



**UNODC**  
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

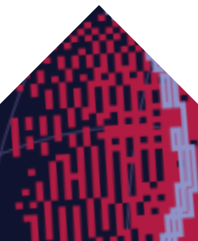
UNODC  
**YEA!**   
FRAMEWORK

# YOUTH FACTSHEET

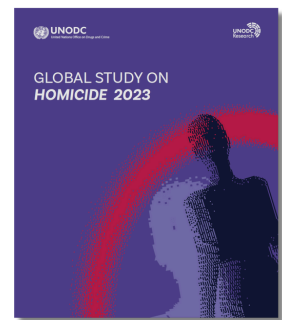
---

## HOMICIDE AND YOUTH

Results from the UNODC Global  
Study on Homicide 2023



This Youth Factsheet offers a glimpse into the key findings regarding significant trends in homicides worldwide concerning young people (**aged 15 to 29**). These insights are drawn from the UNODC **Global Study on Homicide 2023**, which provides a comprehensive examination of intentional homicide trends and patterns around the world.



## OVERVIEW

**In 2021, an average of 52 people lost their lives to homicidal violence every single hour.** It was an exceptionally lethal year with an estimated 458,000 intentional homicides globally, which indicates insufficient advancement in decreasing lethal violence since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 [1].



Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.1 on significantly reducing all forms of violence and related death rates, can be inferred as a decrease in the homicide rate of at least 50 per cent by 2030. Therefore, a reduction in the number of intentional homicides is crucial for achieving more peaceful and just societies. However, a projection based on the period 2015-2020 suggests that the 2030 homicide rate will only be 23 per cent lower compared with 2015, falling well short of the SDG target 16.1

Globally, homicide accounts for many more deaths than conflict-related killings and terrorist killings combined. In the period 2019–2021, an annual average of around 440,000 deaths worldwide were caused by intentional homicide, of which an estimated annual average of 22,000 can be attributed to terrorism and 94,000 conflict-related [2].

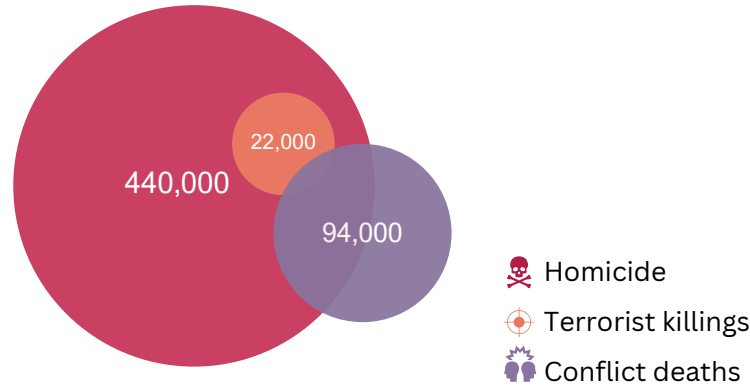
Although conflict deaths increased by over 95 per cent during the 2021-2022 period, largely due to escalating conflicts in countries such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Somalia and Ukraine, available homicide data indicate that in 2022, the global burden of homicide was still twice as conflict deaths [3].

[1] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 18. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[2] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 19. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[3] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 41. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

## Average annual number of deaths caused by homicide, terrorism and conflict, 2019–2021



Source: UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 41. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

## YOUTH IN HOMICIDE TRENDS AND PATTERNS



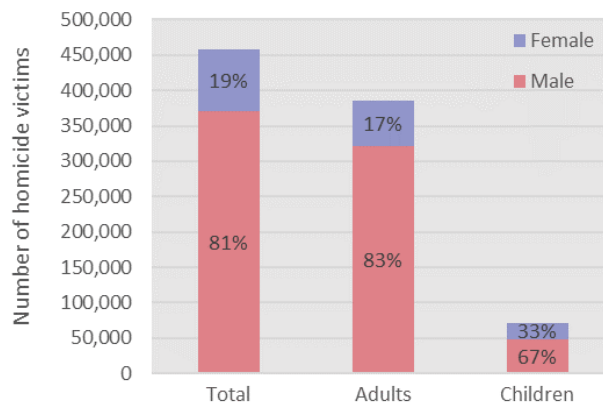
### Gender of homicide victims

In 2021, most victims of homicides globally (81 per cent) were men and boys, while women and girls comprised a significantly smaller share (19 per cent). However, the share of female victims is significantly larger among children, meaning people below the age of 18 (33 per cent), than amongst adults victims (17 per cent).



