

The Children's Reporter

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VIOLENT DISCIPLINE

Read on page 14



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VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

READ THE CALL-TO-ACTION: page 40

NEW DATA & SOLUTIONS!

Every child and adolescent has the right to grow up free from fear, neglect and violence!

- Armed Violence & Homicide page 8
- Sexual Violence page 22
- Bullying page 30
- Online Violence page 34



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Violence against Children and Adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean: New data and solutions

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FOREWORD

Every child and adolescent has the right to grow up free from fear, neglect and violence. Yet across Latin America and the Caribbean, far too many still face violence in their homes, schools, communities and online. These acts are not isolated. They are part of a wider pattern that harms children, families and societies — eroding trust, learning, health and opportunity.

This report, produced by UNICEF and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), shines a light on the realities children and adolescents face in our region today. It brings together the latest data on armed violence, violent discipline, sexual violence, bullying and online harms — and highlights proven solutions that are already making a difference.

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, communities, governments and organizations are showing that change is possible. Strong laws, evidence-based prevention programmes, better data, and coordinated action between health, education, justice and protection systems are helping to break the cycle of violence and give every child a fair chance to thrive.

We know what works. The evidence is clear. What's needed now is the courage and commitment to put these solutions into action — everywhere, for every child and adolescent.



Contents

1. Introduction	6
Understanding violence against children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean.....	6
2. Armed violence & homicide	8
Armed violence and homicide in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show.....	8
What works to reduce armed violence and homicide?.....	10
3. Violent discipline	14
Violent discipline in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show.....	15
What works to reduce violent discipline?.....	18
4. Sexual violence	22
Sexual violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show.....	22
What works to reduce sexual violence?.....	25
5. Bullying	30
Bullying in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show.....	30
What works to reduce bullying?.....	32
6. Online violence	34
Online violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show.....	34
What works to reduce online violence?.....	35
7. Call to action	40
Endnotes	42

Figures

Figure 1: Five forms of violence against children and adolescents.....	7
Figure 2: Young victims of homicide by age and sex, rate per 100,000 population, 2018–2022.....	9
Figure 3: Child victims of homicide by age and sex, 2015–2022.....	9
Figure 4: Children and adolescents arrested or suspected of intentional homicide, 2015–2022.....	10
Figure 5: Percentage of children and adolescents aged 1–14 experiencing various forms of violent discipline.....	15
Figure 6: Percentage of children and adolescents aged 1–14 experiencing different types of violent discipline.....	16
Figure 7: Percentage of children and adolescents aged 2–14 who experienced any violent discipline by caregivers in the past month, according to disability status.....	16
Figure 8: Attitudes of caregivers of 2–14-year-olds versus children’s and adolescents’ experiences of violent discipline.....	17
Figure 9: Percentage of caregivers of 2–14-year-olds with and without functional difficulties who believe physical punishment is needed to raise a child or adolescent properly.....	18
Figure 10: Percentage of women aged 18–29 who experienced sexual violence before age 18.....	22
Figure 11: Percentage of ever-married/ever-partnered women aged 15 years and older who have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime and in the past 12 months, 2023, by Global Burden of Disease region.....	23
Figure 12: Femicide victims by age in the region.....	24
Figure 13: Percentage of adolescents aged 13–17 who reported being bullied at least once in the past 30 days.....	31
Figure 14: Most reported types of school-based bullying in the region.....	32
Figure 15: Percentage of children facing online offensive behaviour online.....	34

1. INTRODUCTION

Every day, millions of children and adolescents across Latin America and the Caribbean live with violence. Physical violence. Sexual violence. Psychological violence. A child or adolescent might be hit at home, bullied at school or harassed online – and often, it's not just one of these, but all of them at once. These are not isolated events. They pile up, overlap and leave deep wounds. Behind every number is a real person, scared and denied the chance to live a full life.

The damage doesn't stop with those directly hurt by violence. Millions more are affected in other ways: kids who can't play outside because their neighbourhoods aren't safe, families forced to leave everything behind because gangs have taken over their streets, children who can't walk to school without fear. Violence against children and adolescents isn't just about pain today – it follows them for life. It harms their health, their learning, their friendships and their future as adults.¹

None of this should be normal. Every child and adolescent has the right to feel safe and to be protected from violence.

This report shares the latest data on how children and adolescents in our region are being harmed – with a focus on armed violence, violent discipline, sexual abuse, bullying and online violence. These five forms of violence are pressing examples of why action is urgently needed – but, sadly, they are not the only forms of violence affecting children and adolescents in the region.

The report also shows something just as important: solutions. Concrete actions, designed and tested right here in Latin America and the Caribbean that are already protecting children and adolescents and changing lives.

We know what works. We have the tools. What's needed now is the investment and courage to make it happen.



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Understanding violence against children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean

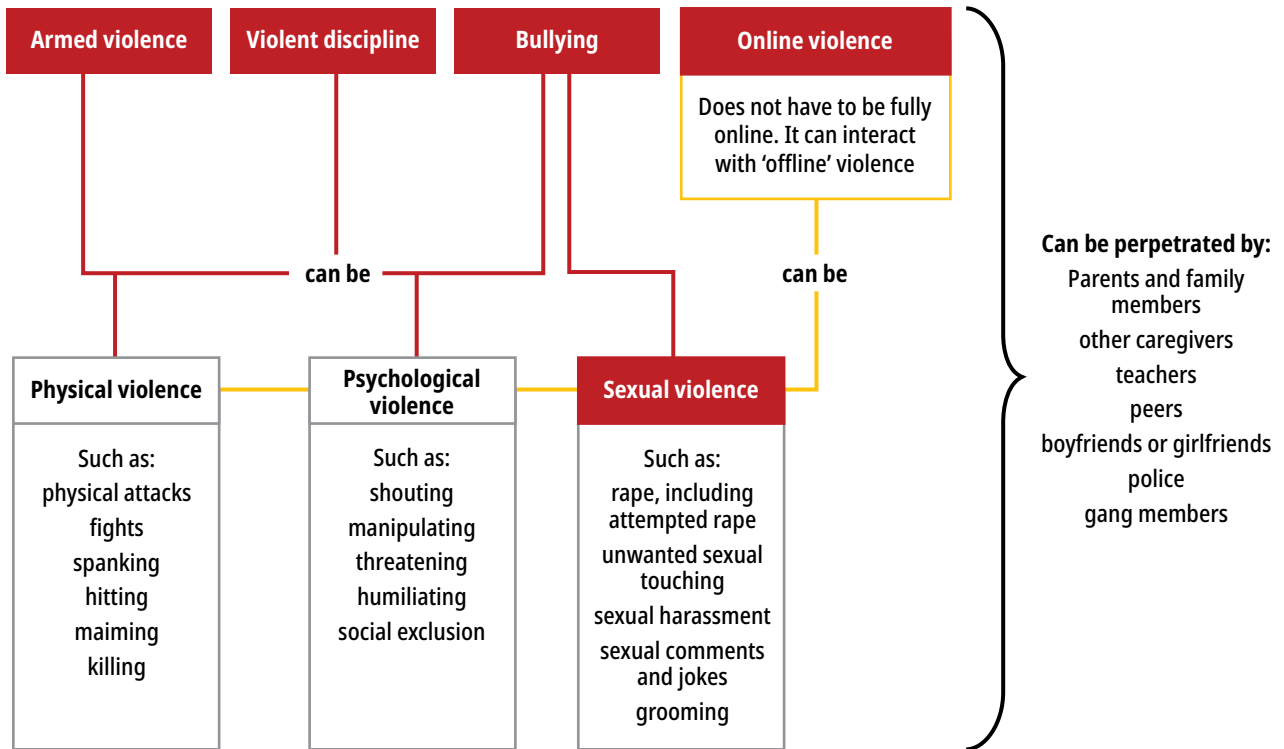
Violence against children and adolescents includes physical, psychological and sexual abuse. These forms of abuse can happen in many ways – for example, as armed violence, violent discipline, bullying and online violence – and children and adolescents can be at risk of multiple forms of violence at the same time (see Figure 1).²

Violence against children and adolescents doesn't happen for just one reason. It is often tied to deep problems in society – like poverty, unfair treatment based on age, race or gender, weak systems meant to protect children, and crime or conflict. Because of this, not all children and adolescents face the same level of risk of being abused and certain groups are often more vulnerable.³

The people who commit violence against children are often those close to them: parents, family members, teachers, caregivers, friends or boyfriends/girlfriends. But it is not always someone they know: violence can also come from police officers or members of gangs and organized crime.

Violence does not harm children and adolescents for a day, but for their entire lifetime. It can lead to physical and mental health problems, make it hard for them to learn, or lead to behaviour problems. Being abused (or witnessing abuse) young also increases children's and adolescents' risk of experiencing violence later in life. This can create a cycle of violence, one that affects the next generation too.⁴

Figure 1: Five forms of violence against children and adolescents



Children and adolescents are more at risk if they:

live in poverty, are in areas exposed to organised crime and gangs, do not have digital literacy skills, live in households with other forms of violence and experience multiple forms of discrimination



2. ARMED VIOLENCE & HOMICIDE

DEFINITION

ARMED VIOLENCE is the intentional, threatened or actual use of arms to inflict death, injury and/or psychosocial harm to an individual or group of people.⁵ Children and adolescents can be both victims and perpetrators of armed violence.

Armed violence is increasing in some areas of the region. This increase is being driven by a mix of serious issues – like growing gaps between rich and poor, fewer safe public spaces, illegal trade, harmful ideas about gender, organized crime and poor control over weapons.

Children as young as 10 – and sometimes just 6 or 7 – are recruited into gangs and used as lookouts and drug couriers, or to carry weapons.⁶ As they grow older, the roles become even more dangerous: collecting extortion payments or carrying out killings. Girls face being sexually abused, trafficked or exploited by gang leaders.⁷ Some are forced into gangs, but others join because they're looking for safety, respect, money or simply a way to survive.⁸ Recruitment can happen face to face or online, through spaces like gaming platforms.⁹ Children from low-income families – especially those from minority ethnic or racial backgrounds – face higher risks.

“In the beginning, my only focus was not to lose these friends because they gave me something to eat and something to live on.”

– Young man who left a gang, Port-au-Prince¹⁰

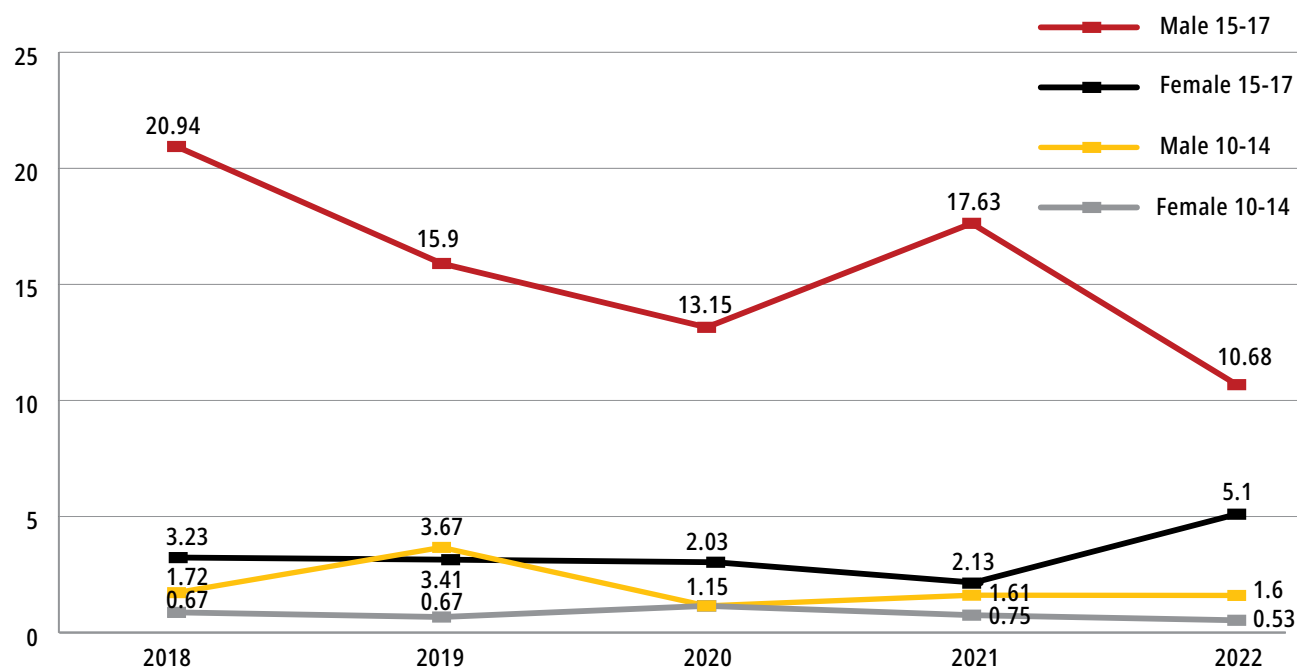
Armed violence and homicide in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show

