A black and white photograph of a woman's hands clasped together, with her wrists in metal handcuffs. The image is partially obscured by three dark blue text boxes.


Evidence-Based Policy Approaches for Preventing Intrafamily Violence and Reducing Criminal Behavior in Latin America

Eric L. Olson¹

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN is one of the world's greatest public health problems² and one of Latin America's major development challenges.³ Intrafamily violence is widespread in the region, affecting between 14 and 38 percent of all women throughout their lifetime.⁴ A series of studies commissioned by the Wilson Center and supported by the Inter-American Development Bank have begun to shed new light on the complex nature of this violence. Together, they contribute to evidence-based policy recommendations that could prevent the incidence of intra-family violence and reduce the risks of future criminal behavior among children.

The first of these studies analyzes partner violence experienced by women in Peru and recommends ways to direct violence prevention resources more effectively. A second examines the characteristics and risk factors common among currently incarcerated women and suggests ways to address these factors preemptively in children to reduce future criminal behavior. Finally, a third study examines the spread of violence from one generation to the next through household violence and reveals differences in how men and women respond to this violence.





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PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE AMONG WOMEN IN ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN PERU

Jorge Agüero⁵

Violence against women in Peru is widespread, according to national survey data. Nearly half of all women between the ages of 15 and 39 experience some form of violence in their lifetime, with one in three suffering emotional violence and one in ten sexual violence. Only seven percent of incidents are reported to the authorities.

Using data from the countrywide Demographic and Family Health Survey (ENDES), Professor Jorge Agüero determined the prevalence of violence against women in different ethnic communities. Consistent with the ENDES, Agüero separated ethnic groups into three linguistic categories: indigenous language speakers, those who only speak an indigenous language; historic Spanish speakers, those who spoke Spanish growing up and continue to do so today; and recent Spanish speakers, those who grew up speaking an indigenous language but now speak Spanish. Agüero's study also followed ENDES's typology of violence: emotional violence, sexual violence, and physical violence (moderate and severe).

Topline Findings

- **Among different ethnic groups, rates of violence against women are greatest among those who only recently began speaking Spanish at home.** Women who were raised speaking an indigenous language but now speak Spanish with their partner are 9.4 percent more likely to experience violence than women who have spoken only Spanish since childhood.
- **Women with fewer "outside options" when compared to their partners suffer the greatest violence.** Generally, these are women who have migrated or are in transition.

Because these women have fewer alternatives and fewer social networks upon which to rely, they have reduced negotiating power within the household.

- **Recent Spanish speakers experience the greatest levels of severe physical violence** (+25%) **and sexual violence** (+22%) when compared to historic Spanish speakers.
- **Women who exclusively speak indigenous languages report the least domestic violence:** a 19 percent drop compared to historic Spanish speakers—although the difference falls to 7.7 percent when looking only at severe physical violence.
- **Recent Spanish speakers tend to live apart from their communities of origin**, such as in urban or semi-urban areas, and closer to their partner’s family than their own.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the study’s findings, a number of policy recommendations have emerged.

Redirect current violence prevention programs to target areas where recent Spanish speakers are likely to reside. In general, this means designing programs for urban and semi-urban areas, where rural-urban migration is most common and recent Spanish speakers are more likely to settle. Current prevention programs are directed primarily to rural indigenous communities, where programs are still needed but the problem is less severe.

Design prevention programs that are specific to the most prevalent forms of violence within a language group. For example, prevention programs should specifically seek to address psychological and emotional violence—the most prevalent forms of violence among recent and historic Spanish speakers. Likewise, violence prevention initiatives that address moderate or severe physical violence should be prioritized among women who speak only indigenous languages.

Public education campaigns and prevention programs on the rights of women should focus on both partners, not just women. Insufficient attention is given to educating men as co-responsible partners and building greater awareness among men about women’s rights.