Women and girls are disproportionately affected by homicide perpetrated by intimate partners or family members, which accounts for 56 per cent of all female homicide victims, making the home one of the most dangerous places for women and girls.


### Global number and share of male and female homicide victims among adults and children [4], 2021



Source: UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 34. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[4] Under the age of 18 years

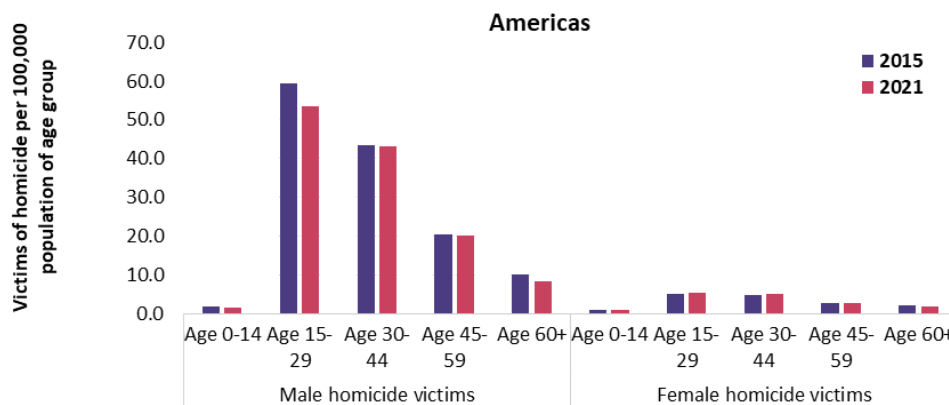
Globally, children make up a relatively small share of the total number of homicide victims. In 2021, around **71,600 homicide victims were children**, which equates to just over **15 per cent of the estimated total**. The gender disparity in the homicide rate among children and young people increases with age, as it does in the total homicide rate. There tends to be parity in the homicide rate among male and female child victims aged 0–9 years, while in older age groups, males become significantly more likely than females to fall victim to homicide [5].



### Age of homicide victims

Age-disaggregated homicide estimated in the Americas and Europe [6] suggests that young men are most at risk of homicidal violence. Particularly, **young men aged 15–29 years in the Americas were those most at risk of homicide in 2021**, with an estimated rate of 53.6 male victims per 100,000 male population in that age group.

**Homicide rate in the Americas, by sex and age group, 2015 and 2021**



Source: UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 58. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

Women and girls face a much lower homicide risk than men and boys across all age groups. The relative age-specific homicide risks are comparable across the sexes; however, **women and girls aged 15–29 years also face the highest risk of homicide in the Americas as compared to other regions.**

[5] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), pp. 33-34. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[6] Disaggregated data on the age of homicide victims are not as readily available as data on the sex of victims. In the Americas and Europe, the availability of age-disaggregated data enables the production of regional estimates of the age profile of homicide victims, whereas in Asia, Africa and Oceania, the availability of such data is limited, making regional estimates of the age profile of homicide victims unreliable in those regions.

## Killings due to accusations of sorcery or witchcraft and ritual attacks [a]

**5,250 killings of people accused of witchcraft or sorcery** were reported in online sources between 2009 and 2019 across 60 countries, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [b]. In many countries, including India and countries in Africa, **women and girls are the main targets** of such accusations and killings, **but men and boys also fall victim to them in some locations**, such as Kenya and parts of Papua New Guinea [c]. The age of victims also varies and tends to depend on where such killings take place: in some societies, widowed older women are common targets [d] while children are targets in others, especially those living in step-families [e].

In Africa in particular, understandings of witchcraft that increasingly focus suspicion on **children** have recently emerged [f]. A study carried out in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, revealed the related dynamics, including the role played by the church [g].