Children and adolescents as victims. In 2019 homicide was the leading cause of death for adolescents aged 10–19 in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹¹ Between 2018 and 2022 (the latest available data), the number of adolescent boys aged 15–17 who were victims of homicides fell across the region, though the rate is still very high. Between 2021 and 2022, however, there was a rise in the number of adolescent girls aged 15–17 who were killed (see Figure 2). Since 2023, homicide rates have risen in some countries, and so the number of children and adolescents affected is also likely to have increased.¹²



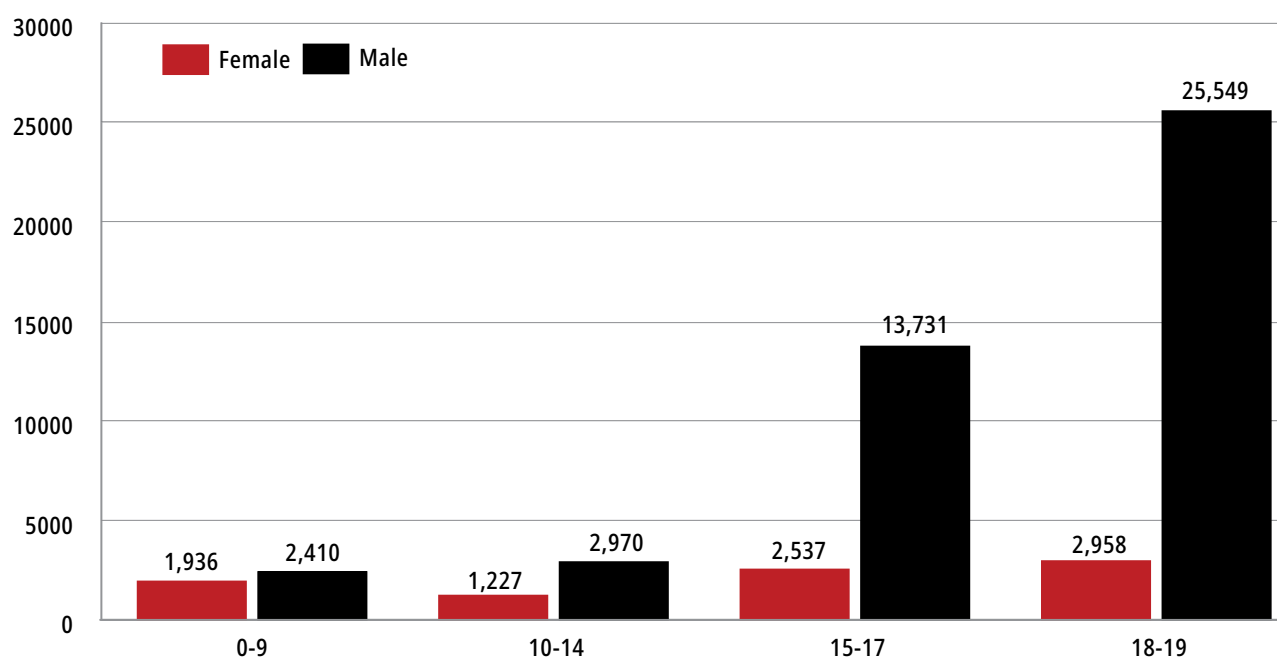
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Figure 2: Young victims of homicide by age and sex, rate per 100,000 population, 2018–2022



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime data; authors' own calculations. Average for all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with available data over the period 2018–2022.¹³

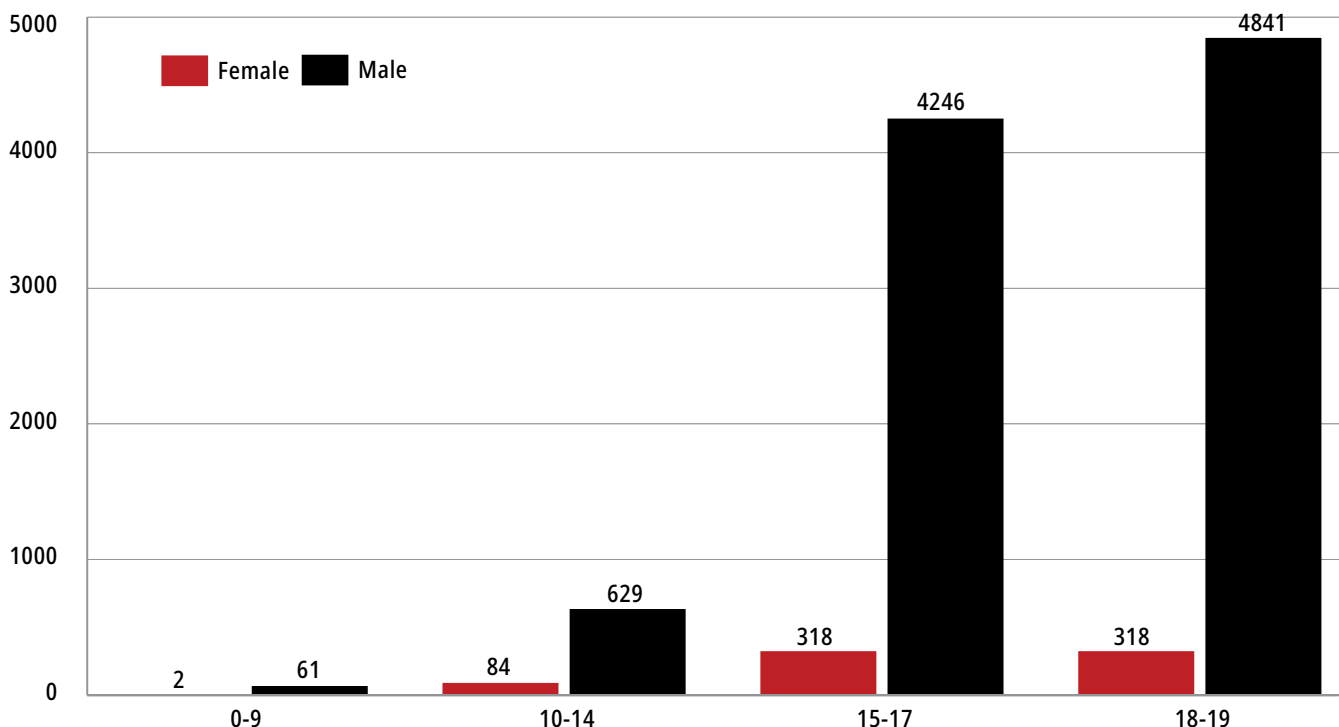
Figure 3: Child victims of homicide by age and sex, 2015–2022



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime data; authors' own calculations.

Children as perpetrators. Between 2015 and 2022, around 10,500 children and adolescents (ages 0–19) were arrested or suspected of homicide in the region (see Figure 4). Most were teenagers between 15 and 19, but 1 in 14 were as young as 10–14. Boys were 13 times more likely than girls to be arrested or suspected of homicide, though not all have actually committed these crimes.

Figure 4: Children and adolescents arrested or suspected of intentional homicide, 2015–2022



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime data; authors' calculations.

What works to reduce armed violence and homicide?

To break the cycle of armed violence and homicide, we need action on all fronts. The most effective ways to tackle armed violence and homicides against children and adolescents include:

- ✓ making sure firearms laws and policies are in place and enforced;
- ✓ stopping violence before it happens, through identifying children and adolescents at risk, mediation, and community action;
- ✓ offering comprehensive social and educational programmes for at-risk children, adolescents and families;
- ✓ reducing financial incentives to join gangs;
- ✓ making sure children and adolescents affected by violence get access to appropriate support, including mental health and substance abuse service; and
- ✓ creating child-friendly justice and helping young offenders rebuild their lives through restorative justice.

PUTTING ANTI-FIREARMS LAWS AND POLICIES INTO ACTION

One of the strongest tools we have to fight armed violence and to protect children is making sure laws are actually enforced.¹⁴ These laws cover who can own, carry or use firearms, and aim to stop illegal trafficking of weapons. Across the region, there are several promising examples:

- **Belize:** The National Action Plan for Juvenile Justice led to an agreement with gangs to stop shootings around schools and along the routes children take to get there.¹⁵
- **Jamaica:** The 2022 Firearms Act allowed people to hand in illegal weapons without fear of being prosecuted.¹⁶
- **Central America and the Dominican Republic:** The Roadmap to Prevent Illicit Trafficking of Firearms, Ammunition, and Explosives gives countries a clear plan to stop the spread of illegal weapons and calls for national and regional strategies to back it up.¹⁷
- **Brazil:** Police body cameras have helped reduce homicides of children and adolescents (see Box 1).

BOX 1: POLICE USE OF BODY CAMERAS IN BRAZIL

An evaluation of the Olho Vivo (Live Eye) programme in 2022 showed just how powerful body cameras can be. In São Paulo, where more than half the police force used them, deaths during police operations dropped by 67 per cent (Marques, 2024). The effect was even stronger for black boys aged 15–19: deaths in this group fell by 80 per cent.

The programme also set out clear guidelines to professionalize the state's police forces. These included creating a Risk Mitigation Commission and investing in less lethal weapons to reduce the use of deadly force.¹⁸

BOX 2: INTERRUPTING VIOLENCE: AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY TO REDUCE ARMED VIOLENCE

The non-governmental organization Cure Violence tackles armed violence by changing the way people think and act. The programme trains trusted local groups and credible messengers – community workers, faith leaders and respected figures – to spot and stop conflicts, guide young people at high risk towards safer choices, and promote healthier social norms. Its success in Honduras and Puerto Rico opened the door for similar efforts across the region, helping to reduce armed violence in Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, and Trinidad and Tobago.¹⁹

- In Cali, Colombia, Cure Violence ran under the name *Abriendo Caminos* (Opening Pathways). Results were striking: youth homicides (ages 12–25) dropped by 95 per cent. About 40 per cent of participants went back to school, and many broke away from long-standing involvement in crime.²⁰
- In Trinidad and Tobago, the programme was known as *Project Reason*. Monthly shootings fell by nearly 39 per cent, more young people gained access to education and jobs, and communities reported fewer revenge killings.²¹

STOPPING VIOLENCE AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS IN COMMUNITIES

Community-based programmes that interrupt violence work (see *Box 2*). These programmes focus on spotting and defusing violent situations before they escalate. They work through:

- **Mediation:** Trusted community leaders, often former gang members, step in to prevent a potential homicide, and resolve conflicts.
- **Opportunities:** Young people at high risk of violence are connected to education, training, jobs and drug treatment.
- **Community action:** Programmes shift local attitudes so that violence is no longer accepted as normal.



PROVIDING COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES

These programmes focus on keeping children and adolescents away from risky or violent behaviours by supporting their development from an early age and building protective communities.

Some start from the early years, like Brazil's national *Primeira Infância Melhor* (Better Early Childhood Programme). Trained professionals visit families with children aged 0–5, giving them guidance and support on health, care and development. A key part of the programme is reducing behaviour problems, including aggression. Research shows that children who took part in the programme were less likely to engage in violence later on. By the ages of 10–11, they were 5 per cent less likely to bully or steal, and 10 per cent less likely to attack or threaten others compared to those who didn't participate.²²

Schools are another important entry point. Programmes can be part of the school timetable or run as after-school activities. They often use sports, arts and group activities to help young people build social and emotional skills, while also working with law enforcement to encourage trust and non-violent values (see *Box 3*). Community sports, recreation and cultural activities can also integrate these violence-prevention strategies.

Teachers play a central role – both as role models for peace and as people who may themselves face gang threats. Honduras’ *Docentes por la Paz* (Educators for Peace), which ran from 2019 to 2023, helped public-school teachers apply violence-prevention techniques and created safe spaces for them to share ways to handle gang harassment. More than 88 per cent of teachers said it helped them deal better with violence in their schools and communities.²⁵ Key to success was that the training was led by teachers themselves, who could adapt it to their own classrooms.

