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**THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE  
ON INEQUALITY IN LATIN  
AMERICA AND THE  
CARIBBEAN: A RESEARCH  
AGENDA**

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## THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE ON INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: A RESEARCH AGENDA<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Violence has profound effects on individuals, communities, and countries. It affects mental health, child development, education outcomes, political participation, and social relations. It transforms formal and informal institutions, the quality of governance, public goods provision, and democracy. Yet, these effects do not impact all people equally: gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and geographic location can determine people’s risk of being a victim as well as how severe the consequences are that they will endure. When violence systematically affects the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, it can reinforce and amplify inequality. Surprisingly, the causal effect of violence on inequality has received scant attention. This background paper hopes to lay the foundations for a research agenda on the effects of violence on inequality in human development in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)—the most violent and most unequal region in the world. By connecting various literatures on the dynamics of violence in LAC with different bodies of work on the effects of violence on individual and collective outcomes, the paper discusses several channels by which violence can perpetuate and amplify various types of inequalities.

JEL Code: D63, D74, H11, I14, I24, J16, K42, N36, O15

Keywords: Inequality, violence, social violence, criminal violence, political violence, organized crime, armed governance, victimization, Latin America, Caribbean, human development

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*Background Paper for the UNDP LAC Regional Human Development Report 2021. The views and recommendations presented in this paper are from the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of UNDP.*

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## 1. Introduction

Violence has profound effects on individuals, communities, and countries. It affects mental health, child development, education outcomes, political participation, and social relations. It transforms formal and informal institutions, the quality of governance, public goods provision, and democracy. A vast literature has demonstrated how, through multiple mechanisms, violence undermines economic growth and human development. Yet, these effects do not impact all people equally: gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and geographic location can influence the risks people face of being a victim as well as how severe the consequences are that they will endure. When violence systematically affects the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, it can reinforce and amplify inequality. Surprisingly, the causal effect of violence on inequality has received scant attention. Many economists have investigated the effects of violence on economic growth<sup>1</sup> and a vast, interdisciplinary literature has studied the effects of inequality on violence<sup>2</sup>. Yet, the opposite causal effect—that of violence on inequality—has seldom been the focus of research.

This background paper explores the potential causal effects of violence on inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)—the most violent *and* most unequal region in the world. By connecting the diverse literature on violence in LAC with the findings of various bodies of work on the effects of violence on individual and collective outcomes, the paper discusses several channels by which violence can increase inequality in the region. The central argument is that, because violence tends to disproportionately affect populations that are already at a disadvantage, it can perpetuate and amplify distinct types of inequalities. Victimized individuals can end up with fewer rights and liberties, worse physical and mental health, lower educational and labor participation outcomes, and lower levels of political participation; likewise, victimized communities can enjoy lower levels of social capital, be governed by less democratic local governments, and have less access to public goods. These negative outcomes put already deprived individuals and communities at an even greater disadvantage.

Investigating these multiple causal effects theoretically and empirically would require numerous research initiatives because of their complexity, as well the scarcity of data and the methodological challenges.<sup>3</sup> This paper lays the foundations for a research agenda on the effects of violence on inequality in human development by deriving hypotheses based on available knowledge of the prevalence, dynamics, and effects of different types of violence. Hence, the contribution of the paper is threefold. First, it presents an assessment of the prevalence and dynamics of different types of violence in the region based on available data and different research niches. Second, it reviews distinct areas of research on the effects of various types of violence that are seldom considered together. Although there are excellent reviews of specific academic niches such as the effects of crime (e.g., Soares, 2015), political violence (e.g., Skaperdas, 2011), and domestic violence (e.g., Shah & Shah, 2010; Showalter, 2016), few works consider simultaneously the effects of these different forms of violence. Third, building on these reviews, the paper derives hypotheses on the impact of violence on various types of inequality. The analysis shows that, based on extant research, we can expect violence to amplify both interpersonal and group inequality in human development, with groups being defined by factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and place of residence.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the findings of this body of work are discussed later in the paper.

<sup>2</sup> This is the subject of another background paper and, therefore, this literature is not summarized here.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Soares (2015) for a discussion of the challenges involved in researching the welfare costs of crime.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces a simple framework to investigate the effects of violence on inequality. Section 3 summarizes the patterns of violence in LAC, with a focus on the last two decades. Section 4 focuses on the effects of violence on inequality. It first describes, based on available evidence, the prevalence of victimization in the region depending on gender, ethnicity, income, and education. This section shows that underprivileged groups are often disproportionately affected by violence; this fact implies that any negative effects victimization has on human development translate into greater inequality. The following section investigates what those effects might be: based on a review of various bodies of work on the effects of violence, it derives hypotheses on how violence can widen the gap in (i) the right to life and physical integrity; (ii) health, education, and income; (iii) political participation, local democracy, and social capital; and (iv) the quality of local governments. The final section concludes.

A note about concepts and data. Violence is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon; defining it is therefore contentious, within and across disciplines (Spierenburg, 2008). This paper focuses exclusively on acts that entail the intentional rendering of physical harm. Regarding the forms of violence—another contentious conceptual issue—the paper focuses on three types: political, criminal, and social and domestic violence. Political violence includes interpersonal and collective violence that occurs in relation to socio-political agendas; criminal violence refers to interpersonal or collective violence linked to criminal activities; and social and domestic violence includes interpersonal violence (and, on rare occasions, collective violence) linked to interpersonal conflicts among people who do not live in the same household (social) as well as those who do (domestic) (Morrison, Buvinić, & Shifter, 2003; UNODC, 2019a). Although many instances of violence fail to fall neatly into these categories, this typology allows for considering together phenomena that share attributes.

Turning to data, measuring violence entails multiple challenges (Daigle, Snyder, & Fisher, 2016; Pepper, Petrie, & Sullivan, 2010; Tourangeau & McNeeley, 2003). Many violent events go unreported, including serious ones like rape. Even homicides, which are more likely to be recorded in official data, are tricky. The legal definition of intentional homicide varies somewhat across countries, and the capacity of states to systematically collect and report data on such homicides also varies. In some cases, different agencies within the same country report different numbers of homicides. The challenges for measuring other forms of violence tend to be even greater because measurement depends on citizens denouncing violent events or reporting them in surveys. This paper recognizes these limitations and does not pretend to quantify with precision the different violent phenomena that afflict the region. Rather, relying on available data and reports on different countries as well as on comparative studies, the paper seeks to describe the main trends of different forms of violence in LAC.

Regarding inequality, the paper explores not only inequality in material conditions but also in other key domains of human development where violence can have a significant impact: physical integrity and human rights, physical and mental health, education, political representation, democracy, social capital, and the quality of local governance. Importantly, the paper focuses on inequality across groups not only defined by individual-level attributes (such as gender, ethnicity, and class) but also by their place of residence, that is, subnational inequality. This is crucial because, as Otero-Bahamon (2019, p. 185) argues, “In many countries around the world, living in one subnational unit versus another can be just as important as race or class as a determinant of differential access to opportunities and wellbeing.” The paper, therefore, considers how violence can impact inequality at the individual as well as the subnational levels, considering potential impacts on units such as neighborhoods, cities, and regions within countries.

## 2. A simple framework to investigate the effects of violence on inequality

Violence causes inequality in human development if it makes some members of society worse off in any domain of human development. In an equal world, violence would cause inequality because it would make victims worse off than the rest of the population, unless they were somehow compensated in order to bring their level of human development on a par with everyone else. The situation is a bit more complicated when it comes to societies that are already unequal. This paper focuses on whether, and how, violence can amplify existing inequality. I propose a simple framework where the size and type of effect of violence on inequality in human development are determined by four factors:

1. *The type of victim.* If victims are individuals or communities that are already at a disadvantage vis-a-vis others in society, then violence leads to greater inequality by making those persons even more deprived. For example, if violence disproportionately affects the income prospects of the poor, it exacerbates inequality. If it undermines the mental health of gender minorities who are discriminated against, it also amplifies inequality.
2. *The type of violence.* Different forms of violence impact different domains of human development. The size of the effect can also vary across types of violence. A robbery and a rape, for example, impact different sets of domains of victims' human development, and the size of the effect is likely to differ as well.
3. *The frequency or intensity of violence.* Whether a person (or community) experiences few or many events matters. The intensity of a single event can also matter, for example how much a person loses to a robbery or the number of instances a woman experiences physical abuse by a partner.
4. *Moderators.* The same violent event can affect people or communities in dramatically different ways because of factors that moderate the magnitude of the effect. For example, someone who has access to mental health care after being victimized can recover much more quickly than someone without such care.

Based on this framework, every time violence disproportionately affects any domain of the human development of individuals who are already underprivileged, it leads to greater inequality. The specific domains of human development that violence has an impact on and the size of the effects depend on the kind and severity of violence as well as on attributes (of the victim or their context) that can moderate the effects.

The following sections rely on available data and various bodies of work to show that (i) in LAC, underprivileged sectors of society are often disproportionately affected by violence; (ii) the forms of violence that are prevalent in the region have profound effects on several domains or dimensions of human development; and (iii) several moderators amplify the effects of violence on victims from disadvantaged groups. Taken together, these three facts imply that violence disproportionately undermines several domains of the human development of those who are already worse off, thereby increasing various types of inequality in the region.

### 3. The patterns of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean

LAC has a long and complex history of violence. After gaining their independence, many countries were in turmoil because of foreign interventions, border wars, and internal civil conflict. In the 20th century, many countries experienced severe forms of state repression by both democratic governments and brutal dictatorships. Urban and rural insurgencies, which emerged throughout the region in the 1960s and 1970s, brought new forms of political violence perpetrated by guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, militias, death squads, and state forces. Some countries endured these forms of violence for a few years; others, for decades. With the democratization wave of the 1980s, political violence significantly decreased in many countries. While violent forms of state repression did not disappear, they did become less frequent, and citizens in many countries gained political and civil rights they had not enjoyed for decades. Most civil wars ended—the Colombian case being the only exception—which also contributed to a sharp decline in political violence (Bates, Coatsworth, & Williamson, 2007; Corradi, Fagen, Garretón, & Merino, 1992; Koonings, 1999; Ortiz, 2015; Wickham-Crowley, 1992).

Yet, as *political* violence was declining in the region, many countries started to be deeply impacted by *criminal* violence. Since the 1990s, both organized crime and petty delinquency have been rampant in many Central American countries in the aftermath of civil war; organized crime has also surged in countries in both Latin America and the Caribbean that are affected by drug trafficking. In addition, LAC has also endured high levels of social violence against women, children, ethnic minorities, and the LGBT community.

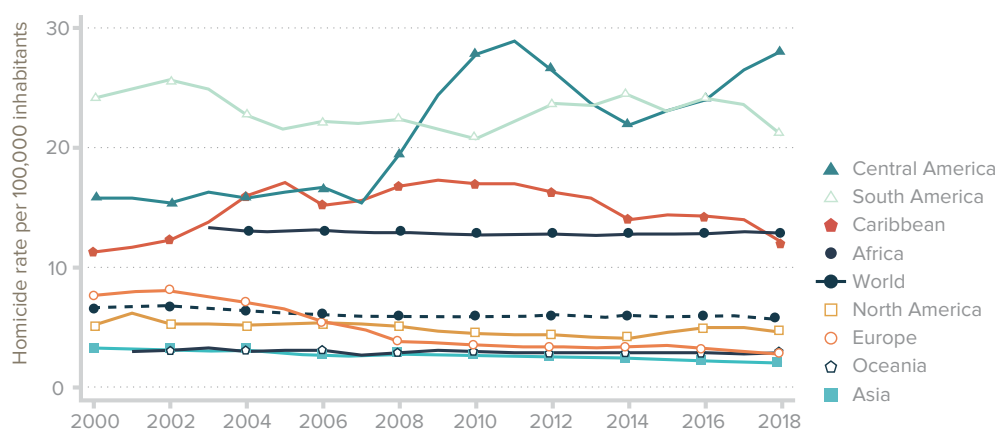
These different forms of violence, particularly criminal violence, have made LAC the most violent region in the world. With just 8% of the global population, the region is responsible for one third of all homicides on the planet. And while homicide rates have been stable or decreasing in every other region since 2000, in LAC they continue to rise. Indeed, between 2005 and 2012, homicide rates in the region grew more than three times the population growth rate (Chioda, 2017). Today, 41 of the 50 most homicidal cities in the world are in LAC, and the region’s rate of 22 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants is almost four times the global average rate of 6.2. The region is the only one in the world in which homicide is the principal external cause of death (World Health Organization, 2018), and some LAC countries experience levels of violence that surpass those of countries undergoing civil war (Chioda, 2017).

To describe the patterns of violence in the last two decades, I start with homicides, which can be linked to any of the types of violence introduced above: political, criminal, and social—although, as discussed later in the paper, most homicides in the region today are believed to be linked to criminal violence. I then turn to forms of violence that can be classified as criminal, political, or social. These sections rely on available data and case studies, as well as on information provided by the UNDP regional offices.

#### 3.1. Homicides

As Figure 1 shows, each subregion in LAC has had higher homicide rates than other world regions since the early 2000s, with Central and South America consistently experiencing significantly higher rates than the Caribbean. Overall, more than 2.5 million people have been killed in LAC in this millennium (Alvarado et al., 2018), mostly due to criminal violence.

**Figure 1.** Intentional homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants, world regions and LAC subregions



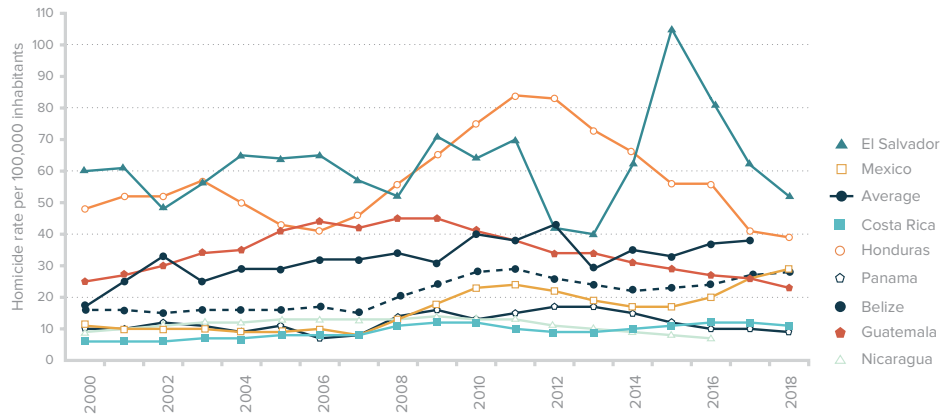
Source: UNODC statistics

Yet, there is wide variation in homicidal violence across and within LAC subregions. As Figure 2 shows, some countries have homicide rates that are twice, three times, and even thirteen times those of other countries in the same subregion. In Central America, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have had the highest rates throughout this millennium. In the Caribbean, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and, since 2012, the Bahamas had much higher rates than the other countries of the subregion. In South America, Colombia and Venezuela, and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, had significantly higher rates than the rest of the countries. Overall, the average homicide rate between 2000 and 2018 (for the years when data are available) across countries varies tremendously. El Salvador's rate is, for example, seven times that of Costa Rica, and Venezuela's is thirteen times the rate of Chile, as Figure 3 shows.