[a] A contribution by Miranda Forsyth (Australian National University) and Muluka-Anne Miti-Drummond (United Nations Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism), cited by UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), pp. 104-105.

[b] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Right (OHCHR). "Concept note on the elimination of harmful practices related to witchcraft accusations and ritual killings", 19 March 2020


[c] Forsyth, M., "The regulation of witchcraft and sorcery practices and beliefs", Annual Review of Law and Social Science, vol. 12 (October 2016), pp. 331-351; Forsyth, M. et al, "Sorcery accusation related violence in Papua New Guinea: The Impact of SARV on Children", Development Policy Centre Discussion paper, No. 97 (2021).

[d] Eboiyehi, F., "Convicted without evidence: Elderly women and witchcraft accusations in contemporary Nigeria", Journal of International Women Studies, vol. 8, No. 4 (August 2017).

[e] Cimpric, A., Children Accused of Witchcraft: an Anthropological Study of Contemporary Practice in Africa (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2021).

[f] Secker, E., "Witchcraft stigmatization in Nigeria: challenges and successes in the implementation of child rights", international social work", International Social Work, vol. 56, No. 1 (December 2012).

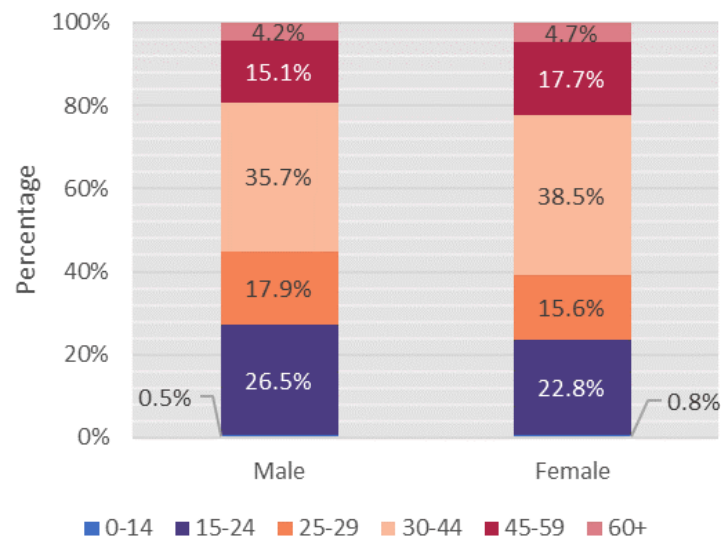
[g] Priest, R., Ngolo, A. and Stabell, T. "Christian pastors and (alleged) child witches in Kinshasa", On Knowing Humanity DRC, vol. 4, No. 1 (January 2020).



## Age of suspects

In 2021, out of 68 countries with data, roughly **44 per cent of suspects brought into formal contact with the police for intentional homicide were aged 15 to 29.**

**Shares of male and female homicide suspects brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide in 68 countries, by age, 2021 or latest year since 2017\***



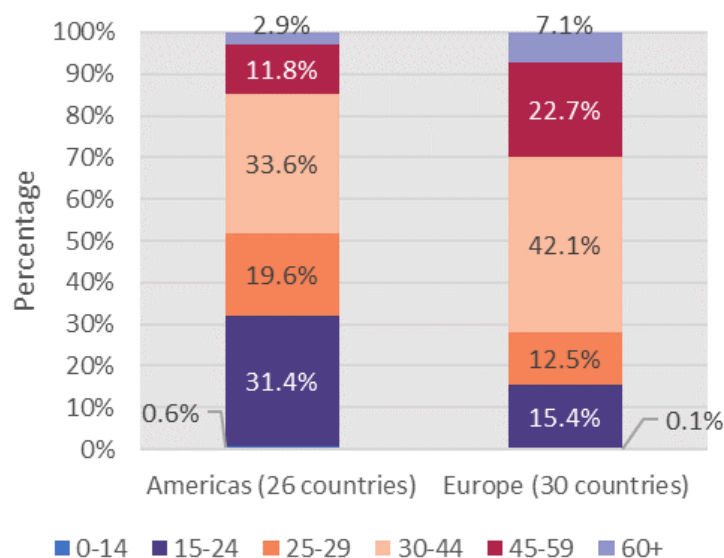
Source: UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 151. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

\*Note: Average of countries with data weighted by the number of suspects by sex. Africa (2 countries), Americas (26 countries), Asia (9 countries), Europe (30 countries), Oceania (1 country).