Innovative initiatives in the region are also helping make sure children and adolescents feel safe, supported and surrounded by adults they can trust. These programmes create welcoming spaces and help young people take an active role in shaping their communities. In Brazil, for example, a project called *#AgendaCidadeUNICEF* (CityAgendaUNICEF) worked in eight cities between 2022 and 2024. A big part of this effort was setting up adolescent citizenship centres where adolescents could learn new skills and lead projects that matter to them. These centres are helping prevent violence by giving adolescents the tools to build safer, stronger communities.²⁶ Also in Brazil, *Selo UNICEF* (the UNICEF Seal) has inspired municipalities to develop strategic action plans and work with Indigenous and Afro-descendent *quilombola* adolescents and local authorities to reduce violence against children and adolescents. This has led to a massive 60-fold increase in reported incidents, as different forms of violence are now recognized, the first step to action.²⁷



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BOX 3: SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMES TO REDUCE VIOLENT BEHAVIOUR

Glasswing International ran an after-school programme in 21 public schools located in some of the most violent neighbourhoods of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. The programme targeted students aged 12–19, meeting twice a week for seven months. It tested three different approaches:

1. **Clubs** – extracurricular activities like dance, sports and art;
2. **Virtue** – club activities plus 32 sessions focused on training and self-reflection; and
3. **Mindful** – club activities plus 16 mindfulness exercises.

The evaluation showed promising results:

- Students in Virtue and Mindful were 23 per cent more likely to behave better at school compared to those in Clubs alone. The biggest improvements were seen among the most-at-risk students, especially those in high-homicide urban areas. Virtue also reduced risk-taking and strengthened emotional control.
- Mindful helped cut down on risky behaviours and lowered school dropout rates.²³

The **Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT)** programme in Guatemala, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Panama works to prevent youth violence through a mentorship model in schools. Police officers visit primary and secondary schools to talk with students about the risks of delinquency and to build trust and open communication. Officers are trained to lead 13 weekly one-hour sessions covering life skills, resisting peer pressure, positive youth development and managing impulsive behaviour. An evaluation of GREAT found that it was effective in:

- increasing trust in the police;
- helping adolescents say no to harmful or risky activities (with lasting effects in El Salvador a year after implementation);
- reducing both bullying victimization and perpetration; and
- weakening positive opinions about gangs.

The impact was strongest among adolescent girls and young people not living with both parents. The programme worked best when teachers took part in the sessions and reinforced the lessons in class, and when police instructors stayed engaged after the official programme ended to continue supporting students.²⁴



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BOX 4: MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES TO SUPPORT SURVIVORS AND FAMILIES

In El Salvador, mental health professionals were trained to deliver trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) to 121 children and adolescents aged 3–18, most of whom had suffered traumatic loss due to armed violence. Over five months, TF-CBT sessions were offered to children and their caregivers across five schools and one community mental health clinic. The results were striking: the programme greatly reduced symptoms of trauma, depression and anxiety. It also built long-term capacity by equipping local providers with the skills to deliver TF-CBT, allowing them to continue supporting trauma-affected children in community settings.³³

REDUCING FINANCIAL INCENTIVES TO JOIN GANGS

Giving families cash support tied to things like school attendance and health checkups has helped reduce homicides and crime in countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay.²⁸ In Colombia, a study of young men whose families received support through Familias en Acción (Families in Action) found impressive results: arrest rates dropped by 2.7 per cent, school dropout rates fell by 5.8 per cent, and participation in further education rose by 1.7 per cent.²⁹ These long-term impacts show how tackling poverty can keep adolescents in school and provide safer alternatives to violent crime.

Cash support works best when combined with other strategies to reduce violence and improve access to services like health and education.³⁰ This ensures maximum benefits and avoids unintended negative effects. Some youth skills and employment programmes – such as Empleando Futuros (Employing Futures) (2016–2021) in Honduras have also helped reduce adolescents’ and young people’s involvement in violence.³¹

INCREASING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Mental health services are vital for children and adolescents who have lived through or witnessed armed violence – and for their families too.³² Examples of effective approaches include early identification of children and adolescents at risk, making sure care is available straight away, and offering different types of therapy.

In El Salvador, a small programme offering trauma-focused therapy for survivors of gang violence has shown encouraging results (see *Box 4 and Box 12*, which shows how mental health and psychosocial support can be built into health services, schools and other public services to reach more children and families).

CREATING CHILD- AND ADOLESCENT-FRIENDLY JUSTICE SYSTEMS

To help children and adolescents affected by armed violence receive justice, it is important to create child- and adolescent-friendly justice systems that don’t create further trauma for them. For example, in Brazil, the Law on Protective Hearing (Law No. 13,431/2017) allows children and adolescents to be heard in safe spaces by trained professionals rather than in courtrooms. This avoids further trauma, protects them from facing their aggressors, and has improved both protection and evidence-gathering – especially in cities that have invested in specialized facilities like juvenile or dedicated courts.³⁴

Restorative justice can also help give young offenders the opportunity for a second chance and to build futures without violence. In Jamaica, the Child Diversion Programme gives young people in conflict with the law an alternative to going through the formal justice system. Instead, it focuses on rehabilitation and helping them reintegrate into society, working through a Child Diversion Office and local committees.³⁵

3. VIOLENT DISCIPLINE

DEFINITION

VIOLENT DISCIPLINE is any type of physical or psychological aggression used to punish a child. Physical violence includes hitting, slapping and spanking, while psychological aggression includes insulting, threatening, yelling and humiliating, to name some examples.

“When my parents hit me, I feel awful because there is no reason for them to do that to me.”

- Child, Mexico³⁶

Many caregivers still believe that violent discipline is the only way to teach children and adolescents respect and good behaviour.³⁷ Parents, grandparents, teachers and staff in children’s homes and youth detention centres may use physical or psychological means to discipline a child and set boundaries.

But hurting – or even threatening to hurt – a child or adolescent, whether physically or emotionally, doesn’t work. Worse, it causes harm. It affects children’s and adolescents’ health and well-being, makes it harder for them to learn, and can damage their relationships with family. It also sends the wrong message: that violence is an acceptable way to deal with conflict, creating a cycle of aggression and violence that continues into the future.³⁸

As of August 2025, 11 countries in the region had bans on violent discipline in all settings, and several others are moving in the same direction (see Box 5). But this is not enough: when laws aren’t enforced, offenders face no punishment, and when laws don’t include emotional abuse, many children and adolescents remain unsafe.³⁹

BOX 5: LEGAL PROGRESS ON PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT IN LATIN AMERICA

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela have banned physical punishment in every setting – whether at home, in schools, at day care, in alternative care or in detention centres. Most other countries in the region have at least some restrictions in place, and Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Jamaica, Mexico and Panama have recently committed to ending all forms of physical violence against children and adolescents.⁴⁰



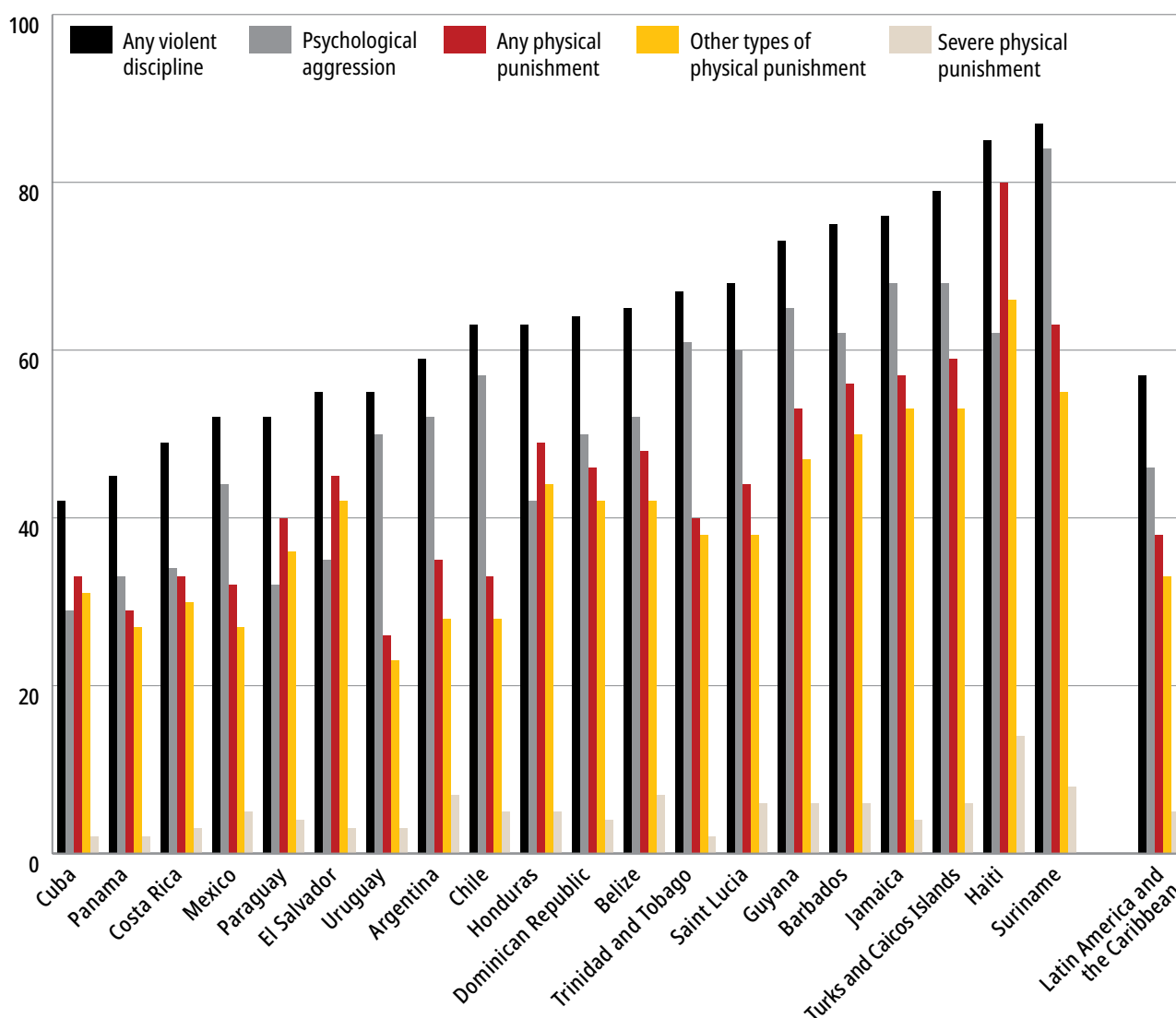
Violent discipline in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show

In Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 6 out of 10 children and adolescents aged 0–14 are subjected to violent discipline, most often at home or in school. In Suriname, Haiti, and Turks and Caicos, the numbers are even higher, with violence affecting 8–9 out of every 10 children (see Figure 5).



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Figure 5: Percentage of children and adolescents aged 1–14 experiencing various forms of violent discipline



Source: UNICEF global databases, 2025.⁴¹

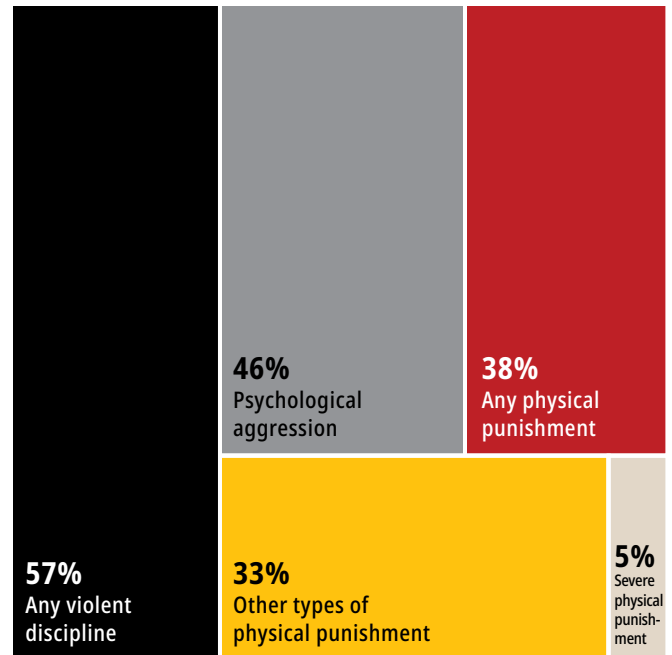
Emotional abuse is the most common form of violent discipline in the region. Nearly 1 in 2 children and adolescents (46 per cent) say they have experienced it, while almost 4 in 10 (38 per cent) have faced physical punishment (see Figure 6).