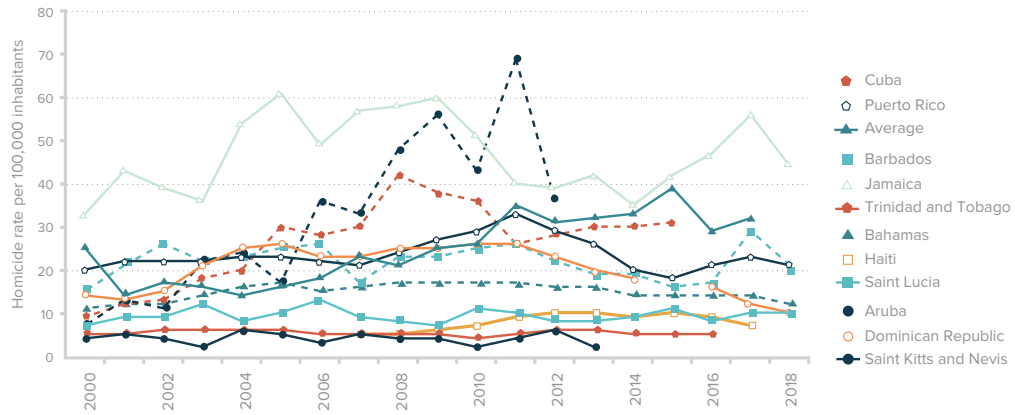
There is also wide subnational variation in homicidal violence in the region. As Muggah and Tobón (2018) note, while some states and cities in Mexico have homicide rates above 200 per 100,000 inhabitants, the most peaceful places in the country have rates below 2. Likewise, Chile has regions experiencing 3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants while others report a rate of 0.5. Violence tends to be concentrated in large cities as well as rural areas with low state presence and competition between organized criminal groups (Alvarado et al., 2018; Yashar, 2018). Border communities are also at a higher risk of violent crime. In some cases, violence is concentrated in a few localities. For example, in 2013 in El Salvador, about 5% of municipalities accounted for 40% of all homicides (Jaitman et al., 2017). What is more, in many cities violence is concentrated in just a few neighborhoods: in Belo Horizonte (Brazil), for example, violence mostly takes place in 6 out of 81 districts comprised of favelas (United Nations Development Programme, 2013).

**Figure 2. Intentional homicide rate across LAC subregions**

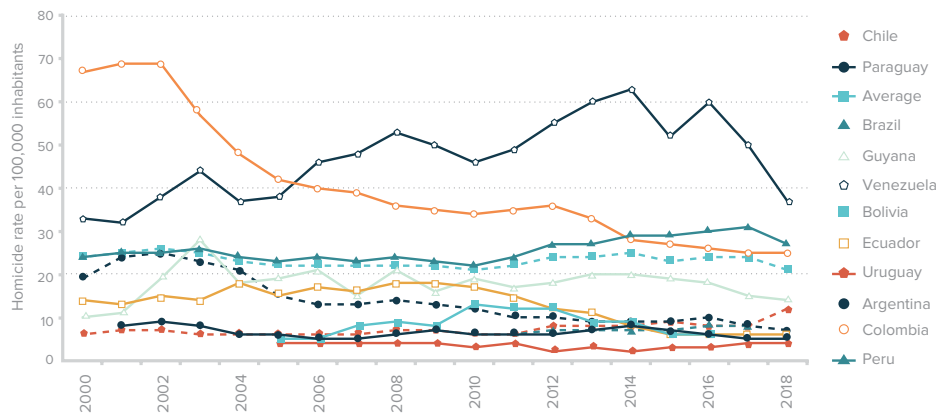
**a. Central America**



**b. Caribbean**



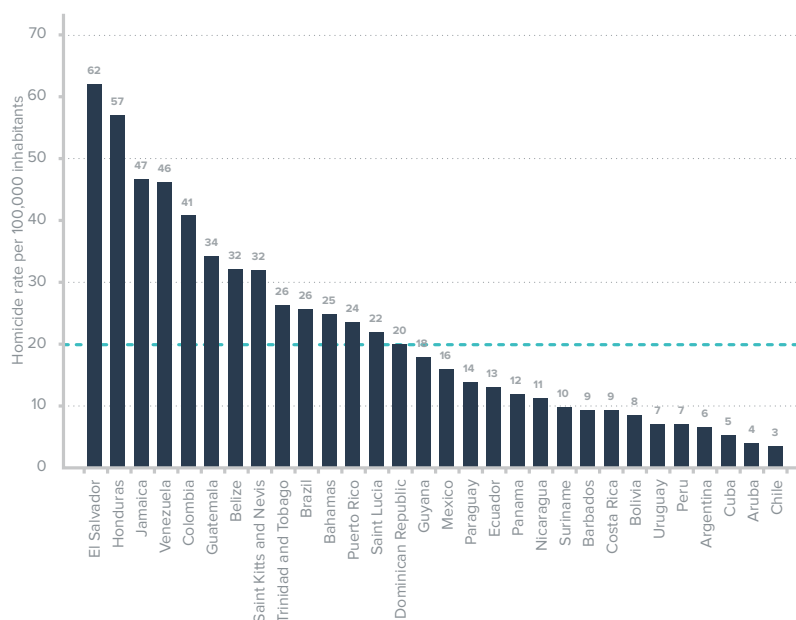
**c. South America**



Source: UNODC statistics



**Figure 3.** Average intentional homicide rate in LAC, 2000–2018



Source: UNODC statistics

Although it is very difficult to establish the proportion of homicides that are linked to political, criminal, and social violence, the prolific literature on violence in Latin America clearly shows that, in the last two decades, the most violent countries owe their fate to organized crime (Demombynes, 2011; Trejo & Ley, 2020; Yashar, 2018). Colombia is an exception, as it continues to endure both political and criminal violence, with the two often being intertwined (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2018). In countries with lower homicide rates, however, lethal violence is primarily linked to domestic violence and events of common delinquency that end up in a homicide, like quarrels and robberies. This is the case of countries like Uruguay, Argentina, Peru, and Bolivia (Lagos & Dammert, 2012).

Other types of violence—which are more difficult to measure and compare across countries than homicides—are quite prevalent in the region and often impact the most vulnerable sectors of society. The ideal source of information on non-lethal forms of violence are victimization surveys because these types of violent events often go unreported, making police records unreliable. Unfortunately, few countries in the region have institutionalized victimization surveys, and most conduct them sporadically (Centro de Excelencia para Información Estadística de Gobierno, 2013). The available evidence suggests, nonetheless, that LAC experiences a complex combination of multiple forms of violence that, as discussed later in the paper, are likely to impact development and inequality in various ways.

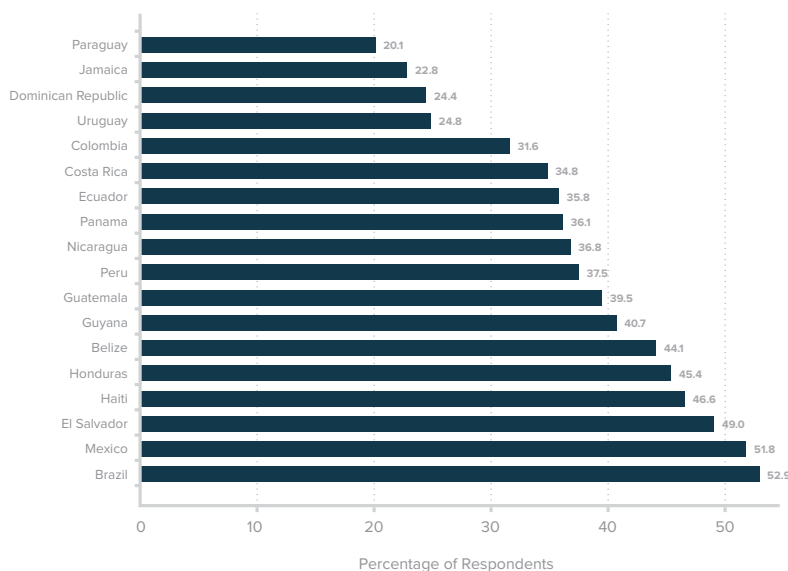
The remainder of this section briefly summarizes the most recent trends of criminal, political, and social violence in the region. The next section discusses the potential effects of these different forms of violence on inequality.

### 3.2. Criminal violence

Most violent crime in LAC is linked to the illicit drug trade. The region produces and exports to the rest of the world cocaine, opiates, marijuana, and methamphetamines (World Drug Report, 2019). Violence during this millennium has been linked mostly to the cocaine trade, as most organized criminal groups derive a substantial portion of their profits from this illicit drug. According to UNODC estimates, the cocaine market in 2003 was worth around US\$60 billion—an amount close to the value of the legitimate economies of the countries where cocaine passes on its way to the United States and Europe (Leggett, 2007). Most of the violence that has ravaged LAC is associated with the competition between organized criminal organizations over the profits of this business, their confrontation with state security apparatuses, and, to a lesser extent, conflict within criminal organizations (Durán-Martínez, 2015; Lessing, 2017; Reuter, 2009; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009a; Yashar, 2018).

Today, many countries in the region struggle with the presence of organized criminal groups in parts of their territory. The AmericasBarometer asked respondents in 18 countries (in 2012, 2014, and/or 2019) which groups posed the greatest threat to their security. Figure 4 shows the average proportion of respondents who said that a gang, organized crime, drug traffickers, or BACRIM (as criminal bands were called at the time in Colombia) posed the greatest threat to their security across time. The data are astonishing: the proportion goes from 20% in Paraguay to 53% in Brazil. Case studies and country reports show that the presence and activities of these groups also affect many other countries in the region, including Venezuela, Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Saint Lucia (UNODC, 2012).

**Figure 4.** Respondents reporting that organized criminal groups pose the greatest security threat, average of 2012, 2014 and 2019



Source: AmericasBarometer

To be sure, organized crime in general and illicit drug trafficking in particular are not always violent (Reuter, 2009; Snyder & Durán Martínez, 2009a). Colombia, the world’s leading producer and one of the main traffickers of cocaine, has experienced great subnational variation across time and space in the levels of violence perpetrated by various types of drug

trafficking groups (LeGrand, 2003; Richani, 2013). Likewise, Mexico has been involved in drug trafficking to the United States for decades, but violence only escalated to civil-war-like levels after 2006 (Grillo, 2012), and subnational territories also exhibit great variation in levels of violence (Trejo & Ley, 2020). At the same time, Peruvian zones of coca production have seldom experienced high levels of violence since the end of the war with the guerrilla group Shining Path. As many observers have noticed, crime has a distinct local nature (Chioda, 2017; Muggah & Tobón, 2018; Yashar, 2018).

Overall, however, organized crime has been increasingly violent in many countries of the region in the last two decades. In Mexico, this increase seems to be associated with changes in electoral outcomes, national policies, and the instability that such changes have brought to the criminal underworld (Lessing, 2017; Snyder & Durán Martínez, 2009b; Trejo & Ley, 2018). As drug trafficking organizations splintered, fought with each other, and confronted state authorities, Mexico saw its homicide rate triple in ten years, with a death toll that surpasses that of many civil wars (Lessing, 2017).

Likewise, several Central American countries fell prey to violence as drug trafficking organizations looked for new corridors in response to crackdowns in Colombia and, later on, Mexico. As these countries became important transit zones, different types of organized criminal groups grew stronger in strategic territories. Some are transnational groups that oversee the entire flow from Andean countries to the United States; others are national groups that transport drugs within their national territories; and others are local gangs in charge of dealing drugs locally and often involved in other illicit activities like extortion (Dudley, 2016; Yashar, 2018). These gangs have turned increasingly powerful and violent as their involvement in the drug trade has allowed them to have access to more sophisticated weapons and to gain political influence. UN estimates suggest that gangs were involved in about 26% of the homicides that took place in Latin America in 2011 (Krause, Muggah, & Gilgen, 2011). Taken together, these local, national, and transnational organizations have made Central America the most violent subregion of the world in per-capita terms, with El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala leading the trend.

In South America, Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela continue to experience high levels of criminal violence. In Colombia, political and criminal violence have long been intertwined, as guerrilla and paramilitary forces funded their operations with profits from the illicit drug trade. After the demobilization of paramilitary groups in the mid-2000s, new drug trafficking groups were formed. Also called neo-paramilitaries and new criminal bands (BACRIM in Spanish), among many other names, these groups recruited many former paramilitaries and controlled territories and markets the old paramilitary groups used to control. Likewise, dissident members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group, which demobilized in 2017, continue to participate in the cocaine market. Today, several groups, including FARC dissidents, are estimated to operate in more than 300 municipalities of the country (PARES, 2019).

Brazil has endured criminal violence perpetrated by powerful organizations devoted to the drug trade since the 1980s. As discussed later in the paper, state violence has also been prevalent in localities affected by criminal violence. While the national homicide rate in the country oscillated between 25 and 30 per 100,000 from 1990 to 2019 there is great variation across Brazilian states and municipalities. Since 2000, homicides have increased in the Northeastern and Midwest states, while Southeastern states have become less violent. In addition, more populated municipalities, especially the largest state capitals like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, have recently seen homicide rates stabilize or decline; smaller municipalities,

however, are becoming increasingly violent. For example, some cities had in 2017 extremely high homicide rates, like Rio Branco (84), Fortaleza (77) and Belem (68), which were many times the rates of Rio de Janeiro (33) and São Paulo (11) (Nsoesie et al., 2020).

Venezuela, for its part, saw its homicide rate increase from 13 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991 to 60 in 2019, although several experts have concerns about the reliability of the data (e.g., Ávila, 2018). The rise in violence is associated with organized crime, which is mostly linked to the cocaine trade, and, to a lesser extent, with state violence to quell opposition.

While drug-related violence in South America used to be a problem that only Colombia, Brazil, and, during the civil war, Peru faced, many others have joined the list in recent years. To be sure, no country in the region has experienced anything similar to what Colombia and, to a lesser extent, Brazil have endured. But the prevalence of drug trafficking and drug-related violence has become increasingly problematic for other countries in the subregion. Argentina, for example, started to face problems related to drug trafficking in the mid-2000s. As elsewhere in LAC, there is great subnational variation in the prevalence of drug markets as well as in their violence. For example, in the province of Santa Fe, cocaine seizures went from 14kg in 2001 to 490kg in 2011, while violence increased dramatically; in the city of Rosario, for example, the homicide rate doubled between 2008 and 2013. In the province of Buenos Aires, cocaine seizures rose by 200% between 2006 and 2013, but the homicide rate went up only by 5% in that period (Flom, 2018).

Finally, the Caribbean has been increasingly impacted by the illicit drug trade. Although cocaine used to be trafficked to the U.S. mostly through the Caribbean in the 1980s, it stopped playing a significant role for years. However, starting in the mid-2000s, the amount of trafficking of cocaine, marijuana, and other drugs seems to be rising in the subregion (InSight Crime, 2017; UNODC, 2012). The Dominican Republic is the most affected country, as it is part of trafficking routes of cocaine to both the U.S. and Europe. Jamaica continues to play an important role in the illicit marijuana market. In addition, the Dutch and French Caribbean as well as Guyana, French Guiana, and Suriname have gained importance in the cocaine trade to Europe (UNODC, 2012).