A comparison of the Americas and Europe [7] shows notable differences between the ages of homicide suspects. Although homicide offenders in Europe were older than in the Americas, in both regions there was a disproportionate share of offenders aged 15–29 in 2021. The difference in the age structure of the suspects can be partially explained by the different age demographics of the two regions, with countries having much younger populations in the Americas than in Europe. In 2021, 23 per cent of the population was aged 15-29 in the Americas compared with 16 per cent in Europe. Furthermore, the large share of organized crime- and gang-related homicides in the Americas may also contribute to the region’s lower average age of homicide suspects.

[7] The two regions with a sufficient number of countries with data.

## Shares of suspects brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide in the Americas and Europe, by age, 2021 or latest year since 2017\*



Source: UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 152. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

\*Note: Average of countries with data weighted by the number of suspects.

## DIVERSE FACTORS DRIVING LETHAL VIOLENCE

The 2023 Global Study on Homicide sheds light on the multifaceted drivers of lethal violence affecting youth worldwide. Particularly among young populations, these elements combine to create environments where violence can flourish. It reveals a complex interplay of factors. For instance:



Children from **socioeconomically disadvantaged communities** face a higher risk of violent behaviour later in life than others. During the period 2016–2018, Project 39A, a criminal justice programme at the National Law University of Delhi, India, conducted a study based on interviews with prisoners on death row in the country for charges related to homicide, among other crimes. The findings from the interviews conducted in the Project 39A study appear to confirm this hypothesis: 24 of the 88 prisoners had never had a parental figure in their lives; 46 had been abused as children; 64 had been neglected; 46 had to drop out of school early; and 50 had at least one parent who had used substances [8] [9].

[8] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), Chapter 5: Criminal Justice System Response, p. 157. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[9] Project39A, “Deathworthy: a mental health perspective of the death penalty”, National Law University, Delhi, 2021



**Mental health challenges** can affect an individual's propensity to commit violent crime, including homicide. Adverse childhood experiences, such as deprivation and neglect, sexual, physical and psychological abuse, intellectual disability, cognitive impairment and mental illness, can affect an individual's propensity to commit violent crime, including homicide [10]. The link between violent crime and mental health has been well-documented in different regions. Childhood exposure to stress and trauma can directly affect healthy brain development, resulting in behavioural issues during adolescence and aggressive behaviour during adulthood, weakened social attachment and increased emotional reactivity [11]. Adverse childhood experiences are also associated with early initiation of substance abuse, lower levels of educational achievement and poor participation in the workforce, thereby escalating the risk of violence [12].



**Unemployment is another factor** that may affect homicide trends. For example, in South Africa, the youth unemployment rate (people aged 15–24 years) rose from 43.5 per cent in 2020 to 49.9 per cent in 2021, representing an increase of 6.4 percentage points. Since youth unemployment has been linked to increases in homicide in a study [13], this situation may have contributed to the surge in homicides in the country in 2021, together with broader, systemic issues related to law enforcement and the criminal justice system [14].



Intentional killings of young children are mainly perpetrated by family members. Among other factors, such killings tend to be linked to **gender stereotypes, family violence** and mental health problems among the victims' parents [15]. As children grow older, they are more likely to fall victim to homicide perpetrated outside the family context.

[10] Van Dorn, R., Volavka, J. and Johnson, N., (2012), Von Cheong, E. et al. (2017), Varese, F. et al. (2012) and Chapman, D. et al. (2004), cited by the UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 157.

[11] Sharma, E. et al, "Consortium on vulnerability to externalizing disorders and addictions (cVEDA): a developmental cohort study protocol," BMC Psychiatry, vol. 20, No. 2 (January 2020)

[12] Fergusson, D., Swain-Campbell, N. and Horwood, J., "How does childhood economic disadvantage lead to crime?", Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, vol. 45, No. 5 (July 2004), cited by the UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 157.