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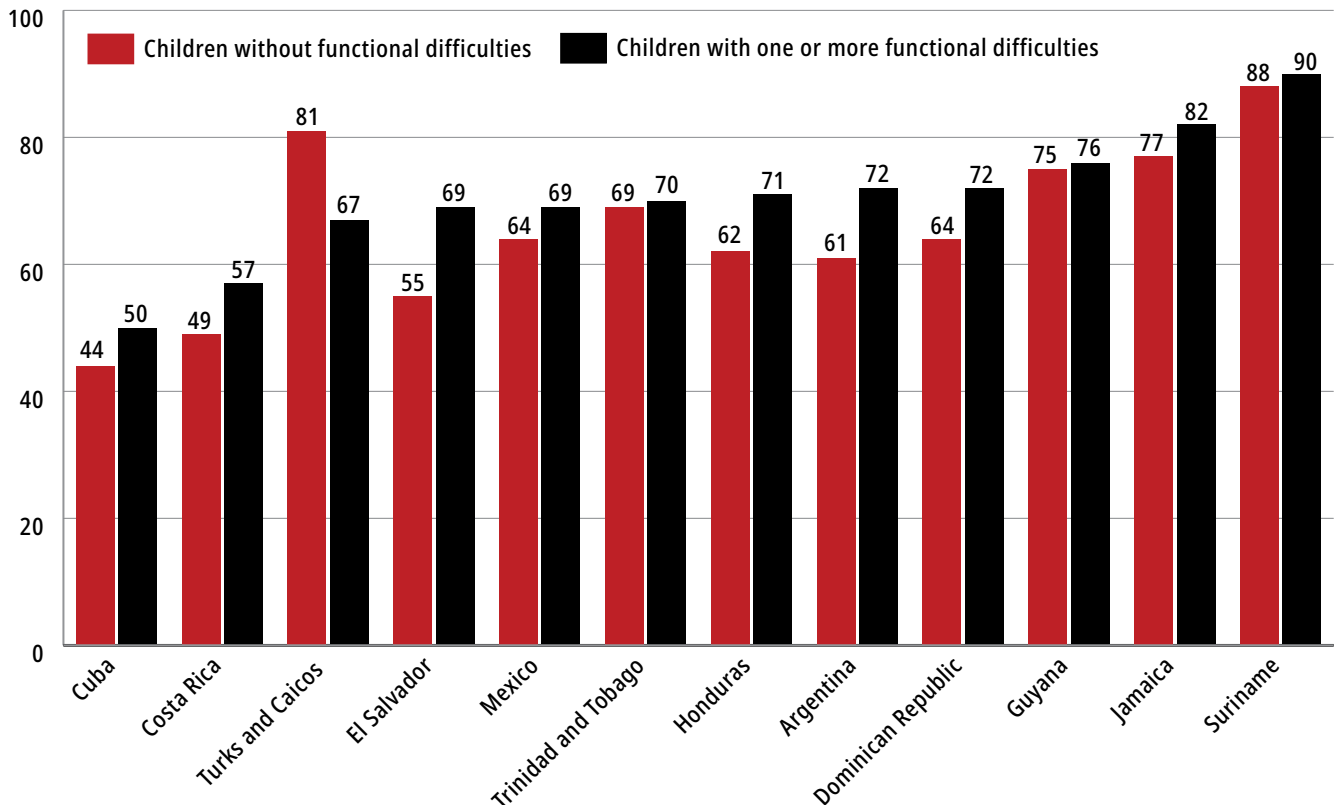
Children and adolescents with disabilities face especially high risks of violent discipline. There are 19.1 million children and adolescents with disabilities in the region and they are more likely to experience violent discipline than their peers without disabilities in nearly half of the countries (see Figure 7).⁴²

Figure 6: Percentage of children and adolescents aged 1-14 experiencing different types of violent discipline



Source: UNICEF global databases, 2025.

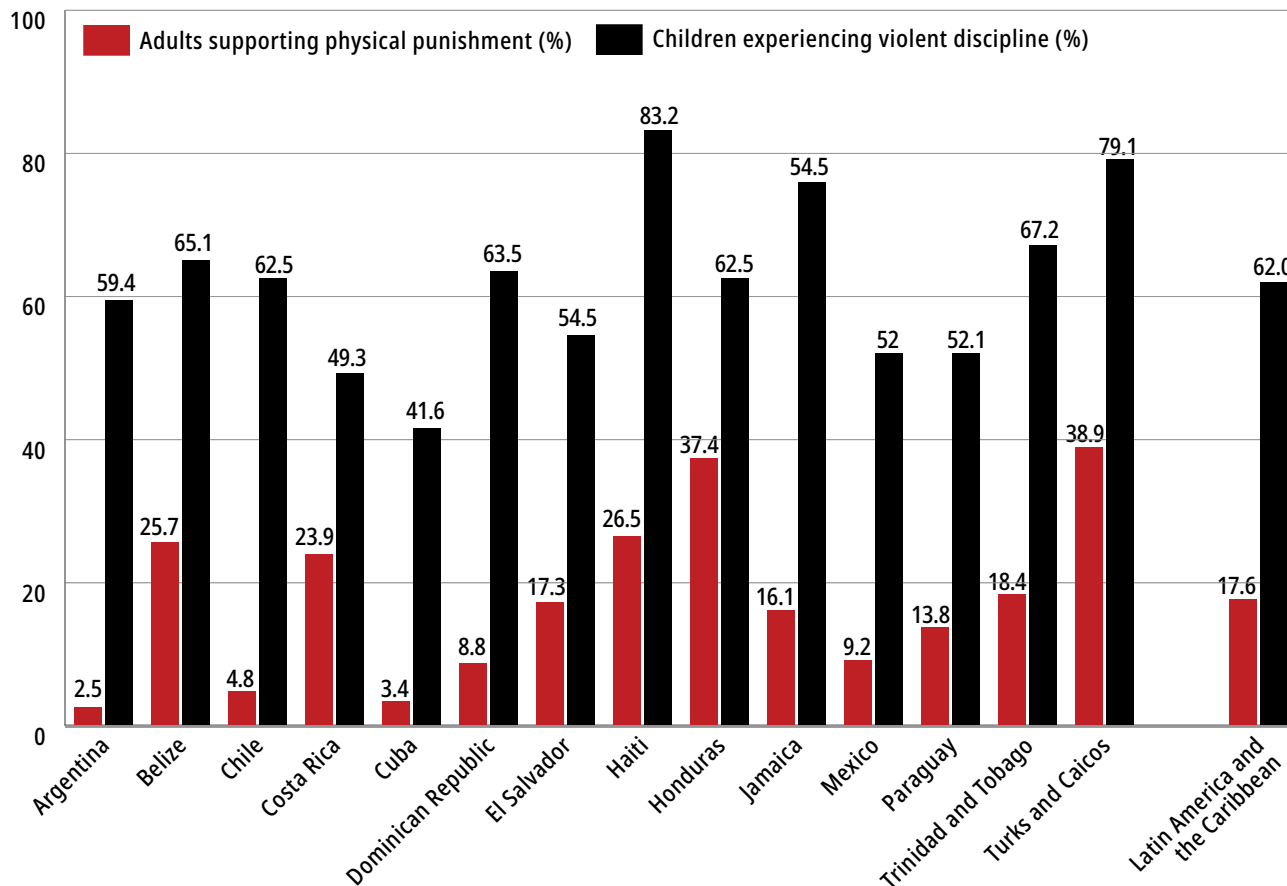
Figure 7: Percentage of children and adolescents aged 2–14 who experienced any violent discipline by caregivers in the past month, according to disability status



Source: UNICEF, 2024.⁴³

Although many caregivers in the region continue to use violent discipline, only a small number openly defend it (see Figure 8). This may reflect recent legal changes across the region (see Box 5), which have made the practice less socially acceptable.

Figure 8: Attitudes of caregivers of 2–14-year-olds versus children’s and adolescents’ experiences of violent discipline



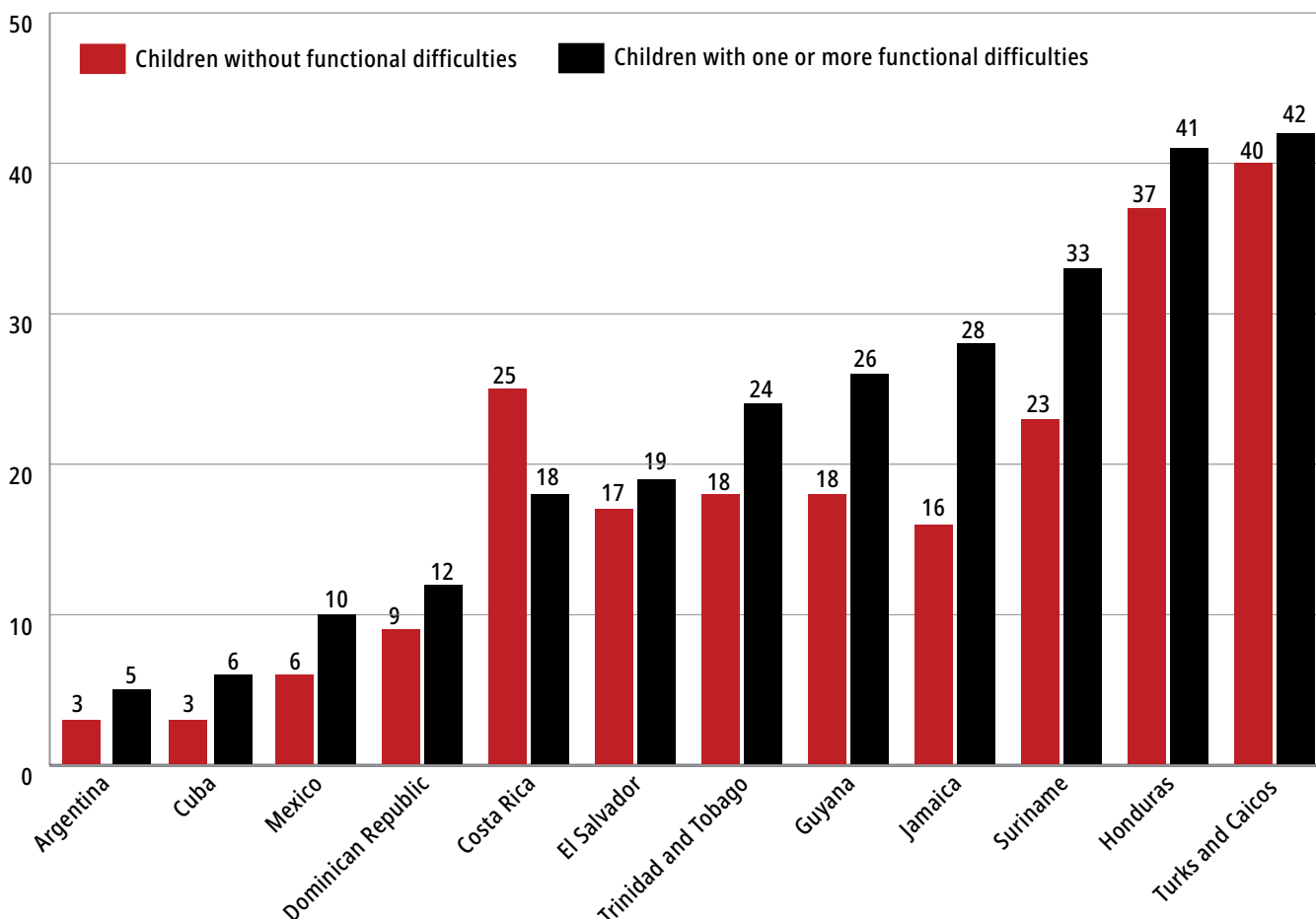
Source: UNICEF global databases, 2025.



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In half of the countries in the region, more caregivers believe that children and adolescents with disabilities need physical punishment to be raised properly compared to those without disabilities (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Percentage of caregivers of 2–14-year-olds with and without functional difficulties who believe physical punishment is needed to raise a child or adolescent properly



Source: UNICEF, 2024.⁴⁴

What works to reduce violent discipline?

Evidence from across the region shows that the most effective ways to prevent violent discipline include:

- supporting parents through training and mentoring; and
- supporting teachers through training and coaching.

These programmes equip caregivers with new knowledge and practical skills to help them manage behaviour, set boundaries and deal with conflict without relying on violence.⁴⁵ Many of these programmes also support young children’s overall development and have been shown to strengthen early learning, especially emotional regulation. The benefits of these programmes are, thus, wider. They prevent violent discipline and also other forms of violence, like bullying.⁴⁶



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Parenting programmes help parents understand what violence really is and the lasting harm it causes. They give parents practical tools to manage conflict, raise their children positively and avoid the use of violence. They also encourage more positive parent-child interactions through play and shared activities, while offering support to reduce stress – for example, through counselling.⁴⁷

Parenting programmes are flexible. They can be run as group workshops or one-on-one sessions, through home visits, schools, early childhood centres, community centres – or even online.⁴⁸ For instance:

- In Peru, the Cuna Más home-visiting programme reaches over 67,000 low-income households every week, with local facilitators providing mothers of children aged 3–5 with parenting advice.⁴⁹
- In Colombia, Apapacho (To hug the soul) is a low-cost, 11-week group programme developed with the government.