As the illicit drug trade grows in the Caribbean, so do the power and coercive capacity of gangs. The UNDP Citizen Security Survey (UNDP 2012) conducted in the subregion in 2010 found that around 12% of respondents reported gang violence in their neighborhoods in the prior year with Barbados having the lowest rate 6%, and Saint Lucia the highest (20%). The same survey also found that gangs have social and political influence in some of the places where they operate. In Barbados and Jamaica, for example, around 14% of respondents said that gangs made their neighborhoods safer. As in many other places, these groups are also behind growing levels of corruption, especially of the judicial process, as well as of increasingly high levels of violence. The UNDP report concluded that all Caribbean countries, except for Barbados and Suriname, had seen their homicide rates and gang-related killings rise in the previous decade. The situation of Jamaica is particularly dire, as it continues to have one of the highest homicide rates in the world. The same report suggests that gangs were responsible for a significant share of violence in the subregion.

Human trafficking is another prevalent illicit activity in LAC (Adams, 2017). Although data on human trafficking are scarce, UNODC's report on human trafficking indicates that women (including adults and girls) account for 75% of the victims, and the most common form of exploitation is sexual. Central America and the Caribbean are the subregions with the

highest rate of detected victims of human trafficking in the world, with girls making up 40% of the victims. Within South America, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru exhibit higher rates of child trafficking. Colombia, Venezuela, and countries in the Southern Cone report larger rates among adult women (Kangaspunta et al., 2018).

Another illicit activity that often involves violence is illicit mining. A recent phenomenon in LAC, gold mining has become a source for profit for organized criminal groups. According to various sources compiled by Wagner (2016), a substantial portion of the gold that is mined in the region is mined illegally: 28% of all gold mined in Peru, 30% in Bolivia, 77% in Ecuador, 80% in Colombia, and 80% to 90% in Venezuela. The organized criminal groups that have seized control of illicit mining are also responsible for labor exploitation and human trafficking. In addition, gold mining causes substantial environmental degradation because it contaminates water and land with mercury and cyanide—indeed, it is considered one of the most destructive industries in the world. According to Global Forrester Watch, there are at least 81 protected areas (or their buffer zones) in the Amazonian region where illegal mining projects were under way in 2016 (Wagner, 2016).

With organized crime often comes criminal governance, that is, instances of criminal groups operating as de facto rulers in areas where they operate. As a growing literature on rebel and criminal governance has shown, gangs, large drug trafficking organizations, and rebel groups that need to control territory often regulate security, collect taxes, provide public goods, and regulate social, economic, and political behavior in areas under their control (Arias, 2017; Arjona, 2016; Arjona, Kasfir, & Mampilly, 2015; Lessing, 2020; Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, & Melo, 2020; Mampilly, 2011; Sánchez De La Sierra, 2020; Trejo & Ley, 2019). People living in slums in large cities, rural towns on drug trafficking routes, and villages in coca and poppy plantations often live under the coercive rule of armed actors. Detailed studies show how rebels, paramilitaries, and organized criminal groups have governed local communities in Colombia (Arjona, 2016; Blattman et al., 2021), Mexico (Flanigan, 2014; Mattiace, Ley, & Trejo, 2019), Jamaica (Harbers, Jaffe, & Cummings, 2016; Jaffe, 2012), El Salvador (Córdova, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2017b), and Brazil (Albarracín, 2018; Arias, 2006, 2017; Arias & Barnes, 2017; Leeds, 1996; Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, & Melo, 2020), among others.

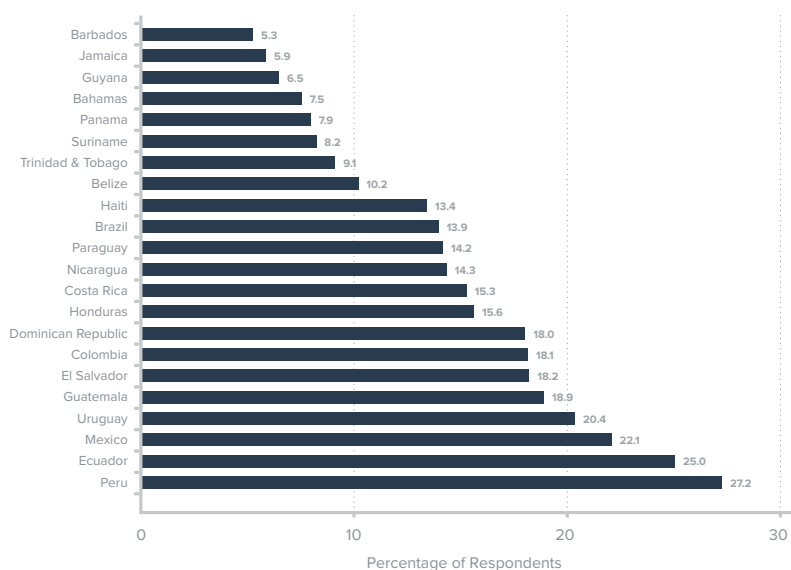
When these violent organizations take on governance functions, they influence the daily lives of local residents in multiple ways. Often, these groups regulate daily economic activities by issuing work permits, collecting all kinds of taxes (more or less regularized extortion), establishing rules to regulate specific markets, and organizing labor. Sometimes they infiltrate local governments, accessing sensitive information like tax records and influencing the decisions of local officials, including the design and implementation of policies. They also interfere in local elections by making alliances with specific political parties and politicians, vetoing candidates to run for office, preventing candidates from campaigning in certain localities, infiltrating and coercing civic organizations, and mobilizing or coercing voters to support a particular candidate or to show up at rallies and protests. Criminal governors also regulate social life, banning certain activities (like homosexual relations) and making others mandatory (like cleaning streets). Some groups punish abusive partners. Many are in charge of public security, punishing thieves and rapists harshly. For the citizens of Latin America who live under these armed local social orders (Arjona, 2016) or micro-level armed regimes (Arias, 2017), armed actors are the de facto authority that determines many aspects of their daily lives.

Another dramatic effect of criminal violence in LAC is the displacement of individuals, families, and entire communities. About 265,000 people fled El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (the Northern Triangle of Central America) every year between 2013 and 2018, many of

them seeking safety (Meyer & Taft-Morales, 2019). Violence has also pushed hundreds of thousands of Mexicans to flee their country (Rios Contreras, 2014). In Colombia, both political and criminal violence has led to the displacement of more than eight million people, most of them within the country (ACNUR, 2018). Migrants are often subjected to new cycles of violence and exploitation in their host communities (International Crisis Group, 2016).

Turning to less serious forms of criminal violence, robberies and physical attacks are also prevalent in LAC, especially in Central and South America as well as Mexico. According to UNODC’s crime statistics, the region has the highest level of (reported) physical assaults and violent robberies worldwide. The AmericasBarometer survey conducted between 2010 and 2014 in 22 countries found that, on average, about one in five respondents in the region reported being a victim of a robbery in the past 12 months. Figure 5 shows the average proportion of respondents in each country that reported being a victim of any of the following crimes in the previous 12 months: unarmed robbery (with or without assault or physical violence), armed robbery, assault but not robbery, rape or sexual assault, kidnapping, vandalism, burglary, and extortion or blackmailing. There is wide variation across countries, with Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay exhibiting rates above 20%, Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Brazil, Haiti, and Belize having rates between 10% and 20%, and Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Panama, the Bahamas, Guyana, Jamaica, and Barbados showing the lowest rates.

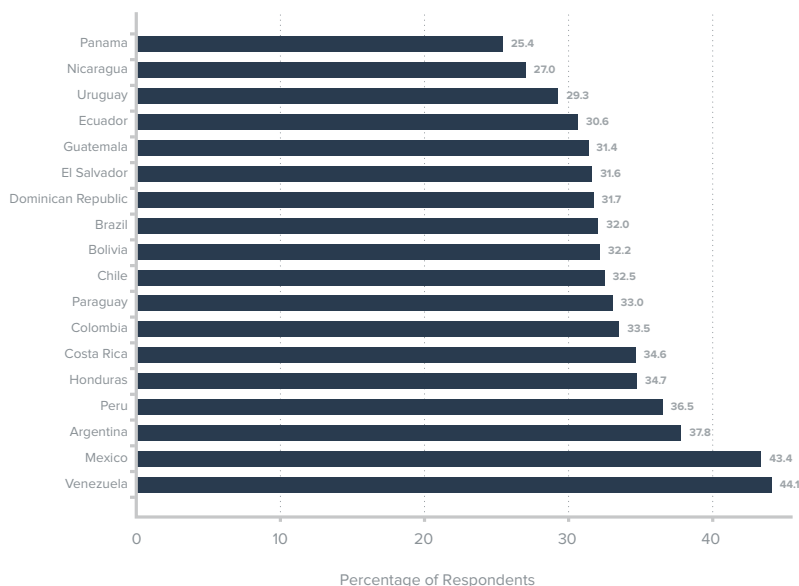
**Figure 5.** Percentage of respondents reporting they had experienced a crime in the previous 12 months, average of 2010–2014



Source: AmericasBarometer

The Latinobarometro survey asked respondents in a slightly different set of 18 countries if they or their relatives had been a victim of a crime in the past 12 months in 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2015 to 2018. As Figure 6 shows, the data suggest that Venezuela had the highest rate (40%), followed by Mexico (43%); in Argentina, Peru, Honduras, Costa Rica, Colombia, Paraguay, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Dominica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Ecuador, between 30% and 40% of respondents reported that they or a relative had been victim of a crime in the previous year. The three countries with the lowest rates, Panama (25%), Nicaragua (27%), and Uruguay (29%), all had rates above 25%, which attests to the severity of crime in the region.

**Figure 6.** Percentage of respondents reporting that they or a relative had experienced a crime in the previous 12 months, average of 2010–2011, 2013, 2015–2018



Source: Latinobarometro

While these different sources sometimes converge, they can also rank countries quite differently. For example, while Uruguay has one of the highest rates of crime victimization according to AmericasBarometer, it has one of the lowest rates based on the Latinobarometro surveys (even when considering the same time period). In addition, it is difficult to assess the situation of several countries, most of them in the Caribbean, due to the scarcity of data. Given the chronic levels of criminal violence in the region, better data are needed.

Extortion and kidnappings have also been prevalent at certain times and places within the most violent countries in LAC. In Colombia, guerrillas, paramilitaries and criminal groups have relied on both, although the number of kidnappings has decreased substantially since the early 2000s (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica de Colombia, 2020; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, gangs rely on extortion as one of their principal sources of income (International Crisis Group, 2017a). The victims are the residents of the gangs’ own neighborhoods. Several drug trafficking organizations in Mexico also extort the communities where they operate (Magaloni, Robles, Matanock, Diaz-Cayeros, & Romero, 2020), and kidnapping has been prevalent for over two decades in the country; in recent years, kidnapping has impacted not only the wealthy but also middle- and working-class individuals (Ochoa, 2012).

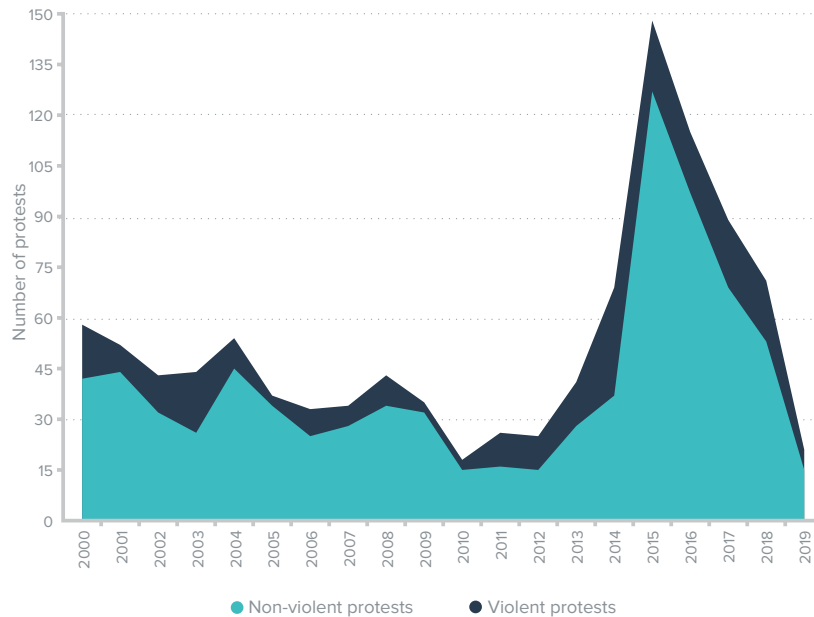
### 3.3. Political violence

In the 21st century, LAC saw a decline in state violence as well as violent acts of contentious politics. However, both forms of political violence continue to affect the region, albeit at a much lower level.

Citizens in LAC have protested at different times throughout the region but, for the most part, mobilization in this millennium has been peaceful. Based on Mass Mobilization Protest Data (Clark & Regan, 2016), there were approximately 39 protests, on average, every year between

2000 and 2012 in the region. Of these, approximately 23% were violent<sup>4</sup>. As Figure 7 shows, mobilization has surged since 2013: the average yearly number of protests between 2013 and 2019 was 79, of which approximately 26% were violent. As with other forms of violence, there is wide variation within and across subregions. Figure 8 shows the total number of violent protests that took place in each country for which data are available between 2000 and 2019. In South America, the countries with the highest number of total protests were Venezuela and Brazil, while violent protests were most common in Venezuela, Brazil, and Bolivia. Within Central America and Mexico, mobilization has been particularly frequent in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, with the highest number of violent protests occurring in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Honduras. Finally, data are available only for four countries in the Caribbean: Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica. Among them, Cuba and Haiti had the highest number of total protests, and Haiti and Jamaica the highest number of violent protests.

**Figure 7.** Violent and non-violent protests, LAC, 2000–2019



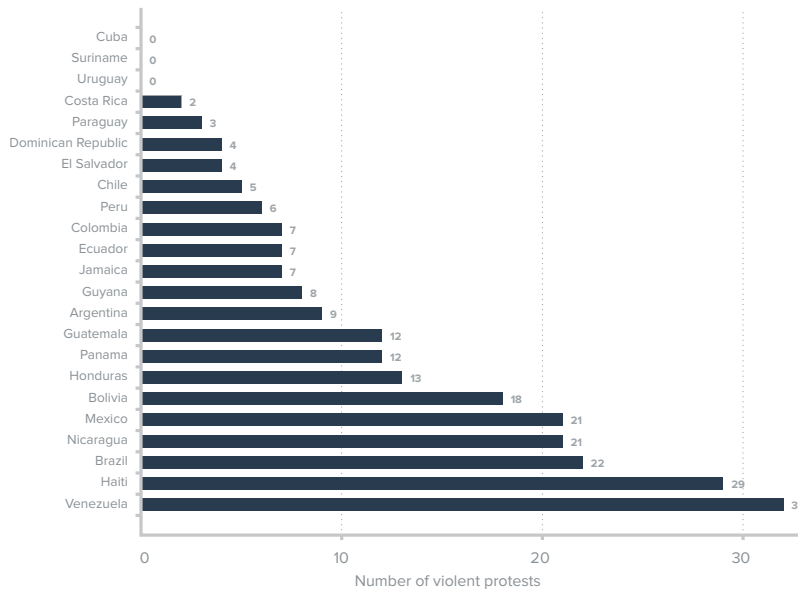
Sources: Clark and Regan (2016, accessed on January 9th, 2021)

In 2019, protests were particularly prevalent. In countries like Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela, protesters consisted mostly of young people, women, and low-income persons. The reasons for protesting varied greatly and included women’s rights, climate change, LGBTQ rights, demanding measures against corruption, access to education and health care, and preserving democracy. Several states responded to these protests with excessive use of force and emergency declarations that suspended basic rights and freedoms (Amnesty International, 2019). More than two hundred people died due to violence in the protests, with most of the victims being in Haiti (ibid).

