicides, and encourage the production of rigorous evidence.

## Methodology

This review includes evaluations that meet three criteria:

1. The dependent variable must be the number homicides or its rate.
2. The evaluation considers programs or interventions where their potential impact on homicide reduction could be measured, even if this was not the central objective.
3. The evaluation design must be experimental or quasi-experimental to ensure a minimum level of rigor and internal validity.

To identify evaluations, scientific repositories were reviewed, manual searches on Google were conducted, and experts were consulted to identify unpublished studies. In total, 65 evaluations were identified and analysed, 42 of them from Brazil, 10 from Colombia, and 5 from Mexico, with lesser representation from other countries.

## Results

These 65 evaluations assessed 39 programs, classified into 23 types of interventions and grouped into 11 different strategies (see table). The evaluations employed various methodologies, the most common being interrupted time series with a single intervention (31 studies) and the difference-in-differences technique (26 studies). Non-equivalent control groups (18 studies), propensity score matching (9 studies), and synthetic control (6 studies) were also used. Other approaches included interrupted time series with multiple interventions (5 studies), correlation of intervention intensity with effect (2 studies), and experimental design (2 studies).

Several methodological limitations in the evaluations are noted. Experimental studies are very scarce. In many cases, the time series are too short. In some instances, evaluations use dependent variables that do not precisely correspond to the intervention (e.g., restrictions on firearm carrying are introduced, but overall homicide rates are used), take indirect variables (proxies) to measure the implementation instead of directly measuring the intervention, or use different units of analysis from those used in the program (e.g., neighbourhoods are intervened, but homicide rates between municipalities are compared). In some cases, multiple interventions are applied simultaneously in the same areas, but only one is evaluated, making it difficult to isolate its real impact. Unfortunately, it is rare to have a measure of the degree of program implementation at the local level or precise information about the criteria for selecting the intervened areas, both of which would significantly strengthen internal validity. Similarly, there is sometimes a lack of measurement of key intermediate variables, such as conviction rates of individuals accused of homicide in programs aimed at improving criminal investigation. In the absence of experimental studies, techniques like propensity score

matching and synthetic control have been used, although these present difficulties in forming truly equivalent control groups. Some programs lack a clear definition, which can introduce biases in the results if the programs are conceptualized retrospectively, especially if this is done based on homicide trends. Many evaluations show mixed results, but they are sometimes reported as globally positive.

Regarding the effectiveness of interventions, the following table summarizes the impact of each type of program on homicides.

## What Works to Reduce Homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean?

Strategy	Programme Type	Number of Evaluations
<b>Effective</b>		
I: Firearms	3. Limitation of firearm possession	6
III: Control of alcohol consumption or sales	6. Restriction on alcohol sales	7
VI: Police interventions	10. Police patrols in areas with a high incidence of homicides	5
<b>Promising</b>		
I: Firearms	1. Limitation on firearm ownership	6
II: Gender-based violence	4. Laws on gender violence/femicide	4
VI: Police interventions	11. General police patrol strategies	1
VI: Police interventions	12. Improvement in homicide investigations	1
VI: Police interventions	13. Improvement in criminal information systems	2
VII: Criminal justice interventions	15. Focused deterrence	1
VIII: Integration of social and police prevention	18. Social/situational prevention + police intervention in areas with a high incidence of homicides	11
<b>Inconclusive</b>		
II: Gender-based violence	5. Creation of gender violence police stations	2
IV: Situational prevention	6. Situational prevention	4
V: Social prevention	7. Income transfer	2
VII: Criminal justice interventions	8. Accusatory criminal process	1
VII: Criminal justice interventions	9. Incarceration and harsher prison conditions	1
VII: Criminal justice interventions	10. Other interventions in criminal justice	1
X: Public security decentralization	11. Creation of municipal guards	2
X: Public security decentralization	12. Creation of Municipal Security Secretariats	1
X: Public security decentralization	13. Creation of an anonymous tip line	1
<b>Not effective</b>		
I: Firearms	2. Voluntary surrender of firearms	4
V: Social prevention	9. Social prevention for vulnerable groups	3
<b>Counterproductive</b>		
IX: Militarization of public security	19. Army patrols	2
IX: Militarization of public security	20. Decapitation of criminal groups	2

## Conclusions

This research highlights the need for stronger evidence on homicide prevention and reduction programs in Latin America and the Caribbean. There is still a significant gap in consolidating robust evidence that can precisely measure the impact of these policies in the region. The document emphasizes the importance of critically examining the available evaluations and conducting more and better evaluations. This will enrich public debate and promote the adoption of more effective, efficient, and locally tailored policies.

Although high-quality evaluations are still scarce, some programs already show potential for reducing homicides in the region, while others have proven ineffective or even counterproductive.

Citation::

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