[13] See Mazorodze, B. T., "Youth unemployment and murder crimes in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa", Cogent Economics & Finance (7 August 2020), cited by the UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 66.

[14] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), Chapter 2: Homicide Trend and Patterns, p. 66. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[15] Global Study on Homicide 2019, Booklet VI, Killing of Children and Young Adults (United Nations publication, 2019), cited by UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), Chapter 2: Homicide Trends and Patterns, p. 58.

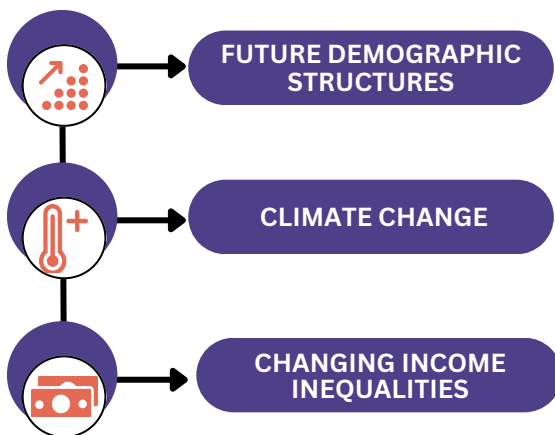




Homicidal violence correlates with **structural risks**, such as weak rule of law, high levels of impunity, social and income inequality and youth unemployment. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the subregion with the highest homicide rate worldwide, homicidal violence caused by **organized crime** is more prevalent. The large share of young male homicide victims in LAC is also linked to the demography of criminal organizations across the subregion. While the leadership of organized criminal organizations may be older, overall, the rank and file of drug trafficking factions, militia groups, street gangs and other criminal entities are typically made-up of young men [16].

## WHAT WILL THE FUTURE LANDSCAPE OF HOMICIDE LOOK LIKE?

Various **megatrends** [17] identified by the United Nations have a significant impact on economic, social and environmental outcomes on a global scale and are likely to affect future patterns of homicide.



In relation to the **future demographic structure**, across most settings, young males aged 15–29 account for a disproportionate share of offenders. Thus, a large proportion of young males in the population, often described as a “male youth bulge”, is linked to a comparatively higher homicide rate. This is particularly the case in countries with a strong presence of organized crime. A projection of regional homicide trends based

on the age composition of populations demonstrated that all regions will experience a decrease in the homicide rate, with the exception of Africa, where the large youth population will continue to drive homicide until the mid-2030s, when it will start to decline [18].

Furthermore, other projections of homicide trends are based on the **impact of climate change** on vulnerable populations and **changes in income inequality**, which will have global implications, not just for young people.

[16] See Chávez, C., “What we know and what we don’t know about youth gangs in Latin America”, United Nations Children’s Fund, 27 September 2018; Jutersonke, O., Muggah, R. and Rodgers, D., “Gangs, urban violence, and security interventions in Central America”, Security Dialogue, vol.40, No.4/5 (September 2009), pp. 373–397; cited by UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), Chapter 4: Understanding homicide, p. 114.

[17] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), Chapter 3: Megatrends and Homicide, p. 71. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[18] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), Chapter 3: Megatrends and Homicide, p. 77. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

# THE PATH TO REDUCING HOMICIDES

As highlighted by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in the 2023 policy brief titled "New Agenda for Peace", violence has profoundly influenced the lives and livelihoods of individuals beyond those directly involved in armed conflicts. Member States and the United Nations should dedicate greater resources to comprehensively address persistent violence. While effective responses to homicide must cover a wide spectrum of context-specific interventions, these must share common threads, namely, be based on evidence, the need to prioritize prevention and address root causes and invest significantly



## Investing in homicide prevention

Experiences in violence prevention from different countries underscore **the need for evidence-based interventions at different administrative levels**, including specific programmes for neighbourhoods with high levels of homicides. Violence prevention programmes should focus on providing support to young men to prevent them from being drawn into a, including joining organized crime groups or gangs. **Rehabilitation programmes and social work are as important as prevention initiatives** [19].

Several types of interventions show promise in terms of reducing the risk of homicide perpetration and victimization among the target population. At a societal level, interventions that aim to **restrict firearm use and access** have been shown to be effective at reducing firearm homicides, while **restrictions on alcohol consumption** may also have beneficial impacts on homicidal violence, at least in the short term [20].

