

Risk and Resilience

UNDERSTANDING THE POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE

Understanding why violence occurs, who commits violent acts, and who is at risk of victimization is at the core of violence prevention. These factors paint a picture of perpetrators, victims, means, and types of violence in a community, which in turn enables communities to design interventions to target those committing violence and to protect the most vulnerable. At the centre of this targeting approach is the identification of risk factors for violence.

The chapter examines what is known about risk factors for violence and how they influence the probability of individuals becoming offenders or victims. After providing an overview of risk, it identifies a number of significant risk factors, explains how these factors can be identified in practice, and then describes how these factors can be used to design effective violence reduction programmes. The main conclusions include:

- The greater the number of extant risk factors, the higher the risk of an individual engaging in violence or becoming a victim of violence.
- Despite being at risk, many individuals in high-risk groups will never commit violent acts. It remains impossible to predict whether or when a particular individual will commit an act of violence.
- Important risk factors for violence change over the course of an individual's lifetime.
- The availability of firearms, the lack of regulation of firearm possession and use, the carrying of firearms in public places, the presence of guns in the home, and improper storage of these firearms are all important factors increasing the risk of gun violence.
- Diverse settings represent different combinations of risk factors. Knowledge of community characteristics and dynamics provides guidelines for targeting interventions.



A student in Salt Lake City displays his Glock 9 mm semi-automatic handgun on the University of Utah campus in April 2007. 'I want to be prepared,' said the student, who has a concealed weapons permit and carries the gun everywhere but church. © Douglas C. Pizac/AP Photo

Table 8.8 WHO identifies 'top ten' violence prevention strategies

Increase safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between children and their parents and caretakers
Reduce availability and misuse of alcohol
Reduce access to lethal means
Improve life skills and enhance opportunities for children and youth
Promote gender equality and empower women
Change cultural norms that support violence
Improve criminal justice systems
Improve social welfare systems
Reduce social distance between conflicting groups
Reduce economic inequality and concentrated poverty

Source: WHO (2008, p. 27)

While the presence of general risk factors increases the likelihood of violence, different types of violence appear to exhibit some unique risk factors. Important in cases of domestic violence are the monitoring capacity of the community in which the domestic violence takes place and a community norm that recognizes partner violence as deviant. The presence of gangs in the neighbourhood, having an older sibling who is in a gang, feeling unsafe at school or in the neighbourhood, and a lack of economic opportunities are important predictors of gang membership. Substance abuse, associating with delinquent peers, and school bullying contribute to youth violence.

Different types of violence exhibit unique risk factors.

Despite increasing knowledge about risk factors for violence, a number of important issues remain unresolved. There is little understanding of why violent offenders stop offending. More attention needs to be paid to the concept of resilience and understanding the factors that contribute to individuals maintaining a positive developmental trajectory in the face of extreme adversity. Another important step forward is the ranking of risk factors. If the most important risk factors can be identified, then practitioners will know where to focus their attention, efforts, and resources.

An important aspect of future research will be generating local knowledge about risk and resilience factors for designing community-based interventions. Targeting interventions to local circumstances is essential to avoid basing programming on best guesses, common stereotypes, and media images of violence that can be sensational and misleading, if not outright inaccurate. Basing interventions on such stereotypes leads to poor policy and ineffective programming. See the World Health Organization's list of best violence prevention strategies in Table 8.8. 📄