Both initiatives have reduced the use and acceptance of violent discipline by encouraging positive parenting practices.⁵⁰

It is vital that fathers are included in these programmes. They play a key role in children's and adolescents' upbringing and must also learn about the impact of violent discipline and how to strengthen their bonds with their children. Other caregivers, like grandparents, should be included too.

Special attention is also needed for young parents – especially teenagers. Their children face some of the highest risks of violent discipline, yet young parents often struggle the most to join and complete these programmes. Tailored approaches for them are essential.



BOX 6: PROGRAMMES SHOWN TO REDUCE CAREGIVERS' USE OF VIOLENT DISCIPLINE

Evaluations show that many initiatives in the region have succeeded in reducing violent discipline by engaging parents and teachers. Examples include:

- Roving Caregiver (Grenada)
- Nadie es Perfecto (Nobody is Perfect, Chile)
- International Child Development (Colombia)
- GenerationPMTO (Chile)
- Lobi Mi Pikin (Suriname)
- Familias Seguras (Safe Families, Bolivia)
- Irie Homes and Classroom Toolbox (Jamaica)
- ACT Raising Kids Safe (Brazil, Peru)
- Cuna Más (Cradle More, Peru)
- Familias Fuertes (Strong Families, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay)
- the violent punishment prevention component of the Citizen Security and Justice Program (Jamaica)



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BOX 7: ACT RAISING KIDS SAFE: PARENTING TRAINING IN BRAZIL AND PERU

Adult and Children Together (ACT) Raising Safe Kids is a low-cost, flexible programme designed to support caregivers from low-income families with children aged 0–8. Developed in the United States of America, it aims to prevent violent discipline by encouraging positive parenting through easy-to-follow, adult-friendly activities.

The programme runs as eight weekly group sessions, each lasting two hours and led by trained facilitators. Caregivers take part in interactive activities and complete home-based tasks. The curriculum covers five main themes: child development, preventing violence, emotional and behavioural regulation, electronic media and discipline, and parenting styles.⁵¹

In Brazil, all 14 evaluations of ACT found it reduced violent discipline.⁵² One recent study in 17 municipalities in Ceará showed that caregivers who joined the programme were less coercive, better at managing their emotions, and shifted towards more positive parenting styles. However, the programme struggled to reach and keep fathers engaged.⁵³

ACT has also shown good results in Peru, where an evaluation found drops in verbal and physical punishment of 3–5-year-olds.⁵⁴ The programme has been rolled out in Guatemala and Colombia as well, though its impact there has not yet been studied.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS

Teacher programmes raise awareness about violent discipline and its harmful effects on children and adolescents, while focusing on practical tools to manage classrooms in positive ways. Teacher training works best when it includes individual coaching – as in the Irie Classroom Toolbox Project (see Box 8). Combining workshops with in-class support gives teachers the chance to get advice on handling difficult situations and receive feedback as they practice new skills.

Providing teachers with a variety of positive discipline strategies also makes a difference. When they have several approaches to choose from, they can select the ones that fit best with their teaching style, making it more likely they will use them consistently over time.⁵⁵



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BOX 8: IRIE CLASSROOM TOOLBOX: TEACHER TRAINING IN JAMAICA

The Irie Classroom Toolbox is a teacher-training programme in Jamaica that promotes positive discipline in schools. It is based on the US-based Incredible Years programme, tailored for teachers of children aged 3–8 and adapted for the Jamaican context.⁵⁶

The programme provides around 11.5 hours of training over eight months, combining workshops with in-class support. Teachers receive a handbook with strategies for creating positive classroom environments, planning lessons and managing behaviour, along with interactive materials to use with students.

Evaluations in low-income areas of Jamaica found that the toolbox helped preschool teachers to stop using violent discipline and create supportive classrooms. The reduction in physical and psychological aggression lasted for at least a year after the programme finished.⁵⁷

“ [When] she is praising me, it motivates me to teach them more. If I can feel that way can you imagine how the children would feel? So that is what I do, I motivate them more, I praise them more.

“Instead of beating them ... I say, ‘I like how (child) is doing this’ and then everyone wants to do it.”

– Participant teachers, Jamaica⁵⁸

However, challenges remain. Many teachers continued to use violent discipline. This may be because, while the programme strengthens skills, boosts motivation and improves child behaviour, it doesn't fully address teachers' beliefs about discipline and violence. Funding shortages, which lead to issues like overcrowded classrooms and limited pedagogical resources, also make it harder to completely eliminate violent practices.⁵⁹



4. SEXUAL VIOLENCE

DEFINITION

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN is any deliberate, unwanted act of a sexual nature, either completed or attempted, that is perpetrated against a child. It includes rape, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, sexual harassment, sexual exposure, threat of a sexual nature, and non-consensual sexual image taking.⁶⁰

“ I was on a shift ... when a woman of 50ish years walked in with her daughter of 11 ... the girl was bleeding and needed surgery immediately ... she was too shocked to tell us what had happened, so her mother told us ... On her way [back from the carnival], a neighbour joined her to supposedly walk the girl home, but he entered the house and repeatedly raped her.”

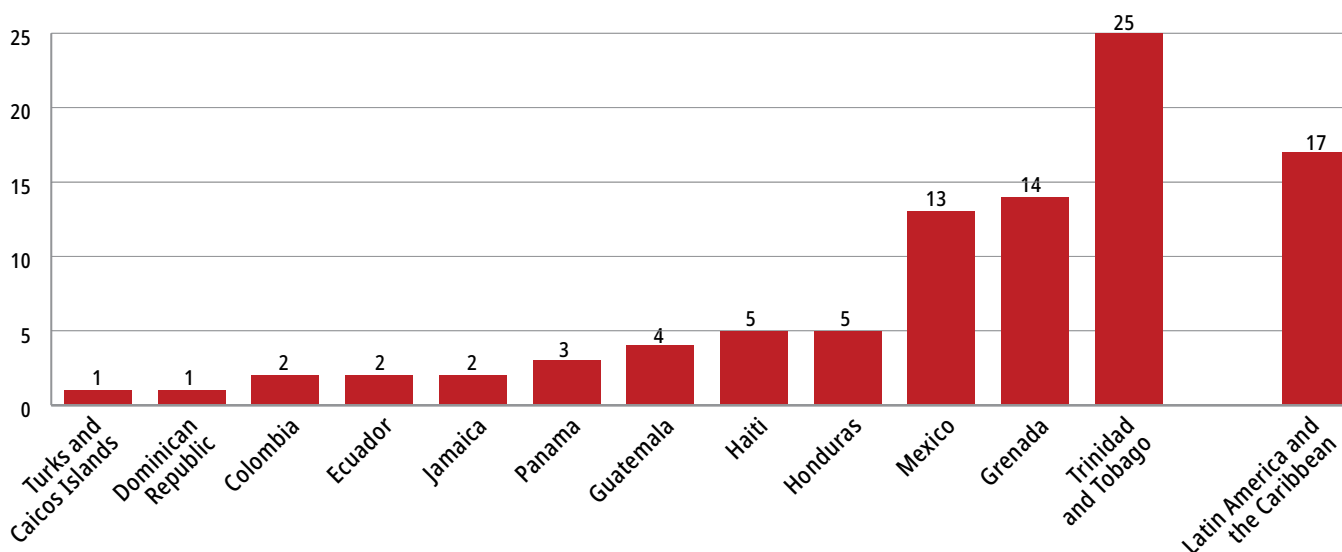
– Doctor, Bolivia⁶¹

Sexual violence against children and adolescents happens in homes, schools, communities and online. In Latin America and the Caribbean, certain factors put children at even greater risk. For example, armed groups often use sexual assault or threats of it to force young people to obey their demands. Migrating adolescents – especially girls who travel without adults – face high risks of sexual assault and trafficking at the hands of organized criminals who exploit their vulnerability.⁶²

Sexual violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show

Sexual violence in childhood or adolescence. Reports from young women show big differences across the region, with between 1 and 25 per cent⁶³ saying they experienced sexual violence during childhood or adolescence (see Figure 10). Data on boys are not collected as systematically – but evidence shows that sexual abuse of boys in childhood and adolescence is also widespread.⁶⁴

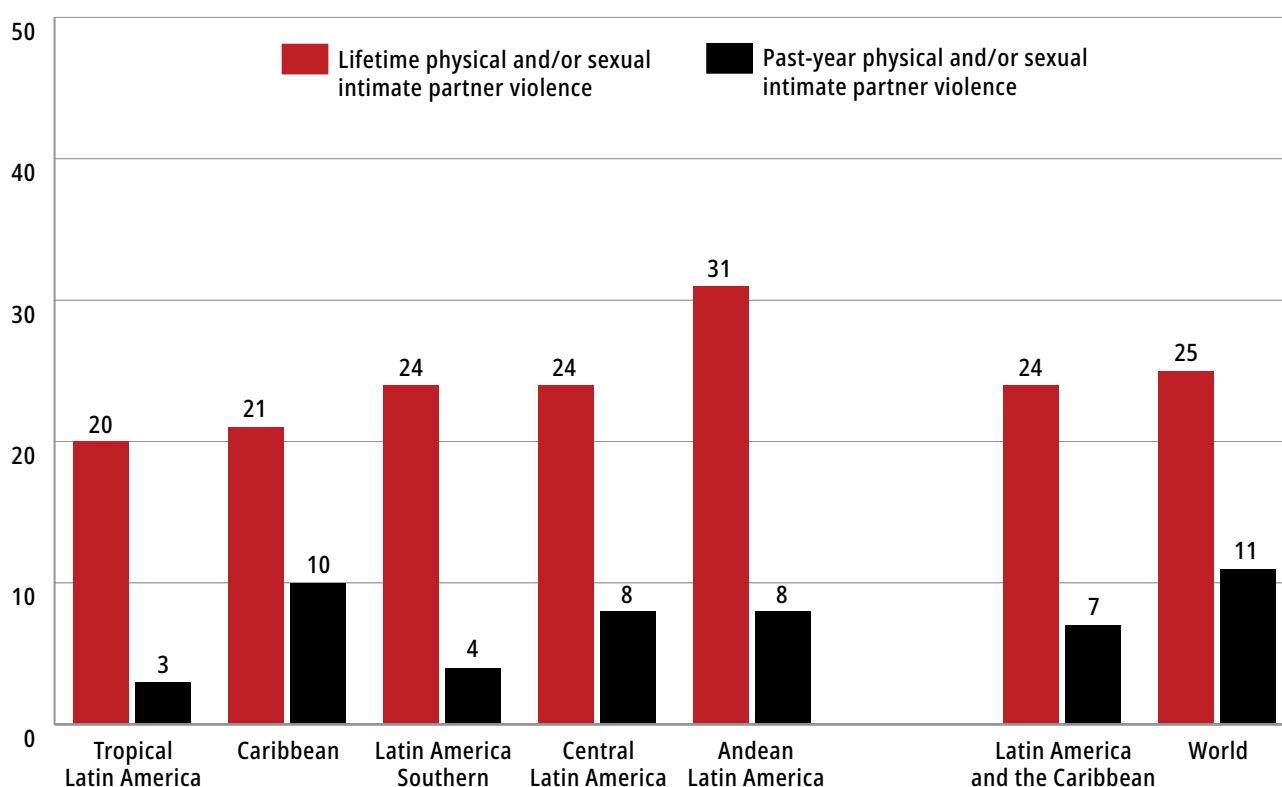
Figure 10: Percentage of women aged 18–29 who experienced sexual violence before age 18



Source: UNICEF global databases, 2025, based on the following surveys: Dominican Republic (DHS 2013), Colombia (DHS 2015), Ecuador (ENVIGMU 2019), Jamaica (Women’s Health Survey 2016), Panama (National Survey of Sexual and Reproductive Health 2014-2015), Guatemala (DHS 2014-2015), Haiti (DHS 2016-2017), Honduras (MICS 2019), Grenada (Women’s Health and Life Experiences Survey 2018), Mexico (ENDIREH 2021), Trinidad and Tobago (National Women’s Health Survey 2017) and Turks and Caicos Islands (MICS 2019-20).

Intimate partner violence against adolescent girls. Figure 11 shows that the level of intimate partner violence faced by adolescent girls in the Andean region (28 per cent) is above the global average (24 per cent), and the level in the Caribbean (21 per cent) close to the global average. This highlights severe problems, particularly in those subregions. While these figures are high, evidence shows that intimate partner violence is usually under-reported, which means that the figure is likely to be still higher.

Figure 11: Percentage of ever-married/ever-partnered women aged 15 years and older who have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime and in the past 12 months, 2023, by Global Burden of Disease region



Source: Source: Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2023: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and non-partner sexual violence against women. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2025.

Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. Please note this is a sub-regional classification used by WHO.⁶⁵



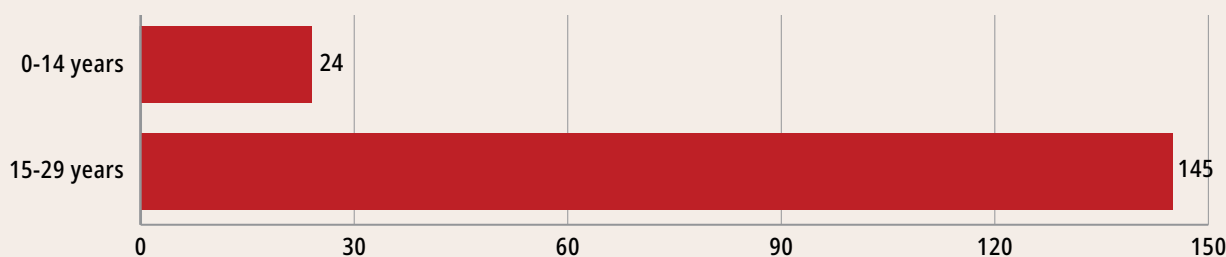
BOX 9: FEMICIDE

Femicide is the intentional killing of a woman or girl because of her gender. It can happen when she tries to leave an intimate partner, rejects a sexual advance, does not conform to expected gender roles, or simply because of misogyny.⁶⁶ Many femicides take place as intimate partner violence escalates, but they can also be carried out by other family members, people in the community or strangers.

Like other forms of violence against women and girls, femicide is driven by discriminatory gender norms. The risk is higher in contexts of poverty, widespread violence, crime and impunity.⁶⁷

In 2023, young women aged 15–29 made up 20.3 per cent of femicide victims in the 11 countries in the region for which there are data (145 recorded cases in total), while 24 cases (3.4 per cent) involved girls aged 0–14.⁶⁸

Figure 12: Femicide victims by age in the region



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Gender Equality Observatory, 2022 data.

Preventing femicides requires:

- tackling violence against women and girls, especially partner violence, by raising awareness of what it is and challenging the discriminatory gender norms at its root.
- identifying survivors of violence early and making sure they get timely support. This depends on identifying girls at risk through clinics or hospitals, or through other systems for referring and monitoring cases.
- ending impunity by ensuring perpetrators are held accountable.⁶⁹
- investing in programmes that are known to work – in line with the RESPECT framework.⁷⁰ These empower women and girls, reduce poverty, make environments safe and prevent child abuse.

Legal and policy reforms are also vital. Today, all but two countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have laws that criminalize femicide.⁷¹ Some – such as Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico – have also introduced alert systems to coordinate institutions and respond more effectively to potential cases.⁷²



What works to reduce sexual violence?

Ending sexual violence against children and adolescents takes a comprehensive approach. The key building blocks include:

- putting laws and policies that protect children from sexual violence into action;
- implementing prevention activities in schools and communities;
- strengthening child-friendly reporting and systems to identify violence early; and
- providing child and adolescent survivors with immediate access to health care and justice.

Together, these measures raise awareness among children, parents and communities about different forms of violence and how to seek help, while also challenging the norms that allow this violence to continue.

PUTTING STRONG LAWS AND POLICIES AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE INTO PRACTICE

While many reforms have taken place in recent years, not all countries in the region have full legal protection yet. Gaps remain – for example, some laws still don't outlaw sexual contact between an adult and a child if it isn't penetrative, and in some countries statutes of limitation prevent survivors from pursuing justice once too much time has passed. Chile, El Salvador and Mexico are examples of countries that have completely abolished statutes of this kind in child sexual abuse cases.⁷³ National action plans – as in Brazil, El Salvador and Mexico – can be powerful tools to bring together efforts across different sectors, but they only work if they are backed with adequate budgets and proper training for everyone responsible for putting them into practice.⁷⁴

IMPLEMENTING PREVENTION ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

This includes awareness sessions for children and parents about child sexual abuse, as well as courses on preventing violence against women and girls. School-based initiatives work best when they are part of the regular curriculum – like the programme in El Salvador described in Box 10 – and scaled up, rather than offered as one-off workshops. Involving families, by explaining the programme and helping them reinforce what children learn at school, can make these initiatives even more effective.⁷⁵

BOX 10: SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMES TO PREVENT SEXUAL ABUSE AND PROMOTE RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Preventing sexual abuse. School-based programmes that teach children and adolescents what sexual abuse is, why it is unacceptable and how to report it are recognized internationally as a promising practice. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 78 per cent of countries already provide age-appropriate education on sexual abuse and exploitation,⁷⁶ along with training for teachers and school staff to recognize and respond to cases.

The most effective programmes for primary school children use cartoons, videos and role plays – making it easier for children to understand the message and practice how to speak up. Small-scale initiatives in Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico have all helped give children stronger knowledge about sexual abuse.⁷⁷

But awareness alone is not enough. These programmes must be backed by broader prevention and response efforts. We must not expect children and adolescents to be responsible for stopping their own abuse.

Respectful relationships for adolescents. Globally, courses on respectful relationships have been shown to shift the harmful norms that fuel dating violence, sexual harassment and intimate partner violence. They also make adolescents more likely to step in if they see violence happening.⁷⁸

One example is *Haz tu parte* (Do Your Part) in El Salvador, an 18-hour course for 7th and 8th graders built into the social science curriculum. The programme raised both boys' and girls' knowledge of human rights, gender and sexuality by 5 percentage points. It included single-sex group discussions on emotional learning, gender, sexuality, peaceful coexistence, economic independence and community participation – plus a student-led campaign with arts activities and promotional materials.⁷⁹

BOX 11: COMMUNITY-BASED SPORTS AND SKILLS TRAINING TO REDUCE VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS

Fútbol Más in Peru. Founded in Chile in 2007, Fútbol Más (Football Plus) has since expanded across Latin America, Europe and East Africa, reaching more than 180,000 children and adolescents worldwide.⁸⁰ The programme blends sports with life skills for children in communities, schools and residential care centres, while also engaging families in activities that strengthen community support and protection for children and adolescents.

In Peru, the local version Jugando Seguros (Playing Safe) was rolled out in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Among participating adolescents, acceptance of intimate partner violence dropped by 52 per cent. The programme helped these adolescents build empathy, strengthen their sense of agency and feel more confident in improving their communities.⁸¹

Reducing violence through economic empowerment, Bolivia. Not all programmes address violence against women and girls directly, yet they can still reduce it. In Bolivia, *Adolescentes: Protagonistas del Desarrollo* (Adolescents: Protagonists of Development) provided eight months of training in soft and technical skills, mentoring, and job placement support. The results were clear: participating girls reported a 3 percentage point drop in both physical and sexual violence, and a 10 percentage point drop in psychological violence. The likely reason? Greater bargaining power for adolescent girls within their households and reduced financial stress.⁸²

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, communities are leading bold and creative efforts to tackle the root causes of sexual violence. These grass-roots initiatives go beyond awareness – they aim to shift culture. Some work directly with men and boys, encouraging healthy and respectful models of masculinity that reject violence and inequality. Others focus on children and adolescents, combining sports, life skills and practical activities that break down harmful gender stereotypes and empower the next generation to build a fairer future.

Though many of these initiatives are still small, they are deeply grounded in community realities. With the right backing, they can expand and reach many more people. Box 11 shares examples from Bolivia and Peru.



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STRENGTHENING CHILD-FRIENDLY REPORTING AND SYSTEM TO IDENTIFY VIOLENCE EARLY

Health care centres – like clinics and hospitals – are vital spots to find children and adolescents who are at risk of, or that have been sexually abused. Doctors, nurses, social workers and psychologists are often the first people children and adolescents talk to. They can identify at-risk children and adolescents early and provide them with support before violence escalates. This is why training is important. Training should teach them child-friendly and trauma-aware ways of recognizing the signs and symptoms of sexual violence and enable them to provide immediate care (see next subsection).

Health care workers also need established and clear procedures to report cases in their hospitals and clinics and bring in different government departments to give children and adolescents the care they need.⁸³ Although many countries in the region have national protocols in place, health care staff have often not been trained on them or might not even know they exist. When they know about them, a lack of resources can make it impossible to use them.⁸⁴

Across the region, helplines – via phone or digital chat – also offer children and adolescents a safe way to seek help and report abuse. Adults can also use them to raise concerns. Helplines are especially valuable in places where in-person services don't exist. Because they are confidential and anonymous, they can give people the courage to reach out when they might otherwise stay silent.

A study across the Americas found that 60 per cent of calls to helplines were to report violent incidents: 57 per cent reported physical violence, 24 per cent sexual violence and 6 per cent psychological violence. Girls were three times more likely than boys to report sexual violence, while boys were slightly more likely to report physical violence.⁸⁵

The impact of child and adolescent helplines can be made stronger by:

- ✓ ensuring helplines have the capacity to provide immediate care;
- ✓ creating clear referral pathways to services and law enforcement when needed (for example, Paraguay's Fono Ayuda 147, run by the Ministry of Children and Adolescents; see Box 12);
- ✓ training staff and volunteers well, ensuring they stay updated on new forms of child exploitation, especially online abuse and trafficking;
- ✓ partnering with telecom companies to keep services free (for example, Jamaica's 211 line and Aruba's Telefon pa Hubentud);⁸⁶
- ✓ offering access on multiple platforms, such as phone and WhatsApp (Fono Ayuda 147 in Paraguay) or online chat (SaferNet in Brazil; see Box 12); and
- ✓ extending operating hours (as with Bolivia's Linea 156 and Paraguay's Fono Ayuda 147, which are available 24 hours per day, all year-round).

BOX 12: HELPLINES LINKED TO CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN PARAGUAY AND BRAZIL

Fono Ayuda 147, Paraguay. Paraguay's 147 Helpline, run by the Ministry of Children and Adolescents, is a free and confidential service that provides listening, guidance and safe referrals to specialized support. Accessible via phone and WhatsApp, it operates 24 hours per day, all year-round.

The helpline acts as a gateway to the national child protection system. Depending on the level of risk, children are referred to protection and health services, or to the police and justice system. For urgent cases, such as sexual violence or serious risk, referrals are made directly to the Public Prosecutor's Office.⁸⁷ Immediate protection measures can also be triggered through municipal protection agencies and/or the national police. The helpline is part of a wider government response to violence against children, coordinated across health, justice, education, psychosocial and mental health services.

Challenges remain, including under-reporting – especially in rural and Indigenous communities – and persistent social norms that tolerate violence, which discourage both children and adults from speaking up. Continued efforts are needed to raise awareness and strengthen trust. Despite these challenges, Fono Ayuda 147 is a cornerstone of Paraguay's child protection system, which is being steadily reinforced.

SaferNet, Brazil. SaferNet provides a safe and child-friendly way for children and adolescents to report online crimes, such as cyberbullying and exploitation, through internet-based platforms like chat and email.⁸⁸ Once a complaint is filed, harmful content is removed from the internet and the case is handed to the federal police or other relevant authorities for investigation.

Beyond reporting, SaferNet offers information and guidance on online violence to children, adolescents and the wider public. It also provides specialized training for state authorities (police, courts, judges), teachers and educators, as well as mental health support for survivors, with parental or caregiver consent.

“ SaferNet helps us adapt our public policies to deal with these new crimes.”⁸⁹

In one year, SaferNet received 1,825 complaints via email and chat. The initiative has strengthened the capacity of child protection officers and built key partnerships – with Red Globo, Brazil's largest TV channel, to put online safety on the public agenda, and with companies like Facebook and Google, to speed up the removal of harmful content.



PROVIDING CHILD AND ADOLESCENT SURVIVORS WITH IMMEDIATE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE AND JUSTICE

Clinics and hospitals are also vital spots for helping children and adolescents recover from sexual violence. They need to provide immediate medical care in a way that is kind to children and adolescents and never blames or criticizes them. This is known as the LIVES approach.⁹⁰ This means doctors, nurses, social workers and psychologists need to:

- listen to the child or adolescent closely with empathy and without judging in a private space;
- assess and respond to needs, wishes and concerns – emotional, physical, social and practical;
- show the child or adolescent that you understand and believe them, and that they are not to blame for what happened;
- protect the child or adolescent from further harm; and
- facilitate support by connecting children and adolescents to formal and informal support services.