At the community level, a relatively large body of experimental and quasi-experimental studies suggests that **policing strategies that focus crime prevention efforts and resources on specific geographical “hotspots”, or high-risk groups, can effectively reduce homicide rates in targeted areas** [21] [22] [23].

[1] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), pp. 18, 23. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

[1] UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), pp. 18, 23, 61, 65. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

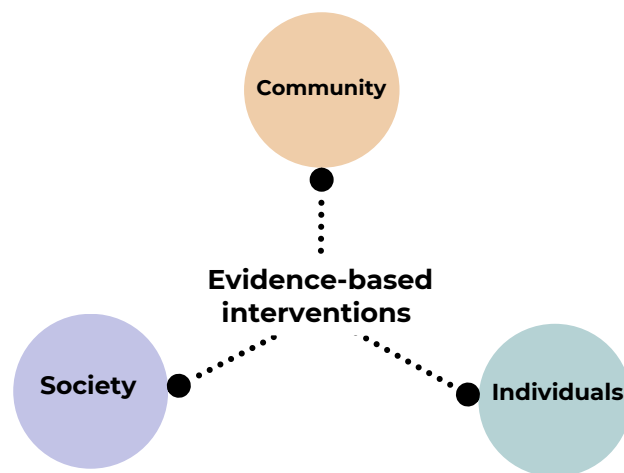
[1] Weisburd, D. (2015). The law of crime concentration and the criminology of place. *Criminology*, 53(2), 133-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12070>

[1] Maguire, E. R. (2017). Preventing homicide. *The handbook of homicide*, 676-692.

[1] Collazos, D., García, E., Mejía, D. et al. Hot spots policing in a high-crime environment: an experimental evaluation in Medellín. *J Exp Criminol* 17, 473–506 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-019-09390-1>

However, findings from several studies indicate that such interventions can nonetheless be effective at reducing specific types of killings (such as femicide or police killings), provided that they are tailored to the local context [24].

At the individual level, a rapidly growing body of experimental studies, primarily from North America, shows that **psycho-social interventions and employment programmes** targeting high-risk individuals (such as gang-involved youths) can have positive impacts on outcomes that are closely linked to homicidal violence, such as violent and criminal behaviour [25] [26] [27]. While these findings are promising, there is still a lack of robust evidence on how such interventions may affect the risk of homicide perpetration or victimization amongst targeted individuals, calling for further research in this area.



Taken together, **these findings show that homicide is preventable**. A review of available evidence suggests that policymakers have at their disposal a set of interventions that have been shown to prevent and reduce homicide effectively from various angles, provided that they are tailored to the local context [28].

## Intersection between mental health and the criminal justice system

Early antisocial behaviour, poor social skills for interacting in the community, a low level of education, early onset of offending and growing up in an environment with poor parental child-rearing practices are considered to be predictors of participation in offending [29].

[24] For more details on crime prevention measures at the community level, visit the UNODC Crime Prevention website, available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/cpcj-crime-prevention-communities.html>

[25] Modestino, Alicia Sasser. "How do summer youth employment programs improve criminal justice outcomes, and for whom?." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 38, no. 3 (2019): 600-628.

[26] Heller, Sara B. "Summer jobs reduce violence among disadvantaged youth." *Science* 346, no. 6214 (2014): 1219-1223.

[27] Kessler, J. B., Tahamont, S., Gelber, A., & Isen, A. (2022). The effects of youth employment on crime: Evidence from New York City lotteries. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 41(3), 710-730.

[28] Maguire, E. R. (2017). Preventing homicide. *The handbook of homicide*, 676-692.

[29] Farrington, D. P. and Hawkins J. D., "Predicting participation, early onset and later persistence in officially recorded offending", *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, vol. 1 (1991), pp. 1-33, cited by the UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 157.

This suggests there is an association between early-life trauma, an individual's propensity to develop mental health issues in adulthood and the risk of engaging in violent criminal behaviour. These pathways can play out with grim predictability; for instance, research has shown that individuals found guilty of sexual abuse are likely to have been victims of sexual abuse as children [30].