<sup>4</sup> In this dataset, a protest is coded as violent if protesters engaged in violence against the state, from riotous behavior that destroys property to shooting at the police or military.



**Figure 8.** Total violent protests, LAC, 2000–2019

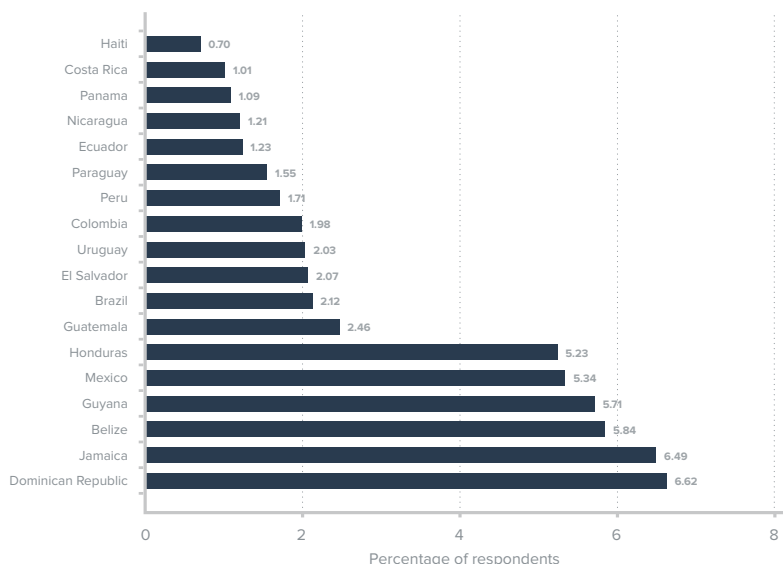


Sources: Clark and Regan (2016, accessed on January 9th, 2021)

Police brutality is another critical component of state violence. Although several countries implemented structural reforms to their police forces as part of their transition to democracy, police abuse continues to be a significant problem in various countries of the region. A LAPOP survey conducted in 2008 found that between 3% and 7% of the population in LAC had been the victim of police abuse in the previous year (Cruz, 2009). The situation is particularly critical in Argentina, El Salvador, Bolivia, and Colombia and tends to affect more men, young people, and residents of large cities. Those who report being more politically active are more likely to be victims of police brutality, suggesting that political motives may underlie some of these abuses.

What is more, data from the AmericasBarometer from 2010 to 2019 suggest that an important segment of the population of various countries in LAC consider the military or the police to pose the greatest threat to their security (Figure 9). Based on these data, the situation is most critical in Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Belize, Guyana, Mexico, and Honduras, where between 5% and 7% of the population fear state forces in this way. The population of Haiti, Costa Rica, and Panama display the lower rates of fear of the police or the military.

**Figure 9.** Percentage of respondents who consider that the police or the military pose the greatest threat to security, average for 2012, 2014, 2018–2019



Source: AmericasBarometer

In some countries, state violence is an important cause of death. Although data are not available on many countries, a few studies provide astonishing estimates. The situation is particularly critical in Venezuela, where the rate of civilians killed by state forces increased from 2.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2010 to 19 in 2016 (Ávila, 2019). A study by Amnesty International concluded that in 2016, as many as 22% of all violent deaths in the country were perpetrated by state security forces; this proportion rose to 26% in 2017 (Ávila, 2018). The situation in El Salvador is also alarming, where the rate was 9.5 in 2016, with around 11% of all homicides being perpetrated by state forces (Bergman, 2019). In Brazil, although the rate is lower (close to 2) (Marques, Cano, Bueno-Nunes, & Husek, 2019), the number of people killed by the police is stunning: more than 33,000 people in the last decade (Muñoz Acebes, 2020). In the state of Rio de Janeiro alone, police killed in 2019 1,810 people, making it the year with the highest number of police killings since 1998, the first year on which these records are available (BBC, 2020). In Colombia, although available data suggest that the rate of civilians killed by state forces is below 1 (Castillo-Muñoz, Suárez-Rueda, & Acero-Velásquez, 2019), extra-judicial killings have been and continue to be a serious problem in the country. Between 1988 and 2014, more than 3,800 persons were killed by the National Army to present them as members of illegal armed groups who died in combat in what came to be known as cases of “false positives” (Legrand, 2020).

Finally, the militarization of public security has also led to higher levels of violence perpetrated by the armed forces in various countries, especially those confronting high levels of criminal violence. Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Venezuela, and the Central American countries with the exception of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama, have called on the military to maintain domestic security (Diamint, 2015; Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2019). The militarization of security was followed by an increase in violence in at least six of these countries: Ecuador, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico. Moreover, several country reports have documented widespread abuses by the armed forces (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2019).

Another type of political violence that makes LAC stand out is that committed against human rights defenders and civic leaders. According to the UN, between 2015 and 2019 75% of the assassinations of human rights defenders that occurred worldwide took place in LAC, with most cases occurring in Colombia, followed by Brazil, Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala (Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 2020). Most of these activists focused on land rights, the defense of the environment, and the rights of indigenous and black people. It is estimated that between 350 and 1,000 social leaders have been killed in Colombia<sup>5</sup>. In Brazil, it is estimated that dozens of human rights defenders are killed every year (Amnesty International, 2016).

Violent environmental conflict is increasingly becoming another area of concern in the region. According to the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), four of the ten most violent environmental conflicts in the world are in LAC: in Brazil, Honduras, and Guatemala (Temper, Del Bene, & Martinez-Alier, 2015). Moreover, almost half of all environmental conflicts related to mining and construction worldwide are in LAC (ibid). Some of the killings of social leaders mentioned above are linked to environmental activism.

Some countries have also experienced chronic levels of violence against politicians. In Mexico, hundreds of politicians have been targeted by drug trafficking organizations (Trejo & Ley, 2019), and, in Colombia, the number of homicides of local politicians (including candidates and elected officials) is estimated at around 2,000 between 1980 and 2015 (Arjona, Chacon, & Garcia, 2020).

Attacks against journalists are also a source of concern. LAC experiences significant problems when it comes to harassment, threats, and violence against journalists. The situation is particularly critical in Mexico—the world’s most dangerous place for journalists—followed by Colombia, Honduras, Brazil, and Guatemala (Diaz-Nosty & de Frutos García, 2017). Between 2000 and 2017, around 450 journalists were killed or disappeared in the region.

Last but not least, the lengthiest internal armed conflict in the region continues to be a cause of concern. Despite the signing of a peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, the country still endures the lengthiest internal armed conflict in the region. The conflict has taken the lives of more than 200,000 people and caused more than nine million victims since 1985.<sup>6</sup> The complex situation involves FARC dissidents, the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group, and multiple criminal organizations. Although violence has decreased significantly in the country as a whole since the signing of the peace agreement—2019 had the lowest homicide rate in nearly five decades—some regions of the country continue to endure high levels of violence (Garzón & Silva, 2019). In addition to the recent spike in assassinations of social leaders mentioned above, the country is also seeing the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) go up: official data suggest that more than 300,000 people have been internally displaced since the signing of the peace agreement.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Estimates vary widely. For example, the Office of the Attorney General reports that 349 social leaders were assassinated between November of 2016 and August of 2020, while the NGO Indepaz reports more than 1,000 victims in the same time period <http://www.indepaz.org.co/1-000-lideres-y-defensores-de-ddhh/>.

<sup>6</sup> Registro Unico de Víctimas de Colombia, available at <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394>, accessed on June 15th, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Unidad de Víctimas de Colombia, available at <https://cifras.unidadvictimas.gov.co/Home/Desplazamiento>, accessed on December 1, 2020.

### 3.4. Social and domestic violence

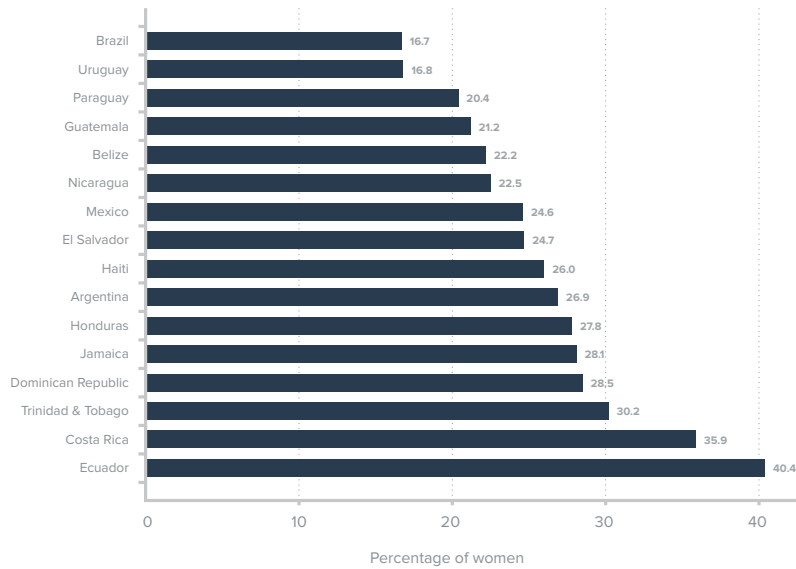
In addition to the critical problems LAC faces with political and criminal violence, the region also struggles with various forms of social and domestic violence. In fact, some studies suggest that the region’s history of political and criminal violence—together with strict gender-based roles—has made social and domestic violence more prevalent (Morrison, Biehl, et al., 1999). Although comparable data on social violence are scarce, the available evidence suggests that it is a serious problem in LAC.

Despite the scarcity of data on violence against women in the region, there is consensus among experts that the situation is dire. According to some measures, LAC has the third highest lifetime prevalence of sexual violence by non-partners worldwide and the second highest rate of violence perpetrated by a partner, with the African, Eastern Mediterranean and South-East Asia regions reporting the highest rate (World Health Organization, 2013). Studies conducted in the early 2000s reported prevalence levels in LAC countries ranging from 10% to 50% (Castro & Riquer, 2003). More recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that about one-third of ever-partnered women in the region have been physically and/or sexually abused by an intimate partner at some point in life (World Health Organization, 2013). WHO estimates also suggest that more than 10% of women above age 14 in LAC have experienced forced sex by a non-partner in their lives (World Health Organization, 2013).

There is, however, wide variation across countries. A 2019 systematic review of nationally-representative surveys conducted in 24 countries in the Americas between 1998 and 2017 found that, although intimate partner violence (IPV) against women is widespread in each of the countries included in the study, the rates vary substantially (Bott, Guedes, Ruiz-Celis, & Mendoza, 2019). Figure 10 shows the percentage of women who were physically or sexually abused by a partner at any point in the past. Ecuador had the highest rate (40.4%), followed by Costa Rica (35.9%) and Trinidad and Tobago (30.2%). All other countries in the study had rates between 20% and 30%, except Brazil and Uruguay, which had the lowest rates: 16.7 and 16.8, respectively. Figure 11 shows the percentage of women who were physically or sexually abused by their current or most recent partner. Bolivia exhibited the highest rate, with almost 60% of women reporting being the victim of IPV by their current or most recent partner. Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru exhibit rates between 30% and 35%, and only Uruguay reports less than 10%.

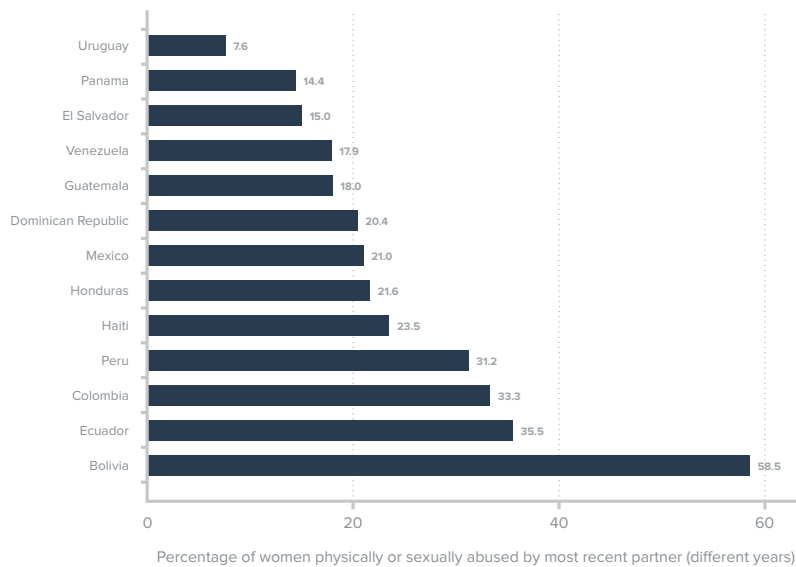
Femicide—homicides of women for reasons related to their gender—is also a growing source of concern. According to the 2019 Global Study on Homicide, the Americas had the second highest rate of females killed purely by intimate partners in 2018. The same study also found that the female intimate partner homicide rate was five times higher than the male rate in the same year. According to data compiled by ECLAC on 18 countries in LAC, those with the highest rates of femicide per 100,000 inhabitants in the last decade in the Caribbean were Dominican Republic (3.1), Trinidad and Tobago (2.3), and Saint Lucia (1.8); in South America, Bolivia (2.0), Brazil (1.6), and Uruguay (1.5); and, in Central America, the subregion with much higher rates, Honduras (7.1) and El Salvador (6.3) (Figure 12).

**Figure 10.** Percentage of women physically or sexually abused by any partner, last available year, 2003–2017



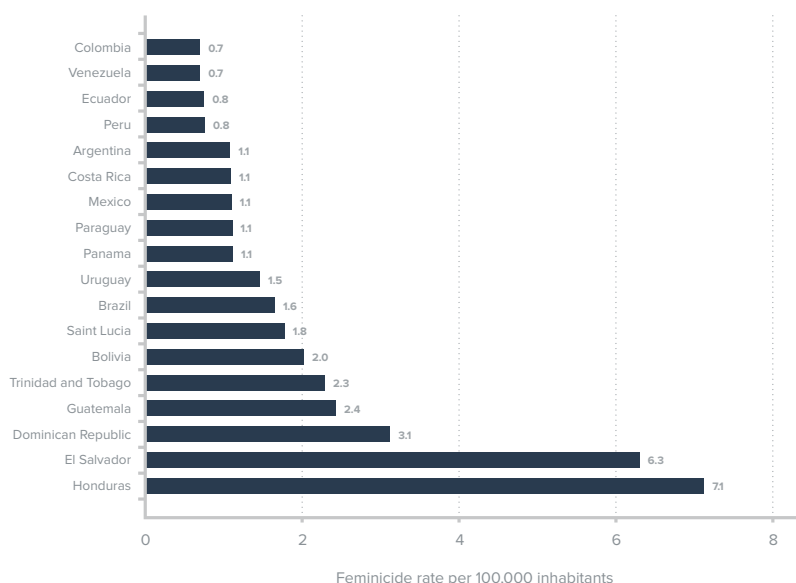
Source: Bott et al. (2019)

**Figure 11.** Percentage of women physically or sexually abused by most recent partner, last available year, 2003–2017



Source: Bott et al. (2019)

**Figure 12.** Average femicide rate, LAC countries, 2010–2019



Source: ECLAC: CEPALSTAT

LAC also struggles with violence against children. This violence can take many forms and happens in various settings, including at home, school, child care institutions, work, and in the community. Most of this violence, however, happens in the home (Pinheiro, 2006).