They also need to provide support to non-offending caregivers so that they can care for the child or adolescent. Immediate medical care must provide all the necessary services for rape survivors, following the latest and best medical guidelines.⁹¹

For staff to provide this kind of care, they need training, clear guidelines and manageable workloads.⁹² They also need strong and well-funded health systems with child-friendly facilities and good record-keeping systems where they can document cases and easily share the necessary information with other government offices involved.⁹³ This minimizes the number of times a child or adolescent is asked to retell their traumatic experiences. Documenting cases is also important for knowing how many children have suffered violence and how to improve support (see Chapter 7). Immediate medical care must also include psychological care that follows the same kind and non-judgmental principles. There is strong proof in Latin America that therapy works for survivors. For example, in Brazil, a programme called Superar (Overcome) provided individual therapy for girls (aged 9–16) and group therapy for other children who had experienced sexual violence. As a result, the children and adolescents experienced fewer symptoms of depression, stress and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁹⁴

To improve quality in health care, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have developed guidelines that outline the role of health services in the response to sexual violence. According to the Pan American Health Organization's analyses, the majority of countries have such guidelines, but more work is needed to make them more detailed and based on evidence of what works⁹⁵

Across the region, many countries train front-line staff – from police officers and social workers to judges and prosecutors – in child- and adolescent-friendly procedures, including how to interview children safely and respectfully. Some, like Brazil, Guatemala, Jamaica and El Salvador, have even created specialized police units focused on child and adolescent sexual exploitation and abuse.⁹⁶

Some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have integrated models to support children and adolescents both navigate the justice system and recover. In Guyana, for example, child advocacy centres (see Box 13) provide an integrated model that combines safe spaces for reporting, support through the justice process and access to therapeutic services.

BOX 13: CHILD ADVOCACY CENTRES (CACs) IN GUYANA

CACs act as one-stop shops where children and adolescents can safely report sexual abuse, receive trauma-focused therapy and get support throughout the justice process. There are now 16 centres across the country, developed through a partnership between the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security's Child Protection Agency, two non-governmental organizations (ChildLink and Blossom Inc) and UNICEF.

At the centres, interviews are carried out by trained forensic specialists and observed from an adjoining room by police and case workers. The sessions are recorded and used as evidence in court. This approach strengthens coordination between agencies, reduces the number of times a child or adolescent has to retell their story, and minimizes re-traumatization.

The CACs also provide therapy and counselling, make referrals to other services, and guide parents and caregivers in supporting children and adolescents who have experienced abuse. They carry out community outreach too, helping adults identify signs of abuse.

An evaluation showed strong results: 97 per cent of children and adolescents and 94 per cent of parents interviewed said the centres made it easier to access support; 95 per cent of children and adolescents said the CACs helped them recover from their experiences; and 93 per cent felt they improved access to justice.⁹⁷

5. BULLYING

DEFINITION

BULLYING involves a person or group repeatedly demonstrating aggressive behaviour against a child who cannot easily defend him or herself.⁹⁸ Bullying is a pattern of behaviour, rather than an isolated incident. It can involve verbal aggression, physical violence, sexual harassment and cyberbullying. Bullying can happen both in school and out of school.

Boys are more likely to face physical bullying, while girls are more often exposed to psychological bullying. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, bullying and violence in schools remain widespread, threatening children's and adolescents' right to a safe, inclusive and fair education.⁹⁹

Bullying doesn't stop at the classroom door but also takes place in communities and online spaces.¹⁰⁰ Survivors of bullying are at higher risk of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, social isolation and poor school performance.¹⁰¹ Those who bully others also face risks, often showing more antisocial behaviour and greater substance use.

“ [Someone at school] cut my mouth with a pencil”

“ ...strangled me”

“ ...steals my toys”

“ ...steals my pencils”

“ ... hit me with many books and left me a mark”

“ ...pulled me by the hair”

“ ... made me trip and no one helped me”

– Boys and girls aged 5–7, Chile¹⁰²



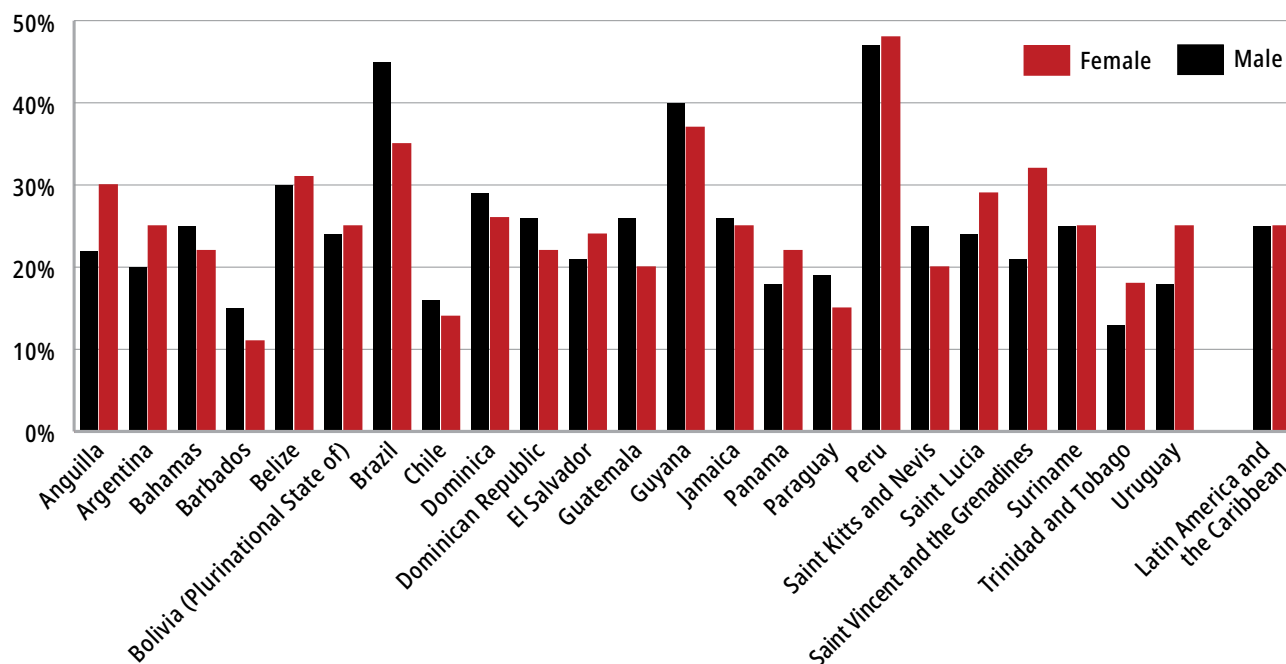
Even though the harm is well documented, responses in the region are uneven. Some countries have built strong laws and policies to address the problem, but in many others action is fragmented, with no national commitment or systemic programmes in place.

Bullying in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show

- Across the region, 1 in 4 children and adolescents experience bullying.¹⁰³
- In Central America, around 22.8 per cent of students report being bullied, with sexual harassment more common among boys (15.3 per cent) than girls (10.8 per cent).¹⁰⁴
- In the Caribbean, the rate is slightly higher at 25 per cent, with clear gender differences: boys face more physical bullying, while girls report more psychological bullying and sexual harassment.¹⁰⁵
- Overall in Latin America and the Caribbean, the average share of boys and girls who experience bullying is nearly identical: 25 per cent for girls and 25.3 per cent for boys.¹⁰⁶

Other surveys point to even higher levels of face-to-face bullying: 71 per cent of children and adolescents reported being bullied at least once in Chile and Costa Rica, and 50 per cent in Argentina.¹⁰⁷

Figure 13: Percentage of adolescents aged 13–17 who reported being bullied at least once in the past 30 days



Source: World Health Organization, Global School-based Student Health Survey, 2009–2019 (latest data available per country).

Children and adolescents say they are bullied – particularly in schools – for many reasons, such as their physical appearance, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, or sexual orientation and identity. These patterns mirror deep-rooted discrimination and exclusion in both schools and society at large.

BOX 14: VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQI+ CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

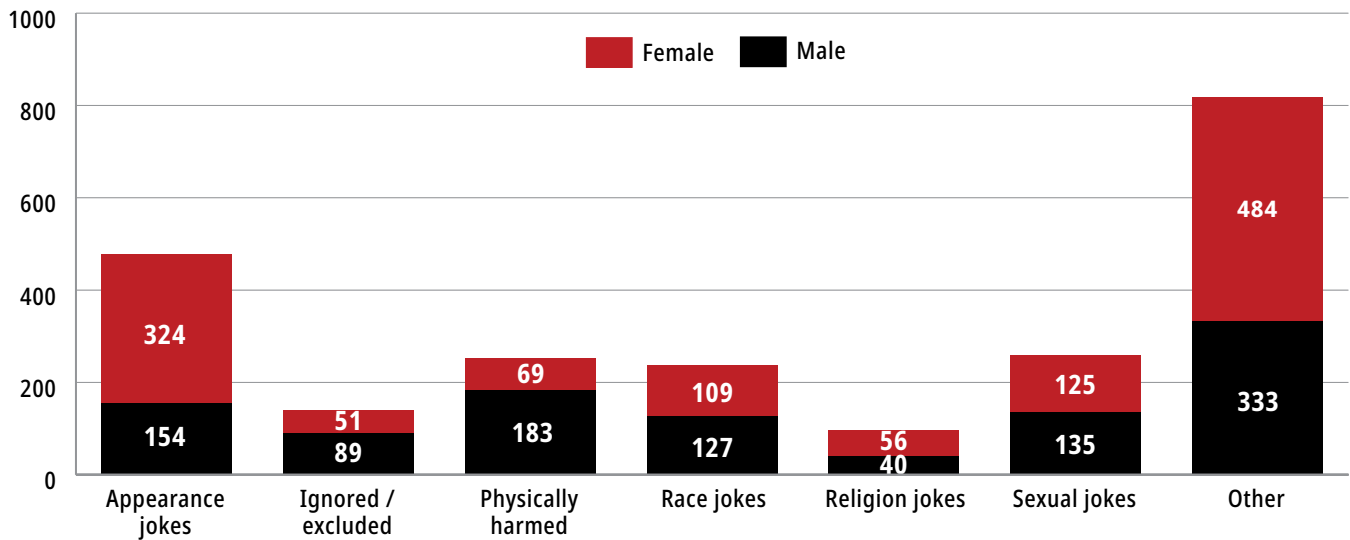
“When I was eight, I told my dad not to buy me boys’ toys but dolls and dresses instead. I told him, ‘I feel like a girl.’ He grabbed me by the hair, beat me with a broomstick, and locked me in a room. I went days without food. He said, ‘If you don’t want to be a boy, you’re going to die.’”

– Trans woman, Honduras¹⁰⁸

Across the region, widespread homophobia and transphobia put LGBTQI+ children and adolescents at greater risk of bullying and discrimination – both at school and at home. A regional survey of LGBTQI+ secondary school students in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay found:

- 74–93 per cent had frequently heard anti-LGBTQI+ remarks at school.
- 49–76 per cent had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- 23–43 per cent reported being pushed or shoved, and 8–17 per cent reported more serious physical attacks.¹⁰⁹

Figure 14: Most reported types of school-based bullying in the region



Source: World Health Organization, Global School-based Student Health Survey, 2025.¹¹⁰

BOX 15: SAFE TO LEARN INITIATIVE

Safe to Learn is a global partnership – including UNICEF and the World Health Organization – that works to end violence against children and adolescents in and around schools. Its Call to Action is a widely endorsed, evidence-based framework that identifies the areas where progress needs to accelerate.

It calls on governments and education actors to:

- put strong policies and laws in place;
- strengthen prevention, risk reduction and response measures in schools;
- challenge harmful social and gender norms and promote positive behaviour change;
- invest resources effectively; and
- build and use evidence to guide action.