Conclusion

Policymakers can increase the impact of violence prevention programs among ethnic communities if they more narrowly target the places where violence against women is most prevalent and if they include greater efforts to educate men on women’s rights.



INCARCERATED WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA: CHARACTERISTICS AND RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

Ana Safranoff and Antonella Tiravassi⁶

While males have traditionally been the largest segment of Latin America's prison population, the percentage of incarcerated females has been increasing. Between 2005 and 2011, the percentage of incarcerated women grew faster than that of men in nine Latin American countries. Risk factors for incarceration among women vary from those of men and include a combination of social, economic, and household factors that can and should be addressed by governments in a targeted manner.

Topline Findings

Unique characteristics and significant gender differences exist among the incarcerated population in Latin America. Women have committed less violent and less aggressive crimes than men. For example, women (38%) are more likely than men (12%) to be incarcerated for non-violent drug offences such as possession and trafficking of illicit substances. Men are more likely than women to commit homicides (21% vs. 14%) and sexual crimes (15% vs. 2%). Women commit their first crimes later in life and thus are criminally active for less time. They are less likely to be repeat offenders, less likely to have spent time in a youth detention facility, and less likely to have possessed a weapon at some point in their lives.

Women live in situations of greater economic and social vulnerability than men prior to entering prison. Risk factors for women include greater household poverty: women are more likely to be unemployed the month before committing a crime, or to have never had employment. Compared to men, incarcerated women in Latin America are more likely to be single and/or adolescent parents; and, with the exception of Mexican women, to have multiple children. They are more likely to have an incarcerated partner and to commit a crime with others. Women's



Fifty-five percent of those surveyed have possessed and/or handled a firearm during their lifetime

early socialization is also characterized by fractured households and a weakened family structure, exposure to household violence, and the presence of neighborhood criminal gangs.

Twenty percent of women are likely to be repeat offenders. Recidivism among women is associated with having children; consuming drugs or alcohol shortly before committing a crime; experiencing intrafamily violence during childhood; having a criminally active peer group at the time of the first crime; and spending time in a youth detention facility early in life.

Types of Crimes Committed by Incarcerated Men and Women		
Gender	Type of Crime	Total
Women	Robbery	22.40%
	Homicide	14.40%
	Drug trafficking/possession	38.10%
	Sexual crimes	2.10%
	Other Crimes	23.00%
Men	Robbery	40.60%
	Homicide	21.00%
	Drug trafficking/possession	11.80%
	Sexual crimes	15.30%
	Other Crimes	11.30%

Source: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Inseguridad y Violencia, Universidad Tres de Febrero

Policy Recommendations

Policymakers designing crime prevention programs should focus on eliminating risk factors associated with behavior that leads to the incarceration of women.

- **Prioritize household and family-based interventions that specifically target incarceration risk factors for women.** Such policies should address household poverty, availability of childcare, and factors contributing to a weakened family structure. Securing access to quality childcare in particular can be crucial to enable a woman to find and sustain employment to better support her family. Incarcerated women are more likely to have partners who are also incarcerated, to be adolescent mothers, and to face challenges related to under- or unemployment, so programs designed to address these risk factors are particularly important. Additionally, effective programs provide positive peer support, address problems of problematic consumption of alcohol and/or drugs, and limit the influence of criminally active peers. Finally, programs designed to empower women and reduce their dependence on a partner (especially when the partner is incarcerated) are vitally important.
- **Design programs to support women during the period of post-incarceration reintegration.** Economic vulnerability and lack of childcare are significant risk factors driving recidivism for women. Programs that serve women recently released from prison should focus especially on labor market insertion, women's empowerment programs, and providing quality childcare. Whether a woman becomes a repeat offender often hinges on whether she has a criminally active peer group or dependency ties to a partner. Women's empowerment programs that seek to establish positive peer group relations and break dependency relationships with partners, especially those who are incarcerated, provide an important alternative for women leaving incarceration.