Although comparable data on non-lethal violence against children are not available across countries and over time in LAC, several studies provide informative estimates. A 2016 study estimated that 58% of children (under age 18) experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in the region (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress, 2016). A 2019 meta-analysis of multiple studies found that as much as 60% of children between ages two and three are the victims of physical violence and that between 14% and 19% of ever-partnered girls ages 15 to 19 report being physically abused by their partners (Devries K, 2019).

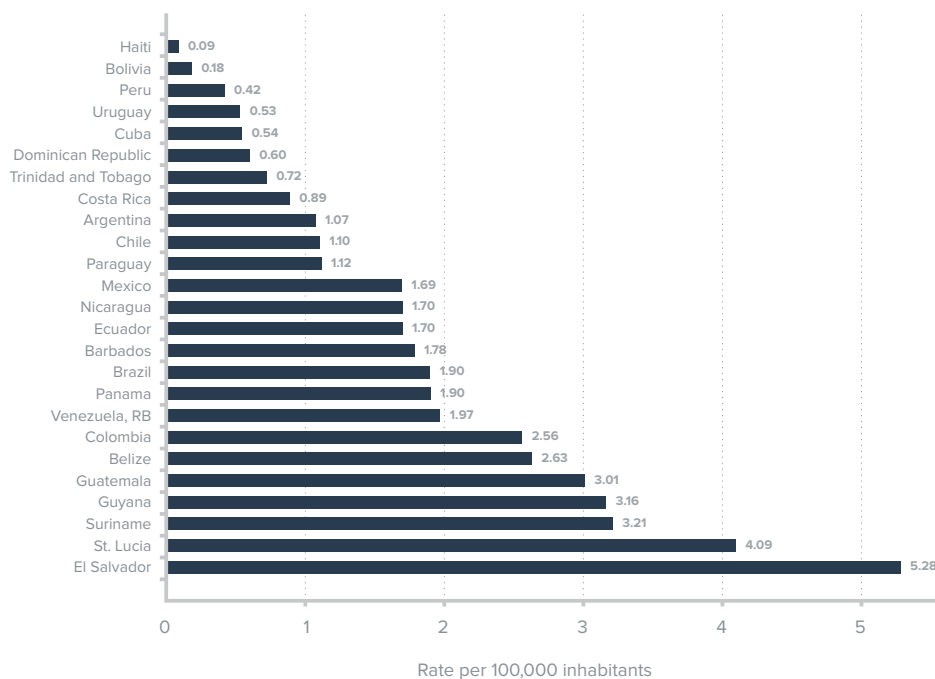
UNICEF data also suggest that, in most LAC countries where data are available, the majority of children experience violent discipline at home.<sup>8</sup> Corporal punishment is also common at schools, despite being outlawed in most countries in the region (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2016). In addition, although estimating the prevalence of child sexual abuse and exploitation poses many problems due to data quality, availability, and comparability, different studies suggest that this is an acute problem in many countries in LAC. Save the Children (2017), for example, estimates that two million children are victims of sexual exploitation and that 50% of the victims of human trafficking in Central America and the Caribbean are children—compared with 20% elsewhere in the world.

Figure 13 shows deaths due to intentional injuries among minors ages 1 to 14 per 100,000 inhabitants for the last available year (in most cases, 2009) compiled by ECLAC. El Salvador has by far the highest rate (5.3), followed by Saint Lucia (4.1). Suriname, Guyana, and Guatemala have rates around 3.0, while Belize, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Brazil, Barbados,

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF Global Databases, available at UNICEF, <http://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/violent-discipline/>, accessed on May 20, 2020.

Ecuador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Paraguay, Chile, and Argentina have rates between 1.0 and 2.6. The countries with rates under 1.0 are Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Uruguay, Peru, Bolivia, and Haiti.

**Figure 13.** Rate of deaths caused by intentional injuries, minors ages 1–14, LAC, year of most recent available data



Source: ECLAC, CEPALSTAT

Countries also vary greatly in the extent to which their citizens consider domestic violence against children to be one of the most frequent forms of violence where they live. According to responses to the Latinobarometro survey in 2018, 54% of respondents in Colombia considered this form of violence as one of the most frequent in their place of residence, the highest in the region. Dominican Republic ranked second, with 36%, followed by Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, all with rates between 25% and 30%. El Salvador and Chile had the lowest rates (13%). To be sure, these perceptions do not necessarily correlate with actual violence, but they do capture the extent to which people are aware of and concerned about violence against minors. It is therefore possible that respondents in countries with lower levels of violence but higher awareness report being more concerned.

When it comes to lethal violence, the situation is extreme: the adolescent homicide rate in LAC is five times higher than the world average, and the five countries with the highest homicide rates of adolescents are all in LAC. What is more, the risk for adolescent boys of being victim of homicide is higher in some LAC countries than it is for adolescent boys in conflict-ridden countries of dying from collective violence (UNICEF, 2017). The situation is critical in Venezuela, Honduras, Colombia, El Salvador, and Brazil.

Children are also impacted in various ways in countries enduring high levels of criminal or political violence. In Colombia, for example, a study found that, between 1984 and 2015, more than 1.9 million school-age children were victims of violence, and around 4,730 minors dropped out of school after being recruited into armed groups (Díaz, 2016). Cuartas Ricaurte,

Harker, and Moya (2016) estimate that approximately 9% of Colombian children under age 6 were victims of the armed conflict, and Cristancho, Harker, and Molano (2016) find that at least one homicide occurred in the vicinity of 92% of schools within a sample of schools in the cities of Cali and Medellin only in the first 42 weeks of 2012.

Other population groups suffer as well. Although data are scant, several sources suggest that violence against sexual and gender minorities is also prevalent in LAC. One study found that 77% of the registered homicides of transgender persons that occurred between 2008 and 2011 in the world took place in LAC (Balzer, Hutta, Adrián, & Hyndal, 2013). A 2019 report found that 89% of the homicides of members of the LGBT community in the region, excluding Brazil, occurred in Colombia, Mexico, and Honduras (SinViolencia LGBTI, 2019). According to a UN study, 11% of gay men in the Caribbean reported having been physically attacked in the last five years (UNAIDS, 2014). Overall, however, it is very difficult to assess the prevalence of this form of violence across countries in the region due to the absence of official data in most of them (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2015).

Finally, several countries struggle with violence by citizens taking justice into their own hands. Although precise numbers are rarely available, several reports and case studies indicate that violence perpetrated by vigilante groups, death squads, private militias, and even unorganized citizens claiming to defend their communities from criminal groups and delinquents is a source of concern in several countries (Godoy, 2006; Santamaria, 2012), including Guatemala (Bateson, 2017; Handy, 2004), Mexico (Navarro, 2020), Brazil (Barbara, 2015), Bolivia (Goldstein, 2003), and Ecuador (Santillán, 2008). Using data collected in LAPOP's 2012 AmericasBarometer, Cruz and Kloppe-Santamaría (2019) find that the percentage of the population who support the use of extralegal violence is disturbingly high in most countries of the region: between 40% and 52% in Honduras, Bolivia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Belize, and Jamaica; between 30% and 40% in Nicaragua, Colombia, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, Mexico, Guyana, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay; and between 20% and 30% in Argentina, Panama, Chile, and Costa Rica. These rates reflect worrisome low levels of trust in institutions as well as acceptance of violence as a valid way to solve conflict.

### 3.5. The need for better data on the types of violence that affect LAC

The sections above paint a somber picture of LAC: it is a region that faces some of the highest levels of criminal, social and political violence. This fact contrasts with the scarcity of data: the empirical evidence needed to assess the severity of each type of violence in each country does not exist. Even where data are available, drawing comparisons across countries is often tricky. Differences in how victimization is measured, how often it is measured, reporting rates, and the level of transparency among government agencies render comparisons across countries difficult.

Advancing the understanding of violence—and designing policies to prevent it and mitigate its effects—requires more nuanced assessments of the situation in each country and the possibility of undertaking comparisons. The obvious implication is that we need more and better data, a costly but necessary endeavor. A first step would be to clearly identify the areas in which data scarcity is particularly dire in each country. Based on this diagnosis, countries facing similar needs could join forces to design data collection initiatives and collaborate to improve their implementation. This would reduce the costs while also facilitating cross-country comparisons in the future.



Even in the absence of better data, devising a classification scheme of the situation of each country in terms of how prevalent criminal, political and social violence are would facilitate both research and policy debate in the region. Such a classification could, for example, enable research on how political, criminal and social violence are interrelated. It would also allow for identifying countries facing similar priorities and the research findings that are relevant to them.

For the purpose of this paper, the available evidence is sufficient to conclude that all three types of violence—criminal, political and social—are critical problems in the region. Although not all countries face the same types and severity of violence, most face serious challenges associated with at least one type. If violence does amplify inequality—and I argue in the next sections that it does—then every country in the region has an additional reason to consider the reduction of violence as a top priority.

## 4. The effects of violence on inequality

Based on the simple framework introduced in Section 1, inequality rises if violence impacts sectors of the population who are already at a disadvantage. The type and severity of violence determines which domains of human development can be impacted by it and, therefore, what kinds of inequality are likely to grow. The presence of moderators can also impact the type and magnitude of those effects.

This section shows that, based on available evidence, most types of violence in LAC tend to affect sectors of the population who are worse off: the poor, ethnic and gender minorities, women, and deprived communities. It also shows that, based on knowledge accumulated in different disciplines, we can expect violence to negatively impact individuals' physical and mental health, cognitive development, education outcomes, job market participation and earnings, and political engagement, among others. Violence is also likely to impact local communities in various ways, as it can influence the performance of state institutions, public goods provision, the strength of local economies, social capital, and the quality of democracy—all important components of human development. Since individuals and communities that are already at a disadvantage are more likely to endure violence, these impacts widen existing gaps in human development.

I start with a summary of what we know about the prevalence of different forms of victimization to show that violence does impact underprivileged members of society. I then turn to the effects of violence on various domains of human development. Building on an interdisciplinary literature on the effects of violence on multiple outcomes, this section discusses the channels by which violence can undermine human development among disadvantaged populations, thereby exacerbating different forms of interpersonal and subnational inequality.

The literature on the effects of violence is vast and scattered. Researchers in psychology, economics, political science, criminology, sociology, and medicine, among others, have investigated the impact of various forms of violence on several outcomes. Although a comprehensive review of these fields is beyond the scope of this paper, this section summarizes the findings on the effects of violence on life expectancy, health, education, income and economic growth, pro-social behavior and social capital, political participation, elections, local democracy, and local governance.

The discussion is organized around four major domains: first, the right to life and physical

integrity, which is directly curtailed by violence; second, health, education, and income; third, political participation, social capital and democracy, which involve citizens' ability to participate in various ways in the political life of their communities, interpersonal trust, and the quality of local democracy; and, fourth, the quality of local governance at the subnational level, which includes public goods provision and the performance of local institutions. When possible, the discussion identifies how specific populations can be affected in distinct ways.

While the list of potential effects of violence on inequality in human development that emerges from this exercise is by no means comprehensive, it starts to lay the foundations for a research agenda on these impacts. Additional theoretical and empirical work is needed to identify the many ways that social, criminal, and political violence can impact human development in the short and long run. What we already know suggests, nonetheless, that violence is quite likely to make the most disadvantaged sectors of society even more deprived.

#### 4.1. Who are the victims of violence in LAC?

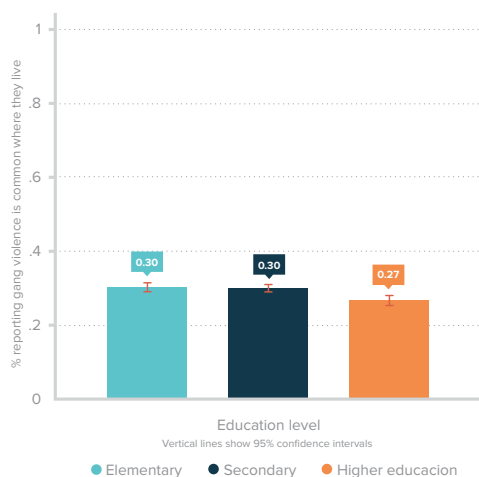
As in the rest of the world, most victims of homicide are young males. In 2008, the homicide rate among minors age 10 to 14 was around 2.8 per 100,000 inhabitants in LAC; among teenagers age 15 to 19, the rate was 31.1; and among young adults age 20 to 24, 48.2 (Chioda, 2017). Today, approximately half of all homicidal victims are between 15 and 29 years old (Muggah & Tobón, 2018). Yet, not all young men face the same risk of lethal violence. Geography matters tremendously: criminal violence is concentrated in the poor neighborhoods of cities and in rural areas with poor state presence and strong illicit economies (Alvarado et al., 2018; Briscoe, 2008; Yashar, 2018). Several studies also find that homicides tend to disproportionately affect the poor (Gaviria & Vélez, 2001; Soares, 2006). Ethnicity matters, too: although data are scarce, a few studies suggest that ethnic minorities in some countries are more likely to be victims of lethal violence. In Brazil, different data show that the black population is at a higher risk of being killed: in 2012, for example, the homicide rate among Afro-descendant youth age 12 to 29 in Brazil was 70.8 per 100,000 inhabitants, while, among their non-black or brown counterparts, it was 27.8 (ECLAC 2017).

Non-lethal violence is much harder to measure, as noted in Section 1. People may not report crimes to the police, and victimization surveys—the ideal source for many types of crime—are quite scarce. Some representative surveys ask respondents about their own experiences, but many ask instead about their perception of insecurity where they live. Although data on fear of crime and perceived insecurity are very important because they capture a relevant aspect of people's behavior and wellbeing, they are less useful in assessing how victimization varies across population groups because beliefs about insecurity do not always correlate with actual violent events (Rader, 2017). In what follows I rely on previous studies as well as available data to summarize what is known about the patterns of different types of victimization.