Continued global disparities in income and between social groups hinder equitable access to mental health resources. Findings from a study of 17 low-middle- and high-income countries revealed low mental health care utilization despite documented high need: in each country, at least two thirds of individuals with common mental disorders went untreated. Furthermore, members of socially disadvantaged groups such as ethnic/racial minorities and low-income patients had lower mental health service utilization than members of advantaged groups [31]. Less-developed countries in particular face a wide treatment gap, meaning most people with a mental disorder do not receive any treatment at all and often face isolation, discrimination and violations of their human rights [32].

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, causing a multidimensional impact on people's well-being, affecting their health, personal and social interactions, work life, finances and more, which has contributed to a deterioration in mental health worldwide. In the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic alone, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression surged by 25 per cent [33]. Stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia and anger are just some of the significant health issues that have been reported in studies [34].

Given this context, **the criminal justice system needs to adapt if it is to provide more effective support for individuals facing mental health issues** in order to reduce the risk of homicide and better equip those facing such adversity to navigate the legal system.

Examining the intersection between mental health and the criminal justice system and evaluating how the system addresses individuals facing mental health challenges can provide valuable insights into potential pathways to ensuring a fair and effective response to complex cases.

[30] Levenson, J. S., Willis, G. M. and Prescott, D. S., "Adverse childhood experiences in the lives of male sex offenders", *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, vol. 28, No. 4 (June 2016), cited by the UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 157.

[31] Alegría, M., Nakash, O. and NeMoyer, A., "Increasing equity in access to mental health: a critical first step in improving service quality", *World Psychiatry*, vol. 17, No.1 (February 2018), pp. 43–44, cited by the UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 159.

[32] Kohn, R., "Treatment gap in mental health care", *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 82, No. 11 (November 2004), cited by the UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 159.

[33] World Health Organization, "Covid-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide," 2 March 2022, cited by the UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 158.

[34] Roy, A. et al., "Mental health implications of COVID-19 pandemic and its response in India", *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, vol. 67, No. 5 (August 2021), pp. 587–600, cited by the UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, (United Nations publication, 2023), p. 158.



In line with the SDGs, universal access to mental health resources could have a far-reaching impact on reducing the commission of violent crime, including homicide. However, addressing this issue requires careful consideration of the public stigma surrounding mental health, which may deter individuals from seeking help even when services are available [35].



### Investing in better data collection

There are significant limitations in the information available across regions, exposing the need to invest in better data collection. Enhanced support for the implementation of the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) could help to improve reporting and support more targeted responses to homicidal violence.

[35] For more details on the intersection between mental health and the criminal justice system, see UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, (United Nations publication, 2023), pp. 157-158. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

## GANG VIOLENCE THREATENS THE FUTURE OF YOUTH IN CENTRAL AMERICA <sup>[36]</sup>

For young people in Central America, safety, physical integrity and access to education, among other human rights, are threatened due to criminal violence by gangs, which goes beyond mere statistics, leaving deep scars on families and communities. To illustrate the profound human impact of this issue, this factsheet presents an interview with two young women who have witnessed the devastating consequences of gang violence and violence against women in the region. Their insights aim to shed light on the human side behind the figures, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to prevent violence.

Thanks to CHIMUMI Foundation [37], UNODC spoke with Ana from Honduras and Carmen from El Salvador [38], who shared their personal experiences and the impact that violence has had on their lives. *"Everyone experiences it differently, and there are many stories. I think violence and organized crime can cause youth a lot of problems and conflicts, both psychologically and physically"* said Ana, who suffered physical and sexual aggression from her father for several years. He belonged to the MS-13 gang, with a presence in Honduras and other countries of the region.

*"I used to self-harm so that this person would no longer physically or sexually assault me. My mother noticed and asked me why I was doing it. I explained to her what was happening. Then, she complained to my father, and he exposed us to the gang. If we talked or said what was going on, they were going to kill us, or they could take me out of the house. They threatened me at school and chased me every time I went home from classes. They took pictures of me all the time, I felt very harassed and persecuted. That is why my mother and I decided to leave the country and flee to Mexico",* explained Ana.