Conclusion

Slowing the increase in the number of incarcerated women may be possible if policymakers design programs that address the economic, social, and familial risk factors for criminal activity. Furthermore, recidivism can be reduced if women transitioning from incarceration are given appropriate support. In both cases, employment assistance, access to childcare, and empowerment programs are particularly beneficial.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF VIOLENCE: TESTIMONIALS FROM PRISON

Ana Safranoff and Antonella Tiravassi

Childhood experiences have been shown to have both positive and negative influences on the long-term behavior of a child. More specifically, experiences with intrafamily violence and household violence during infancy can have a net negative impact on the physical and psychological developmental health of children, their future school performance, and their behavior patterns.

In their study of incarcerated women and men in eight Latin American countries, Safranoff and Tiravassi begin to unravel the complex relationships between criminal behavior as an adult and experiences of early childhood violence in the household. Based on this research, they identify gender differences in how girls and boys experience household violence and how it impacts their future criminal behavior.

Topline Findings

Incarcerated women and men have been the direct victims of household violence during childhood in 47 percent of cases surveyed, and 32 percent have experienced indirect violence. Girls are the direct targets of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse in 42 percent of the cases, while boys are direct targets in 48 percent of cases. In cases of indirect household violence—that is, when violence occurs between adults in the household and the child may or may not witness it—girls are victims in 35 percent of cases, and boys in 32 percent of cases.

Important gender differences exist in the long-term criminal behavior of women and men based on their experience with direct and indirect household violence. Experiences with direct violence increase the likelihood of recidivism among women (20%) and men (32%). Experiences with indirect violence appear to increase the likelihood that women will become repeat offenders, but have a lesser impact on men.

Fifty-five percent of those surveyed have possessed and/or handled a firearm during their lifetime. Possession of a firearm is associated with greater risk of violent criminal behavior. Approximately 61 percent of male prisoners have possessed firearms, compared to 26 percent among women. Experiences with direct household violence during infancy appear to have a greater impact on whether men possess a firearm than women. Experiences with indirect household violence during childhood have a greater impact on women’s likelihood of possessing a firearm throughout their lifetime.

Policy Recommendations

Given that experiences with direct and indirect household violence during infancy have differentiated impacts on the future criminal behavior of women and men, policymakers should target policies accordingly.

- **Prevention programs for women should focus on reducing incidence of both direct and indirect violence during childhood** since both have a significant impact on a woman’s future criminal behavior. Women are more likely than men to be affected by indirect household violence, so programs should take into account violence among parents and family members as well.
- **Programs for men should prioritize reducing direct violence** since it affects men’s future criminal behavior at a greater rate than do experiences with indirect violence. Effective programs to address direct experiences of household violence can reduce the likelihood that men’s criminal behavior will be violent (firearms possession) and repetitive.

Conclusion

Direct and indirect experiences with household violence during infancy have clear associations with the long-term criminal behavior of women and men. The impact on women of indirect violence is greatest when compared to men, but both experience greater risks of recidivism and firearm possession with experiences of direct household violence.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 World Health Organization. 2011. "Violence against Women: Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence against Women." *Fact Sheet 239*.
- 3 Agüero, Jorge M. 2013. *Causal Estimates of the Intangible Costs of Violence against Women in Latin America and the Caribbean*. IDB Working Paper No. 414. Inter-American Development Bank.
- 4 United Nations. 2015. "Violence against Women: Violence against women is everywhere." *The World's Women 2015*. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/downloads/Ch6_VaW_info.pdf.
- 5 Jorge Agüero is a Professor of Economics at the University of Connecticut.
- 6 The authors of this study collaborated with the Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Inseguridad y Violencia (CELIV), Universidad Tres de Febrero (UNTREF). It is based on the "Encuesta de presos condenados," conducted by the CELIV and IDB in eight countries: Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Chile. 8,285 women and men were interviewed.
- 7 Ibid.

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