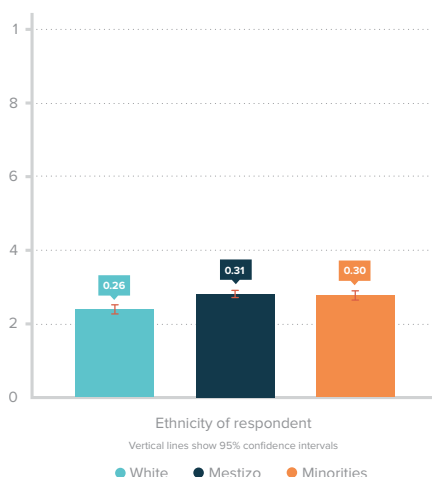
Starting with crime and delinquency, as Soares (2015, p. 129) notes, “the distributional impact of crime (...) is still understudied both in the determinants of crime and in the costs of crime literature.” Some evidence suggests, however, that the poor are more affected (Cullen & Levitt, 1999; Tella, Galiani, & Schargrodsky, 2010). Some studies find that specific crimes, like street robberies in Argentina (Tella et al., 2010), affect the rich and the poor equally. Other studies, however, find that crime usually affects rich and middle class households in larger cities (Gaviria & Pagés, 2002). According to a survey conducted by Latinobarometro in 2018, people with elementary or secondary education were more likely than those with higher education to report living in a place where gang violence was one of the most frequent forms of violence, as

Figure 14 shows; likewise, persons who identify as black, indigenous, or other ethnic minorities were more likely to report prevalent gang violence in their place of residence than white respondents, as Figure 15 shows (these differences are statistically significant).

**Figure 14.** Gang violence that is perceived to be prevalent in the place of residence, by the educational attainment of respondents, 2018



**Figure 15.** Gang violence that is perceived to be prevalent in the place of residence, by the ethnicity of respondents, LAC, 2018



Source: Latinobarómetro

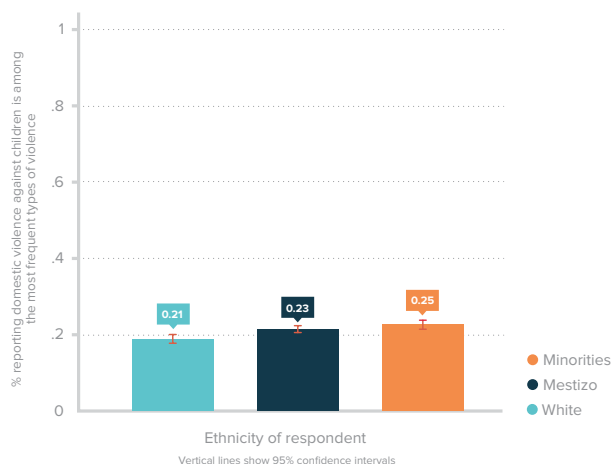
Regarding gender-based violence, although data are scarce, several sources suggest that victimization is more common among ethnic and sexual minorities than among the rest of the population. According to the CIDH, ethnic minorities and the LGBT community are at a higher risk of being killed (CIDH, 2015). The CIDH also reports that the average life expectancy of transsexual women in Latin America is 35 years, and many of them are victims of violence. In Uruguay, Afro-descendant women report a higher prevalence of all types of gender-based violence than women of other ethnicities, and, in Ecuador, indigenous and black women endure higher levels of gender-based violence (ECLAC 2018). In Brazil, while homicides of non-black or brown women decreased between 2003 and 2013 by 9.8%, homicides of Afro-descendent women increased by 54.2% (ibid). In 2017, 66% of all female victims of homicide in Brazil were black or brown (Cerqueira et al., 2019), although only approximately 51% of the population is of these ethnicities, according to the 2010 census.

Studies have found that women who are poor are more likely to experience domestic violence than non-poor women in Nicaragua (Ellsberg, Peña, Herrera, Liljestrand, & Winkvist, 2000), Chile, (Larrain, 1993), Colombia, Haiti (Flake & Forste, 2006), and Barbados (Barbados Statistical Service, 2012). However, other studies have not found a positive relationship in Nicaragua, Peru, and Dominican Republic (Flake & Forste, 2006). In the 2018 Latinobarometro survey, members of ethnic minorities were slightly more likely to report domestic violence as one of the most frequent forms of violence in their place of residence. According to the CIDH, LGBT women who are poor are more likely to be victims of police harassment and, as a consequence, exhibit higher rates of imprisonment (CIDH, 2015).

Data on the prevalence of violence against children in different sectors of the population are even more difficult to find. The 2018 Latinobarometro survey found some differences in

respondents' perceptions of how frequent domestic violence against children was in their places of residence. As Figure 16 shows, ethnic minorities and mestizos are more likely to report domestic violence against children as one of the most frequent forms of violence in their communities than white people are (the difference is statistically significant).

**Figure 16.** Domestic violence against children that is perceived to be prevalent in the place of residence, by the ethnicity of respondents, 2018



Source: Latinobarómetro

Another important context where the victimization of children occurs is in places where gangs and other types of armed actors operate. Although data on participation in these groups are very difficult to find, the large literature on organized crime and non-state armed groups suggests that, in LAC, low-income youth are much more likely to live in places where violent groups are present and therefore more likely to join them (Rodgers & Baird, 2015). This means that low-income minors are more likely to be exposed to and partake in violence perpetrated by non-state armed organizations.

Turning to the victims of political violence, violence against social leaders tends to disproportionately affect low-income people and ethnic minorities. These leaders are often involved in activism to defend indigenous rights, land distribution, and environmental justice and tend to represent vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. In Colombia, they are often also involved in efforts to advance the implementation of the peace accord between the government and the FARC. Data from the Colombian NGO Somos Defensores show that most assassinated leaders between 2017 and 2019 were black, indigenous, peasants, or representatives of labor unions (International Crisis Group, 2020). In Brazil, most social leaders who have been assassinated were members of peasant communities mobilizing for land and public services or indigenous people defending their territories and natural resources—all communities facing multiple forms of dispossession (Amnesty International, 2016).

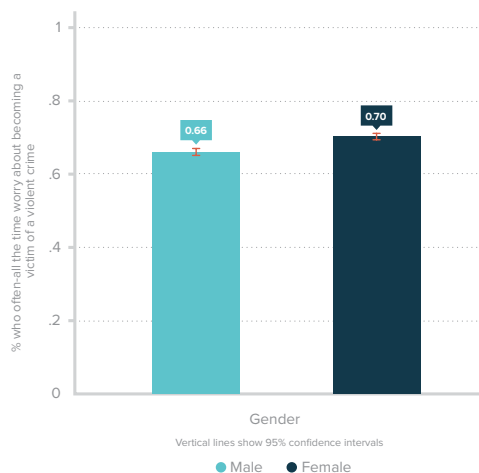
Violence in the two most recent civil wars in the region also disproportionately impacted disadvantaged sectors of the population. In Colombia, most forms of political violence have impacted rural populations more than their urban counterparts: throughout the war, armed actors concentrated their operations in rural areas, and most of the violence took place outside large cities (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013). In addition, guerrillas and paramilitaries recruited mostly low-income persons in areas where they operated, and many of them had already been victims of some form of violence prior to enlisting in an armed

group (Arjona & Kalyvas, 2012). In Peru, the proportion of victims living in rural areas and working in agricultural activities was much higher than among other sectors of the population (Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación del Perú, 2003).

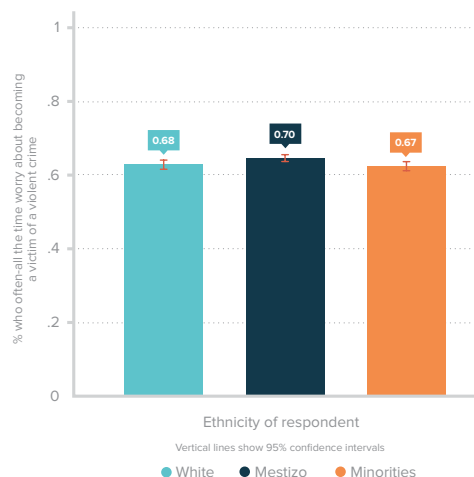
Finally, data on the profiles of victims of state violence are rare. However, available analyses suggest that disadvantaged sectors of the population are also over-represented among the victims of this type of violence. Several reports mention, for example, that the proportion of victims of police abuse among low-income persons (especially in slums in large cities) or ethnic minorities is higher than among the rest of the population in countries like Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Argentina (González, 2019). In Brazil, for example, 75% of citizens killed by state forces are black or brown (Wallace, 2020) even though black and brown people make up about 51% of the total population. Arbitrary detentions of young men as part of iron fist policies to reduce crime also disproportionately affect poor individuals and, in some countries, ethnic minorities. According to ECLAC (2017), black people in Latin America—especially youth—have a higher likelihood of being registered by the police on the street due to racial discrimination. They are also more likely to be arrested and imprisoned, and their penalties are more severe. It is also common for studies of violence by military forces to describe victims as coming from low-income communities; this is, for example, the case of various reports on the victims of the infamous “false positives” in Colombia (e.g., Verdad Abierta, 2015). Finally, the criminalization of protest seems to also disproportionately affect the poor (Doran, 2017; Lessa, 2011).

Yet, it is not only the actual occurrence of a violent event that affects people’s wellbeing: fear of victimization can also take a large toll on people, impacting their mental health, emotional responses, and life satisfaction, as a large literature shows.<sup>9</sup> Survey data from Latinobarómetro in 2018 suggest that some disadvantaged sectors of the population exhibit greater fear of crime. A higher percentage of women worry about being the victim of a crime compared with men (Figure 17). Although this difference is statistically significant. Although, mestizos are more likely to worry about being the victim of a crime than both white people and ethnic minorities this difference is not statistically significant. (Figure 18).

**Figure 17.** Fear of crime, by the sex of respondents, LAC, 2018



**Figure 18.** Fear of crime, by the ethnicity of respondents, LAC, 2018



Source: Latinobarómetro

<sup>9</sup> See Alfaro-Beracoechea, Puente, Da Costa, Ruvalcaba, and Páez (2018); Lorenc et al. (2012) for a review of studies on the impact of fear of crime on wellbeing.

In sum, individuals and communities who are already at a disadvantage—in terms of income, rights, access to social services, or political representation—face a higher risk of being the victim of most forms of violence. Indeed, all types of violence—robberies and kidnapping seem to be the only exception—tend to disproportionately impact poor individuals and communities, as well as geographical areas with precarious state presence. While men are much more likely to be victimized by strangers, women face a much higher risk of being victimized by people they know, especially their partners. In addition, in many countries in LAC, gender and ethnic minorities face greater risk of being victims of both lethal and non-lethal social violence than the rest of the population.

These patterns of the prevalence of violence imply that any negative effects violence has end up exacerbating inequality because they impact people who are already at a disadvantage. The following sections summarize the knowledge that various disciplines have accumulated about the impact of violence on key domains of human development. By linking those findings with the previous sections, I derive hypotheses on the impact of violence on various forms of inequality.

#### 4.2. The right to life, physical integrity, and freedom

Differences in the prevalence of criminal, political, and social violence are likely to translate into greater inequality in human development by undermining the right to life, physical integrity and freedom of sectors of the population that are already at a disadvantage.

*Violence can increase inequality by undermining the right to life and physical integrity of several underprivileged groups.* Every time a person is the victim of an act of violence, their basic right to physical integrity is undermined. Since both homicidal violence and social violence affect low-income persons and ethnic minorities more frequently, violence in LAC amplifies inequality by undermining the right to life of sectors of the population that are already at a disadvantage. In addition, because lethal criminal violence tends to happen in poor neighborhoods and rural areas with precarious state presence, the very occurrence of this violence exacerbates subnational inequality: communities that are economically disadvantaged and receive less from the state also face greater insecurity. In addition, because residents of these communities tend to lack the political influence of more affluent individuals, their concerns about safety often receive less attention from policy makers than those of wealthier members of society.

*Violence—and its threat—can increase inequality by undermining freedom among women and the poor.* People adapt their behavior in order to decrease the risk of being victimized, often in ways that constrain their choices (Lane, 2014; Liska, Sanchirico, & Reed, 1988; Rader, 2004). For example, a 2012 UNDP-LAPOP survey found that up to 65% of Latin Americans stopped going out at night due to insecurity, and 13% thought about moving elsewhere due to fear of crime. In some countries, a large proportion of the population limited the places of recreation they visit in order to avoid crime: almost 60% in Dominican Republic, 43% in El Salvador, and 40% in Mexico; even in the most secure countries the percentage is high: 20.6% in Chile and 21.7% in Panama (United Nations Development Programme, 2013).

Several moderators make this impact of violence and its threat more severe on the poor. Although all sectors of society adapt in some way their behavior to avoid violence, low-income persons have fewer options since they are less likely to be able to afford either services and goods that increase their protection or to move out of insecure neighborhoods. Data on 2012

show, for example, that throughout the region about half of all homicides occurred in the victim's home or neighborhood, and an additional 30% in the victim's municipality (Chioda, 2017). Likewise, Gaviria and Vélez (2001) find that, as a response to crime, households in the top quintile in Colombia often install anti-theft devices at home and hire private security personnel—all of which are out of reach of the poor. Private security has also been on the rise elsewhere in LAC (Ungar, 2007). This means that violence tends to have a greater impact on freedom among low-income people than among the rest of the population. In addition, since women tend to fear crime more than men do (see Section 4.1), they are more likely to lose part of their freedom than their male counterparts.

*Organized crime can increase inequality by subjecting vulnerable communities to authoritarian local regimes.* When people live under the rule of armed actors such as gangs, guerrillas, or drug trafficking organizations, their rights and freedoms can be violated. Although criminal and rebel governance usually entails the provision of certain public goods and the enforcement of norms of behavior that many residents support, it also entails regulations that violate basic rights and freedoms and harsh punishments for disobedience (Arias, 2017; Arjona, 2016). Living under the rule of these groups is often akin to living in a dictatorship—albeit, a subnational one (Arjona et al., 2020). Because in LAC poor communities and ethnic minorities are more likely to endure the presence of these armed organizations in their territory, the negative effects of criminal and rebel governance exacerbate inequality by violating the rights and freedoms of deprived populations.

Finally, *the responses of the state security apparatus to curb crime and political violence can also increase inequality by exacerbating feelings of insecurity and violating individual rights among low-income populations and ethnic minorities.* Because, as discussed in section 4.1, these actions tend to disproportionately affect poor individuals and ethnic minorities, they can widen the disparities between the well-off and the sectors of the population that are already at a disadvantage economically and politically.

### 4.3. Health, education, and income

Violence can impact health, education, and income through multiple mechanisms. Different types of violence often have distinct effects. Throughout the discussion, I refer to violence in general unless the effects are specific to particular forms of violence.

#### Health

*Violence leads to greater gender inequality by impacting women's physical and mental health.* A large literature has documented the direct effects of violence on health, especially among women and children. The effects of violence on women's mental health are severe. Depression is the most salient effect of IPV, and it can last for years after the abusive relationship is over. Other effects include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, and self-harm (Dillon, Hussain, Loxton, & Rahman, 2013). Several studies have also found that women with a history of IPV have lower levels of functional physical health, chronic pain, memory loss, problems with concentration, and increased risk of cervical cancer, among others (Dillon et al., 2013; García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005). Sexual violence—by either an intimate partner or someone else—causes psychological trauma, particularly PTSD and, to a lesser extent, depression.

Suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are also common (Jordan, Campbell, & Follingstad, 2010). Overall, violence against women has been associated with “most forms of major nonorganic mental distress and disorder” (Jordan et al., 2010). Sexual violence can also cause sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), unwanted pregnancies, rejection, and social condemnation. It can also cause injuries and, in some cases, death (Fearon & Hoeffler, 2014).