Further, Carmen recounts her experience of abuse, coercion and violence in El Salvador since she was 15 years old, when a gang member started to watch her as she left school and persecuted her. To prevent him from finding her again, Carmen interrupted her studies for two months and then returned to classes until, eventually, he found her and took her forcibly to his place.

**I thought of a better future for myself than the one I was living in. I never saw myself with a gang member.**  
(Carmen)

[36] The interviews featured in this section are not part of the UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023. They have been included in the factsheet to showcase the impact that gang violence has on Central American youth.

[37] Fundación Chiapaneca de Mujeres Migrantes (CHIMUMI) is a non-profit organization that supports migrant women, children and adolescents who have been physically and psychologically abused. The Foundation aims to promote and protect their human rights, providing support in diverse areas such as mental health, education and employment. Its office is located in Tapachula City, Chiapas, Mexico. For more information, visit their [LinkedIn profile](#).

[38] Names were changed to protect privacy.

Her attempts to escape were unsuccessful. She adds: *"The first time he caught me running away, he hit me 40 times with a baseball bat, and he started hitting me repeatedly and told me that the next time I tried to escape, I was not going to come out alive."* Carmen was repeatedly sexually abused by him, and as a result, their two children were born.

Following his arrest after being stopped at a police checkpoint, Carmen was forced to visit him in prison to bring food. On one occasion, he threatened to kill her, forcing her to flee to Mexico for the first time. When her daughter was 3 years old, she returned to El Salvador in an attempt to re-establish her life there. However, she faced further threats and violence from the 18 gang, who beat her, abused her, took her money, and threatened her life and the lives of her children. Soon after, she fled for a second time to Mexico, looking for safety.

**“ I had to change of country of residence and my identity in order to be ‘safe’.  
(Ana) ”**

Regarding the obstacles these young women have faced in moving forward after being affected by gang violence, Ana says: *"When I arrived in Mexico, I had to go through a whole legal restructuring process by changing my name and surname, so that this person would not have any legal custody over me. I lost all my studies."* Similarly, Carmen indicates: *"I had to start all over again, I had nothing with me, they stole everything from me by crossing the river (at the border)."*

Although they have managed to establish a new life in Tapachula City, both women highlight struggling with the emotional trauma caused by their experiences in their home countries. Carmen indicates: *"When I first returned to El Salvador, I fell into a depression. I couldn't sleep, I wasn't hungry, and I felt frustrated. Often, I tried to take my own life because of what I was going through, but I started to go to a psychologist and that helped me a lot".* In this line, Ana noted: *"I was completely lost. It was a new country; I didn't even know where to start or what to do. One of the things that helped me the most was the psychological therapy and the legal accompaniment that I received not only from CHIMUMI but also from other organizations."*

When asked about what they consider to be the main reasons why young people join these gangs and whether they think there are ways to prevent it, Carmen states: *"In the case of women, there is no option, because women are just victims of their (gangs') abuse. They think they own everything and everyone and you do what they say".* Similarly, Ana explains, *"Most of the time it's not voluntary, it's forced. The mareros [38] force them (young people) to belong to these groups, because if they refuse, they threaten them and their family".*

[39] *Marero* is a person who belongs to gangs.

She believes that there are many measures that can be taken to address this situation, beyond the current efforts of Member States and the international community to prevent violence and strengthen responses. *“Just as there are young people who are forced, there are also those that voluntarily decide to belong to these gangs. I think that if they invested more in sporting, cultural and academic activities, in all levels, that would keep young people in that healthy environment, maybe there wouldn't be so many possibilities for them to join them.”*

As a final reflection, Ana hopes to use this interview as a platform to stress the critical need for mental health support services for young people: *“Many of us are feeling drowned and lost, and we just need a guide on the way. Young people who flee from gang violence come looking to be listened to and received; we come looking for an opportunity to grow, something that was denied to us in our country. **I would like that this interview serves to highlight the importance of mental health support for youth.**”*





**For more information on the  
UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023**

Scan QR Code  
or visit

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>



**For more information and resources on  
youth empowerment at UNODC**

Scan QR Code  
or visit

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/youth/index.html>



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