By directly affecting their physical and mental health, violence does not only undermine a central aspect of women’s wellbeing; it also puts them at an even greater disadvantage, as these illnesses interfere with their economic, social, and political lives, as discussed below. As has been well established, women in LAC face inequality in education, health, access to employment, and political participation (UN Women, 2015). Violence can exacerbate these inequalities by hindering women’s cognitive, emotional, and social skills.

*Violence widens the gap between privileged and underprivileged children by impacting their physical and mental health.* The large literature on the effects of violence on children (i.e. individuals under the age of 18) shows that they are also severely impacted. In fact, they are affected both physiologically and psychologically by violence against themselves and their parents, teachers, and communities (Molteno, Ogadhoh, Cain, & Crumpton, 1999). Several studies show that early experiences of violence can have irreparable impacts on the brain, affecting emotional regulation, memory, and attention (Arnsten, 2009; Teicher, 2002). Violence affects children’s mental health, with the strongest impact being PTSD symptoms, problem behaviors, and cognitive development (for a literature review, see Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltés, 2009; Sharkey, 2018). Even indirect exposure to violence can impact children’s mental health as well as their social behavior and emotional functioning (Fowler et al., 2009; McCoy, Roy, & Raver, 2016; Molano, Harker, & Cristancho, 2018).

When parents are the victims of violence, their children are also affected. A large body of work has shown that experiencing IPV before or during pregnancy can negatively affect a women’s health as well as that of her infant. In particular, victimized women are at higher risk of low birth weight and preterm birth (for a literature review, see Shah & Shah, 2010). Studies have also suggested that IPV can increase the risk of antenatal hospitalization (Lipsky, Holt, Easterling, & Critchlow, 2004) and maternal, perinatal, and infant mortality (Boy & Salihu, 2004). Violence can also impact child development when it affects the mental health of the mother. In addition, witnessing IPV as a child is associated with higher risks of becoming either a victim or perpetrator of IPV later in life (Hindin, Kishor, & Ansara, 2008). Because low-income as well ethnic minority children are at greater risk of most forms of violence, these negative effects are likely to widen the gap in human development between worse off and better off youth in society.

*Illicit mining can increase subnational inequality in health by causing environmental damage.* Illicit gold mining—as mentioned in section 3, a very common profiting activity of organized criminal groups in LAC—has negative effects on the environment that translate into poor health outcomes. Communities living near sites of illicit gold mining have a high risk of consuming water or fish with high levels of mercury or inhaling airborne mercury, which can translate into several health problems. The unborn children of women of childbearing age, for example, can suffer permanent brain damage as a result (Wagner, 2016). As the communities that live nearby sites of illicit mining already experience lower levels of development, the presence of this activity can increase the gap between them and the rest of the country.

*Political and criminal violence can increase inequality in health outcomes by disproportionately impacting populations living in areas where armed groups operate.* A large literature has documented the toll of civil war on both physical and mental health. Although only one



country has endured a civil war in LAC since 2000 (Colombia), many of the attributes of war zones can be found in the towns and neighborhoods where organized criminal groups fight for control and violence is pervasive (Kalyvas, 2015). The findings of this literature can, therefore, apply to several local territories in LAC countries affected by organized crime or having a history of civil war.

In addition to the death toll and injuries, civil war often increases the prevalence of PTSD (Collier, Lani, Hoeffler, Reynal-Querol, & Sambanis, 2003). Moreover, civil war affects public health even in the post-conflict period and disproportionately affects women and children (Ghobarah, Huth, & Russett, 2003; Iqbal, 2006). Refugees from the Guatemalan civil war, for example, continued to exhibit mental health problems twenty years after settling in Mexico (Sabin, Cardozo, Nackerud, Kaiser, & Varese, 2003). Likewise, individuals who experienced violence during the civil war in Peru exhibited long-term mental health problems, especially PTSD, anxiety, and depressive disorders (Tremblay, Pedersen, & Errazuriz, 2009). A vast literature on the mental health of IDPs and refugees has also documented the negative impact of enduring violence and migration. Refugees have higher rates of mood disorders, psychotic illness, and PTSD than non-migrant, resident populations (Porter & Haslam, 2005; Steel et al., 2009). Despite fleeing criminal rather than political violence, Central American migrants exhibit similar mental health problems (Cone & Bonacasa, 2017).

Overall, violence can have direct and indirect effects on health. Because, in LAC, violence impacts disadvantaged sectors of society more than the rest of the population, it amplifies inequality in physical and mental health—a critical component of human development. The effects on inequality are even more pronounced when, due to their economic situation, their place of residence, or both, disadvantaged persons lack access to adequate health care. This is not only the case for physical injuries but also for mental health, as victims are likely to suffer for a longer period of time when they do not have access to treatment (Jordan et al., 2010).

## Education

*Violence increases the educational gap between privileged and deprived individuals and communities by impacting children and youth.* Violence affects the education outcomes of victims as well as their relatives. Violence can impact the development of the brain, affecting both cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Through these and other channels, violence affects children’s ability to learn and diminishes their academic performance (Burdick-Will et al., 2011; Molteno et al., 1999). In Mexico, for example, Jarillo, Magaloni, Franco, and Robles (2016) find that schools that were exposed to criminal violence had, on average, lower math test scores. Moreover, the effects are larger for schools located in poor urban settings and for secondary schools that endure the presence of gangs nearby. In Colombia, Cristancho et al. (2016) find that the occurrence of an homicide near a school four days before a standardized test significantly reduces students’ performance. Similarly, in Rio de Janeiro, Monteiro and Rocha (2017) find that students’ math test scores are lower in years when they are exposed to drug battles in their communities. In Peru, Leon (2012) finds that exposure to political violence negatively affected school attainment.

What is more, some studies find that violence leads to lower educational outcomes even long after the violent events have happened and even if the incident was not directly lived but rather heard about (Molano et al., 2018). In addition, by impacting the mental health of children and youth, violence can also undermine their education as different studies show that mental illness contributes to lower grades, higher absenteeism, and higher dropout rates (McLeod & Fettes, 2007).

*Violence can amplify inequality in the quality and accessibility of schools.* Violence can also impact schools in various ways that are detrimental to student learning. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, Monteiro and Rocha (2017) find that gang-related violence is associated with higher teacher absenteeism, principal turnover, and temporary school closings. When violence causes the actual destruction of schools or disrupts school systems, it also affects children's very opportunity to obtain an education (Molteno et al., 1999).

Violence can also affect education by discouraging students from attending school. For example, fear of violence at night can deter students from attending night school and continuing their education while working during the day. In El Salvador and Honduras, several institutions have had to close their night classes due to violence in the past years (La Prensa, 2013; Rivas & Ramírez, 2016). When getting to school requires crossing insecure neighborhoods, even attending school during the day can be dangerous. Stories of adolescent males being attacked or killed on their way to school because they have to cross blocks controlled by gangs abound (e.g., Grillo, 2016).

*Violence widens the gap in family support between privileged and underprivileged students.* As parents play a major role in the development of cognitive and socioemotional skills among youth, especially during early childhood, the victimization of adults affects their children. Parents' ability to engage in stimulating activities with their children and to provide for emotional nourishment is directly related to their mental resources. Feelings of scarcity and exposure to violence deplete those resources and lead the parents to make suboptimal decisions (Cuartas Ricaurte et al., 2016).

By creating barriers to access to education, negatively affecting child development and academic performance, and causing mental illness among those who are already at a disadvantage, violence can lead to greater levels of inequality. Since education is not only an end in and of itself but also a means to better life prospects, these effects transcend the sphere of education: they also affect job opportunities and income in the long run as discussed in the next section.

## Income

Violence can affect income inequality through its effects on individuals, localities, and countries. At the individual level, violence can jeopardize the earning prospects of disadvantaged individuals through multiple channels, thereby creating additional obstacles to the reduction of inequality. At the local level, violence can undermine local economies in places that are already at a disadvantage, condemning them to lower levels of economic growth. As discussed later in the paper, violence can also undermine the quality of local governance, affecting public goods provision and institutional quality; poor governance can, in turn, create additional barriers to local economic growth. Finally, violence can have macro-economic effects that disproportionately affect low-income populations.

Starting with individual income, *violence can widen the income gap by affecting labor market participation among the poor in various ways.* First, violence can impact physical and mental health. A deterioration in health can, in turn, affect labor outcomes. Second, violence can cause fear and anxiety that lead to modification behavior that impacts labor outcomes. For example, victims may experience a reduced sense of freedom or the need to change certain behaviors to avoid being victimized, and these concerns can prevent them from pursuing additional education or seeking specific job opportunities. Third, the negative effects of violence on educational attainment and cognitive development discussed above

can translate into worse labor market outcomes. Fourth, the impact of violence on non-cognitive skills can also translate into lower life earnings and less labor market participation (Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne, 2001; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001; Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Murnane, Willett, Braatz, & Duhaldeborde, 2001).

Although few studies have identified the causal effect of violent crime on labor market outcomes, some findings suggest a negative impact. A study on Mexico finds that homicides lead to a decline in the number of worked hours (BenYishay & Pearlman, 2013). A recent study on the Netherlands finds that being a victim of an assault is associated with a decrease in earnings of more than 9% the following year (Bindler & Ketel, 2019). These findings suggest that all the forms of violence that disproportionately affect sectors of the population that are already at an economic disadvantage contribute to economic inequality.

*Violence can amplify disparities between men and women in the labor market.* The literature on the effects of IPV on victims' labor market participation has mixed findings. Some studies suggest that victimized women are more likely to be employed, while others conclude that victimization increases the likelihood of job loss. Studies on the effects of earnings are also inconclusive.<sup>10</sup> However, the findings on the effects of IPV on productivity suggest that victims are more likely to report "lower productivity, higher absenteeism rates, more frequent tardiness, and higher job turnover rates and job losses" (Swanberg et al., 2005, p. 294). Since women already face multiple inequalities in the labor market, these findings suggest that violence against women deepens this type of gender inequality. Moreover, since low-income women are disproportionately affected by IPV, these results indicate that this type of victimization amplifies economic inequality.

*When violence triggers migration, it can also exacerbate income inequality.* Migrants, IDPs, and refugees often face more difficulties in finding work, which dims their prospects for improving their economic conditions. When those fleeing are the most disadvantaged, their hardship means that inequality is rising. Moreover, this disadvantage is likely to be long-lasting: Ibáñez and Moya (2010 p. 168) find that displaced households in Colombia become "locked into a low-level economic trajectory".

Turning to macro-level effects, the various bodies of work on the economic costs of crime, war, and social violence suggest that violence can negatively affect economic growth in multiple ways. These impacts, in turn, can disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged sectors of society.

To start, countries can spend substantial resources on the prevention of violence and crime as well as on punishment for perpetrators. These costs include expenses on defense (especially in countries struggling with organized political violence), policing, prevention programs, and punishment (which includes the costs of prosecution, prison, and rehabilitation). In addition, crime and violence can affect productivity, human and social capital, investments, savings, and the overall efficiency of the economy (Lederman, Loayza, & Menendez, 2002; Soares, 2015).

Several studies have concluded that violence is quite costly for societies and that it hinders not only economic growth but also human development more broadly (Aboal, Lanzilotta, Dominguez, & Vairo, 2016; Fearon & Hoeffler, 2014; Morrison et al., 2003; Skaperdas, 2011; Soares, 2015; United Nations, 2013). Studies in the 1990s estimated the cost of crime in LAC

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<sup>10</sup> See Swanberg, Logan, and Macke (2005) for a review.

at 14% of the annual gross domestic product (GDP) per year in the 1990s (Londoño, Guerrero, et al., 1999), 7.5% in 1995 (Bourguignon, 2000), and rates between 2.7% (Costa Rica) and 10% (El Salvador) in Central America (Acevedo, 2008). Londoño et al. (1999) estimated that, on average, the cost of crime (both violent and non-violent) in Latin American countries was as high as 14% of GDP. Most studies, however, do not consider intangible costs such as pain and suffering, the cost of living in fear, and dynamic economic costs (Fearon & Hoeffler, 2014).

More recent studies provide similar estimates. Fearon and Hoeffler (2014) calculate the average costs of homicide across countries in LAC at about 4.1% of national GDP. Jaitman et al. (2017) find that the direct and indirect costs of crime in LAC represent about 3% of GDP in the average country and more than 6% in the most violent Central American countries. Aboal et al. (2016) estimate the percentage of GDP that five Latin American countries spent on crime prevention and punishment in 2010 and found that it was 1.04% in Costa Rica, 1.21% in Chile, 2.27% in Uruguay, 2.53 in Honduras, and 2.45% in Paraguay. These costs include both private and public expenditures on safety and prevention. The authors also estimate the actual costs of victimization to be 1.18% of GDP in Uruguay, 1.47% in Costa Rica, 2.11% in Chile, 6.36% in Paraguay, and an alarming 8.01% in Honduras. These costs include health costs due to homicide and injuries, losses due to property crime (i.e. the value of stolen property), corruption, and public expenditure on prosecution, prison services, and rehabilitation. In Jamaica, the World Bank (2003) estimates that costs related to medical expenses, lost productivity, and public expenditures on security add up to 3.7% of yearly production.

Other studies have focused on estimating the cost of civil war. These analyses are not as useful for LAC in this millennium, since all internal armed conflicts ended in the 20th century, except the one in Colombia. However, given that violence in some countries in LAC has reached levels similar to those of civil wars and that local communities often face similar challenges in civil wars and criminal wars, this literature can be informative.

Estimates of the cost of civil war vary substantially. For Nicaragua, for example, Fitzgerald and Grigsby (2011) have estimated that the cumulative total economic damages between 1987 and 1989 were equal to about one year's GDP. Collier et al. (1999) estimated the decrease in per capita GDP due to civil war worldwide at around 2%. Other studies estimate that civil war reduces economic growth by 3.4% (Stewart, Huang, & Wang, 2011) and 6% (Cerra & Saxena, 2008).

*The macro-economic costs of violence can translate into greater income inequality.* These different costs of violence to the national economy could increase inequality if they prevent the country from investing in policies that would, if implemented, reduce inequality. Although the efficacy of policies to reduce inequality is highly debated in economics, several studies suggest that labor institutions (Calderón & Chong, 2009; Checchi & García-Peñalosa, 2010; Chong & Gradstein, 2007), welfare systems, and taxation (Doerrenberg & Peichl, 2014) are important determinants of inequality (Stiglitz, 2016). Insofar as lower levels of economic growth prevent governments from investing in institutional reform and welfare, violence can contribute to the perpetuation of inequality. In addition, the distortions that violence creates in public and private resource allocation can also contribute to the persistence of inequality.

*Violence can prevent the reduction of inequality from becoming a priority for the country.* High levels of violence—whether political or criminal—often make curbing insecurity the top priority of citizens. In many countries in LAC, insecurity has been one of the top concerns of the population for years. According to LAPOP data, for example, in 2014 one in every three Latin Americans considered crime as their country's principal problem. The question on how to reduce violence therefore often dominates public debates, political campaigns, and government plans, thereby rendering other matters—like inequality—less urgent. Research

on developed democracies has found that fear of crime often leads to a higher demand for redistribution through welfare policies that are expected to reduce crime (Altamirano, Berens, & Ley, 2020). In LAC, however, the opposite seems to be the case. A few recent studies suggest that fear of violence correlates with weaker preferences for redistribution. Flores-Macías and Sánchez-Talanquer (2020) find that, in Mexico, individuals are less willing to pay taxes when public safety declines; moreover, relying on survey data on 24 countries, Altamirano et al. (2020) find that fear of crime reduces the support for welfare policies, although they also find that victims become *more* supportive of such redistributive efforts. The authors conclude that “the spread of negative perceptions of insecurity as a result of growing criminal violence limits the possible expansion of the Latin American and Caribbean welfare state, despite the growing needs that victims of crime face as a result of their direct exposure to violence” (p. 391).

It is also possible that violence makes it easier for elites to preserve the distributional status quo, as several scholars have argued for the Colombian case. On one hand, violence has contributed to the political exclusion of large sectors of the population, who, in turn, cannot mobilize to make demands for greater equality through the democratic process (Dudley, 2004; García-Montoya, 2016; López et al., 2010; Robinson, 2013; Romero, 2003; Saffon, 2021; Steele & Schubiger, 2018). On the other hand, elites have tolerated, facilitated, and participated in violence, intervening in resolute ways only when the violence threatens the status quo—that is, the balance of power between the center and periphery or the distribution of economic and political power at the local level (e.g., Carroll, 2011; García-Montoya, 2016; Robinson, 2013; Saffon, 2021; Gutiérrez-Sanín et al., 2007). Under this view, violence is one of the pillars of a perverse equilibrium that preserves inequality.

*Violence can increase subnational economic inequality.* Different studies find that violence can negatively affect the local economy of subnational units in various ways. Gutiérrez-Romero and Oviedo (2017) find that localities affected by drug-related violence in Mexico experienced a decline in production, profits, salaries, and the number of businesses and workers in manufacturing, as well as an increase in unemployment and poverty. Rondon, Andrade, et al. (2003) estimate that the cost of crime in the Brazilian cities of Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro were 5% and 4% of yearly production, respectively.

The negative effects of violence on local economies can be an important driver of subnational inequality, especially when it comes to rural communities. When violence spikes in rural areas that already have lower economic growth and under-performing institutions, the impact on the local economy can further deteriorate the economic wellbeing of the population, deepening the gap between the locality and the rest of the country.

#### 4.4. Political participation, social capital, and democracy

Violence can undermine individuals’ political engagement as well as social capital and the quality of democracy in their communities. Because most types of violence disproportionately affect the worse off members of society, these effects amplify various forms of inequality.

*Violence can raise inequality by decreasing political participation among disadvantaged populations.* A growing literature has studied the effects of violence on individuals’ decision to participate in politics by voting, joining organizations, and signing petitions, among other activities. Several studies find that, in the aftermath of war, victims of violence tend to participate more than non-victims (for a review, see Bauer et al., 2016). Some studies also find

that victims of crime tend to engage more in various forms of political participation (Bateson, 2012). Post-traumatic growth and the expressive value of participation are hypothesized to explain why victims become more active citizens.

Several studies that focus on contexts of chronic violence find, however, that victims tend to withdraw from politics. Studies of participation during wartime, as opposed to the aftermath, find that victims tend to participate less (Acemoglu, Robinson, & Santos, 2013; Arjona et al., 2020; Gallego, 2018). Likewise, studies of participation in contexts where criminal violence is very high, like Mexico, also find that victims tend to withdraw from political life (Ley, 2018; Trelles & Carreras, 2012). A recent comparative study on countries in LAC finds that, while non-violent crime does increase political participation, violent crime has the opposite effect (Berens & Dallendörfer, 2019). The very presence of gangs that control local territories can undermine political participation, even among those who have not been directly victimized, as a study on El Salvador shows (Córdova, 2019). Moreover, several studies have documented instances where illegal armed groups have intimidated or mobilized citizens to vote for a particular candidate (Arias, 2017; Arjona, 2016; Jaffe, 2013).

Although these mixed findings do not allow clear conclusions to be drawn about how violence affects political participation in LAC, most studies that focus on participation when violence is prevalent—as opposed to in the aftermath of war or in contexts where violence is not pervasive—conclude that victims are less likely to vote and engage in other forms of political participation. When these impacts disproportionately affect disadvantaged members of society, they imply that the gap in political influence between low-income persons, ethnic minorities, and residents of deprived communities, on the one hand, and the better off of society, on the other, is growing.

*Violence can amplify subnational inequality by reducing the quality of democracy and the rule of law in deprived localities.* A large body of work has found that crime erodes citizen support for democracy, institutions, and the rule of law in LAC (Blanco & Ruiz, 2013; Carreras, 2013; Ceobanu, Wood, & Ribeiro, 2011; Estrada, Coronel, & Coordinator, 2006; Fernandez & Kuenzi, 2010; Holland, 2013; Krause, 2014; Malone, 2010; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009; Pérez, 2003; Salinas & Booth, 2011; Visconti, 2019). These effects imply that, in contexts where violence is higher in regions or localities that have under-performing state institutions, lower levels of economic development, or both, under-privileged populations are less likely to demand that politicians uphold democratic values and the rule of law. Iron fist policies, which, as these studies show, have been invoked in many countries to curb crime and are widely supported by those who fear crime, undermine democracy, go against the rule of law, and often lead to the violation of human rights.

In addition, political elites can exploit crime to justify authoritarian security measures as well as to avoid addressing structural conditions that facilitate crime (Chevigny, 2003; Soares & Naritomi, 2010). The prevalence of iron fist policies in LAC’s recent history (Muggah, 2019) is certainly bad news for democracy in the region. Because violence tends to afflict vulnerable communities more often than privileged ones, these findings imply that violence broadens subnational inequality by subjecting deprived localities to lower levels of democracy and rule of law.

*Violence can increase inequality by undermining the quality of political representation in vulnerable communities.* In several countries in LAC, violence does not only affect political participation but also the supply side of democracy (Arjona et al., 2020). When armed groups interfere in elections in the various ways described in Section 3, they undermine democracy. These practices have been found to reduce political competition—i.e. the number of candidates running for office (Gallego, 2018; Ponce, 2019)—which is a crucial pillar of democracy. They can

also sow distrust in democracy and local governments. As Albarracín (2018, p. 559) notes, “When criminal-political alliances use violence to intimidate voters or political rivals, elections are no longer mechanisms of accountability or leadership selection. Election results reflect more a capacity to inflict physical harm than the preferences of the electorate.” Violence therefore undermines the democratic rights and political representation of poor and marginalized local communities. This is also important because, insofar as electing the right officials matters for public goods provision and the quality of governance—and research suggests that it does—then the activities of illegal organizations can also perpetuate inequality by holding local governments back. I return to this point in the next section.

*Violence can ultimately slow the process of political inclusion and democratic consolidation in LAC, thereby increasing inequality.* Taken together, the studies mentioned above suggest that violence can undermine political participation as well as citizen support for democracy and the rule of law, all of which translates into weak political representation, poor democracy, and the violation of citizens’ rights. These findings suggest that, as a whole, LAC countries that experience high levels of violence may experience lower levels of political development and democratic consolidation. These effects can increase inequality because they slow the process of real political inclusion in the region: while traditional elites continue to have more political influence, the worse off members of society become less inclined to participate and less demanding of democracy and the rule of law. In addition, lower levels of rule of law tend to translate into greater violations of the rights of the poor.

*Violence can erode social capital in underprivileged communities, which in turn leads to greater economic, social, and political inequality.* The growing literature on the effects of violence on pro-social behavior has found that civil war violence can increase trust and cooperation among in-group members, but can also decrease both among out-group members.<sup>11</sup> Little is known, however, about the effects of *criminal* violence on pro-social behavior. A recent study on Mexico found that exposure to violence reduces trust in civic institutions but strengthens kinship relationships (Nasir, Rockmore, Tan, et al., 2016). These findings suggest that, as with political violence, criminal violence may erode social capital while increasing in-group (in this case, family) ties. We also know that exposure to violence in children has been linked to lower empathy, difficulties in emotional regulation, and higher avoidant behavior (Arnsten, 2009; Velásquez et al., 2015; Chaux 2012; Molano et al. 2018). Some studies have also found that exposure to violence makes youth more likely to justify the use of violence and less likely to react peacefully to provocations by peers (Harker et al. 2017). These findings suggest that social cooperation can become more difficult in the aftermath of violence.

Although the causal effect of social capital on economic growth has been debated, a large literature has argued that higher levels of social trust are associated with better economic performance and higher political efficiency due to lower transaction costs and higher levels of collective action, among others (Fukuyama, 1995; Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote, 2002; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994). The consolidation of organized crime can also create “perverse social capital” (Rubio, 1997), whereby dense criminal networks facilitate the participation of community members in illicit activities. When violence has any of these effects on local communities, it further undermines economic and political development in populations that are already worse off, thereby deepening subnational inequality.

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<sup>11</sup> See Bauer et al. (2016) for a review.

#### 4.5. The quality of local governance

One of the most consequential types of inequality in LAC, as in many parts of the world, is subnational inequality. Consider this example from Colombia: “A mother in the municipality of Apia (Risaralda) has a higher chance of dying after birth than a mother in the war-torn Central African Republic. But less than 60 kilometers away, in Pereira (Risaralda), a mother’s chances of surviving labor are similar to those in Uruguay” (Otero-Bahamón, 2020, p.94). Similar subnational inequalities exist in other health and educational outcomes.

Because where people live within a country can have such a dramatic effect on their wellbeing, the impact of violence on local governments can be a crucial channel by which violence amplifies inequality. As O’Donnell (1993) famously claimed, the uneven presence of the state within Latin American countries creates profound inequalities in governance that undermine development in marginalized communities. Although this is one of the least researched effects of violence, there are many channels by which the presence and activities of violent organizations can undermine the quality of local governance.

*Violence can increase subnational inequality in the quality of local governance by undermining the democratic process.* Since armed actors interfere in the democratic process, they can influence election results. When they veto candidates or ally with them, mobilize or coerce voters, and intervene in elections in other ways, these localities can end up with worse politicians. In addition, violence and the involvement of armed actors in politics can make it less likely that skilled and honest politicians run for office in the first place (Arjona et al., 2020). As a large literature shows, who governs matters: competent and honest politicians are more likely to bring about good governance and desirable economic and political outcomes (Alesina, 1988; Besley, 2006). If the activities of armed actors make it less likely that “good” politicians win elections, these localities can end up with worse local governance.

*Violence can increase subnational inequality by directly undermining the capacity and quality of local governments in vulnerable communities.* Violence can also disrupt local governments either because they have to react to the consequences of violence, or because they are directly affected by it. As mentioned in a previous section of the paper, violence against politicians is common in some of the most violent countries of the region. Political assassination can negatively affect local governments by impacting the performance of politicians and bureaucrats. Violence can also erode citizen trust in the democratic process and the demands of citizens for transparency and accountability. Arjona et al. (2020) find that, indeed, violence against politicians in Colombia has undermined local government transparency, accountability, and service provision.

Another channel by which violence can negatively affect public goods provision is via spending capacity: when violence negatively affects local economic growth, it also affects the fiscal capacity of local governments, which, in turn, can reduce spending on public goods.

Finally, the different types of criminal, political, and social violence discussed in the third section of the paper can undermine citizen trust in the police and the justice system. This lack of trust can, in turn, increase the likelihood of extra-legal practices like vigilantism while undermining human rights, local governance, and local democracy (United Nations Development Programme, 2013).

To be sure, these effects are plausible but few studies have investigated them empirically. If violence does impact local governance and public goods provision through these different channels, this can be a critical mechanism by which it exacerbates subnational inequality. If organized criminal groups undermine local governance and public goods provision in slums and poor rural areas, the gap between these communities and the rest of the country is likely to grow.



## 5. Conclusion

Violence has pervasive consequences on individuals and communities. Disparities in the likelihood of victimization as well as in the context in which victims cope mean that such effects are more likely to impact some members of society more than others. This paper reviews several bodies of work to derive hypotheses on the potential effects of different forms of violence on inequality in LAC.

The first conclusion is not new to the region: more data on different kinds of victimization are needed. Only a few countries routinely conduct victimization surveys; there is a generalized lack of information on some forms of violence throughout the region; and there are few sources on the overall situation of a few countries, especially in the Caribbean. Given the region's chronic levels of violence and the many implications this can have on human development, collecting more and better data is a priority. It would also be helpful to devise a classification scheme for LAC countries depending on the severity of social, political, and criminal violence they endure. Such a scheme would facilitate research on the links between different types of violence as well as their legacies; it would also facilitate discussions about priorities across countries and across policy debates.

Second, relying on available evidence on the prevalence of different forms of violence, the paper shows that violence in LAC tends to disproportionately affect sectors of the population that are already at a disadvantage: it is the poor (especially young men), women, LGBT, and ethnic minorities—all of whom face various disadvantages—who are at a higher risk of being victimized and, in some cases, of living in communities deeply affected by violence. These patterns imply that any effects violence has on human development are disproportionately impacting the worse off members of society, thereby amplifying multiple forms of inequality.

Third, based on different bodies of work on the dynamics and effects of violence, the paper identifies the potential channels through which violence can increase interpersonal inequality in security, basic human rights, health, income, education, and political representation as well as in subnational inequality in economic growth, democracy, and local governance. Yet, it is possible that the impact of violence on inequality is even greater than the previous sections suggest, for three reasons. To begin, most research on the effects of violence considers only primary and secondary exposure to violence—that is, being the victim of violence or witnessing it. Yet, living in contexts where violence is prevalent, regardless of whether an individual experiences or witnesses it, is also likely to have pervasive effects (Sharkey, 2018). Investigating these indirect effects of violence would likely uncover additional impacts on inequality. In addition, in many cases, violence interacts with other stressors and difficulties at home or in the community, which can amplify its effects. To the extent that such moderators are more prevalent among underprivileged individuals, violence is likely to have a greater impact on those who are already worse off. And finally, some forms of violence can increase the likelihood of other types of violence or amplify their effects. Children who witness IPV at home, for instance, are more likely to experience violent crime outside the household (Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2001) as well as to become perpetrators as adults (Cunningham, McGinnis, Verdú, Tesliuc, & Verner, 2008). Displaced women are more likely to be victims of IPV (Rothkegel et al., 2008; Szczepanikova, 2005). If some types of victimization can increase the likelihood of other violent events, or amplify their impact on individuals or communities, the gap between victims and non-victims is likely to be even larger.

To be sure, assessing whether and to what extent violence amplifies these different types of inequalities requires new research. The hypotheses presented in this paper are by no

means comprehensive. More research is needed to theorize when these and other effects materialize, how they interact with each other, what factors are important moderators, and how long the impacts last. However, the analysis presented in this paper suggests that, given what we already know about the dynamics and effects of violence, violence may be critical to the perpetuation of inequality. Specialists on Latin America have long researched the impact of inequality on violence; it is time for a research agenda on the role that violence plays in the persistence of inequality in the region.

The policy implications of this research are particularly important at a time when inequality and poverty are expected to rise in LAC due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. While many scholars and policy makers recognize that reducing violence is a priority because it is a critical obstacle to development (United Nations, 2020), the quest to decrease violence in LAC may also be a necessary step towards achieving more equality in the region.

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