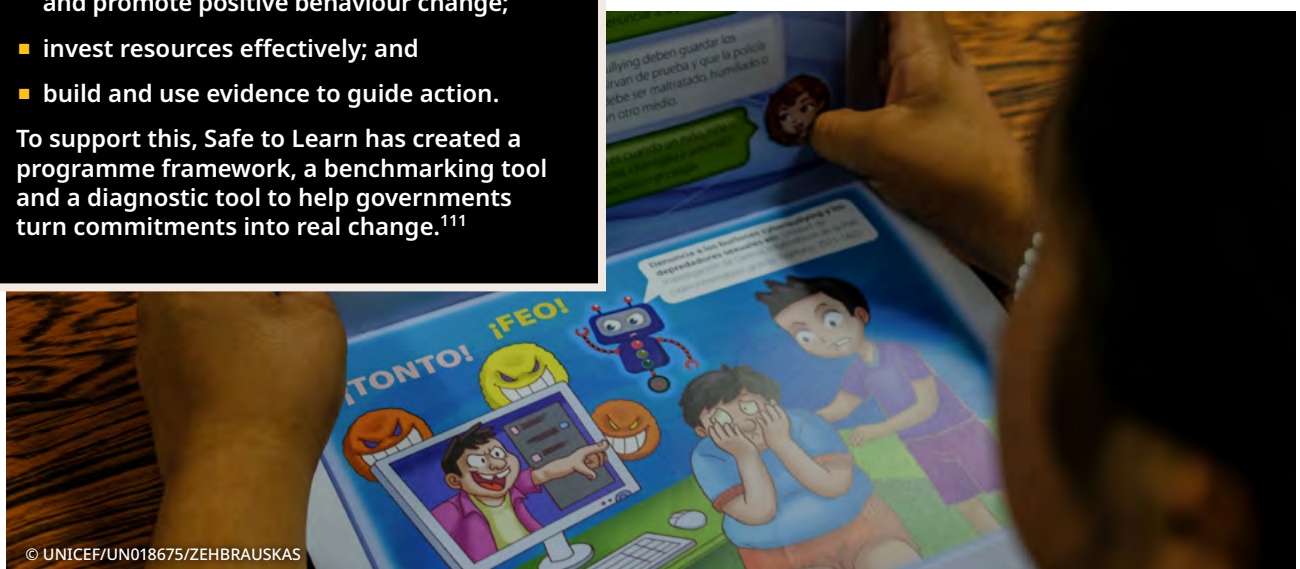
To support this, Safe to Learn has created a programme framework, a benchmarking tool and a diagnostic tool to help governments turn commitments into real change.¹¹¹

What works to reduce bullying in schools?

Evidence shows that effective ways of preventing and reducing bullying in schools include:

- ✓ creating and enforcing anti-bullying laws and policies;
- ✓ implementing school programmes that challenge harmful social and gender norms and promote behaviour change and strengthening response services in schools – including through training school staff, working with children and adolescents to design and implement programmes, and working with parents and communities to support behaviour change.

International and regional initiatives – such as the Safe to Learn initiative (see Box 15) and national school safety programmes – are starting to encourage a more coordinated approach.



CREATING AND ENFORCING ANTI-BULLYING LAWS AND POLICIES

Even with growing awareness of bullying in the region, only about 3 in 10 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have national anti-bullying laws in place. Some countries – like Argentina, Brazil and Colombia – have gone further by legally defining bullying and requiring both public and private schools to take preventive action. But across the region, only 20 per cent of laws include clear support mechanisms for victims.

Where laws do exist, putting them into practice is often a struggle. Limited resources, weak coordination among education authorities, and a lack of training for teachers and school staff make enforcement difficult.

IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL PROGRAMMES AND STRENGTHENING RESPONSE SERVICES AT SCHOOLS

Most school-based interventions come from high-income countries, which means they often need significant adaptation before they can work effectively in the Latin America and the Caribbean context.¹¹² Anti-bullying initiatives in schools usually combine three main elements:

- whole-school or community-wide approaches – focusing on school policies, climate, staff training and parent engagement;
- classroom activities – such as social-emotional learning, bystander skills and role plays; and
- targeted support – for at-risk students through counselling, mentoring or restorative practices.¹¹³

While the focus and methods differ, research shows that multi-component, school-wide programmes are more effective than single-topic lessons. They reduce both victimization and perpetration and have shaped anti-bullying work over the last decade.¹¹⁴ The strongest results come from programmes that:

- ✓ run for more than one school year;
- ✓ are embedded in school policy and monitoring systems; and
- ✓ explicitly train staff and students as active bystanders.

One example is the KiVa approach, first developed in Finland and now used in more than 25 countries. It inspires peers to support victims and stop encouraging bullies.¹¹⁵

Box 16 highlights examples that strengthen teachers' skills to prevent and respond to bullying, alongside student-focused peer behaviour initiatives.

BOX 16: PROMISING ANTI-BULLYING INITIATIVES WITH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Programa Nacional de Convivencia Escolar (PNCE, National Programme for School Coexistence), Mexico. The PNCE was a nationwide initiative of Mexico's Ministry of Public Education during the past administration (2018–2024) that promoted peaceful, inclusive and democratic schools. It supported public schools from pre-primary to secondary with training, protocols for preventing abuse and bullying, and guidance to strengthen emotional and social skills among students, teachers and families.¹¹⁶

Participating schools received:

- capacity-building for local technical teams;
- protocols for preventing and detecting child sexual abuse, bullying and maltreatment; and
- guidance on fostering democratic participation, shared rule-making and student voice.¹¹⁷

Though no full impact evaluation exists, studies show encouraging results. In Sonora, schools with a more positive climate reported less violence. Nationally, most school leaders and teachers found the PNCE useful and believed it improved relationships within schools.¹¹⁸ The current federal administration has reorganized the PNCE and created a website with all the resources and official guidelines the programme generated for bullying prevention and promotion of peaceful schools.¹¹⁹

Violência Nota Zero (Zero Violence), Brazil. This programme delivers 12 weekly sessions for teachers and counsellors, combining workshops and take-home activities to encourage positive relationships and prevent burnout. It improved teachers' mental health, reduced students' self-reported violence and led to some lasting decreases in victimization. Staff also reported a better school climate, though levels of perceived violence between students and staff changed little – showing the need for broader student engagement.¹²⁰

Soy un Buen Amigo (I Am a Good Friend), Peru. In Lima, high-risk secondary students joined workshops on self-reflection, teamwork and positive interaction. They used role play to practise conflict resolution, agreed on new classroom conduct, and involved parents and teachers in strengthening adult-child relationships. Evaluations showed strong results: better protective attitudes, fewer risk factors and a clear drop in bullying.¹²¹

6. ONLINE VIOLENCE

DEFINITION

ONLINE VIOLENCE includes use of the internet, mobile phones or other forms of information communication technology to bully, threaten, harass, groom, sexually abuse or sexually exploit a child or adolescent.¹²²

“ ... I was dating a guy, and we used to send each other photos. Then we broke up and he started sending me messages... until I told him to stop bothering me, that I didn’t want anything to do with him, and then he exploded and started showing my photos to all his friends.”

–16-year-old girl, Argentina¹²³

People who commit online violence – individuals and organized criminal groups – use digital tools, social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook, and video games to exploit children and adolescents. This can include pressuring them into sharing sexual images (through sexting or grooming),¹²⁴ producing sexual content such as live-streamed abuse, or spreading sexual images of children. Increasingly, perpetrators also use artificial intelligence to create fake sexual images of children (deepfakes), which are then used to blackmail them or their families.¹²⁵

Children and adolescents can also harm their peers or former partners online, through sexting, cyberbullying or sharing sexual content without consent.¹²⁶

The impact of online violence is severe. Victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and social isolation – and in the worst cases, it can lead to suicide. Many victims feel powerless, especially when intimate images are shared without their permission.¹²⁷

Online violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: What the data show

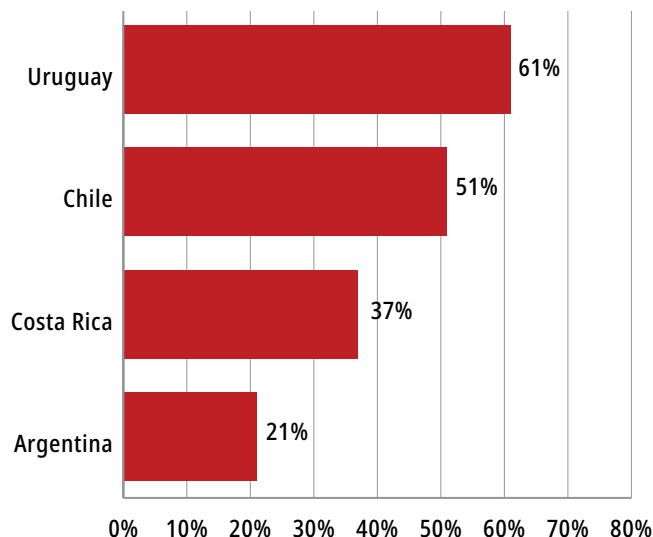
Few countries in the region have undertaken surveys to show how common online violence against children and adolescents is. But we know that:



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- In the past 12 months, 20.4 per cent of 11–17-year-olds in Argentina, Panama and St. Vincent and the Grenadines reported being cyberbullied.¹²⁸
- Between 21 per cent (Argentina) and 61 per cent (Uruguay) of 9–17-year-olds have faced offensive online behaviour at least once (see Figure 15).¹²⁹

Figure 15: Percentage of children facing online offensive behaviour online



Source: Kids Online Surveys, latest data available (2022–2025).

What works to reduce online violence?

Evidence shows that preventing and responding to online violence against children and adolescents includes:

- ✓ creating and implementing laws and policies that recognize online violence and that effectively respond to its challenges and children's and adolescents' needs; and
- ✓ implementing digital literacy, awareness and norm change initiatives.¹³⁰

PUTTING IN PLACE AND ENFORCING LAWS AND POLICIES AROUND ONLINE VIOLENCE

Across the region, governments have taken steps through new laws, stronger child protection systems and prevention strategies such as media campaigns and school awareness programmes. But comprehensive laws are still needed in most countries.¹³¹ Mexico, for example, recently introduced a law on online violence against women and girls, known as Ley Olimpia (Olimpia Law).¹³² Countries like Argentina and Panama have followed and passed an adapted version of this law, with Uruguay and Colombia currently looking to do the same.¹³³ In Argentina, the Ley Micaela (Micaela Law) (2020)¹³⁴ has played a crucial role, leading to a coordinated national strategy to tackle online grooming (see Box 17).



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BOX 17: CLIC DERECHOS: ADDRESSING ONLINE GROOMING IN ARGENTINA

Clic Derechos, an initiative created as part of the National Programme for the Prevention and Awareness of Grooming and Cyberbullying (Programa Nacional para la Prevención y Concienciación del Grooming y el Ciberbullying), works to protect children and adolescents from online risks. Its goals are to teach safe internet use, train school staff, raise public awareness through the media, and explain how and where to report cases.

Clic Derechos has produced practical guidelines for children, adolescents, parents and teachers on how to recognize and respond to online violence. With the support of UNICEF, it launched creative campaigns like a rap contest, where young people aged 12-21 recorded videos on grooming, cyberbullying, digital violence against women and girls, and online privacy. It also organized fairs that reached around 700 adolescents, teaching them about prevention and reporting.

Clic Derechos also strengthened the skills of 500 technical staff working with children and adolescents, focusing on online violence and how to apply Ley Micaela. It also trained 300 call handlers on Linea 102, Argentina's child helpline, so they could better respond to cases of grooming, cyberbullying and other online risks, supported by new action guidelines.

Clic Derechos has proven effective at training teachers and promoting safe internet use among children and adolescents. Importantly, reports of grooming have gone up – showing that children and adolescents are more aware of the issue and feel more confident using reporting mechanisms.¹³⁵

BOX 18: THE WEPROTECT ALLIANCE'S MODEL NATIONAL RESPONSE

The WeProtect Model sets out six key building blocks for keeping children and adolescents safe online:

1. **Laws and policies** – put in place clear legal frameworks to address online child and adolescent exploitation and abuse.
2. **Prevention** – raise awareness among children, parents and teachers about the risks and how to stay safe.
3. **Law enforcement training** – give police and investigators the tools and skills to track, investigate and prosecute online abuse.
4. **Private sector collaboration** – work with tech companies to introduce safety features and reporting mechanisms.
5. **Data and research** – build systems to gather and share reliable data to guide better policies.
6. **Support for victims** – provide accessible services to help children, adolescents and families recover.

The model also includes a maturity framework and practical guidance tools to help governments assess progress and adapt actions to their own national context.¹³⁹

Some forms of online violence are already covered by criminal laws and procedures, but these are not always fully enforced. Common challenges include limited resources, a lack of specialized training for police and legal staff, weak technology to collect digital evidence, and social attitudes that dismiss online violence as 'not real'.¹³⁶

A study across nine countries found that only Brazil, Guatemala and Mexico have specialized police units for online child sexual exploitation and abuse, supported by forensic teams.¹³⁷ In Guatemala, judges and police officers have been trained to strengthen their knowledge on cyber-crime and digital violence.¹³⁸

Globally, the WeProtect Alliance has developed a Model National Response to help governments build effective systems to prevent and respond to online child and adolescent exploitation and abuse (see Box 18).

One major challenge for governments is the lack of reliable data on how widespread online violence against children and adolescents really is – making it harder to design effective policies and programmes. A standout effort to address this gap is Disrupting Harm, an action-research project that has already helped shape government and civil society responses (see Box 19).





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BOX 19: DISRUPTING HARM: A RESEARCH INITIATIVE INFORMING GOVERNMENT ACTION

Disrupting Harm is a joint initiative by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF, carried out in 25 countries – including Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. It gathers data on online sexual exploitation and abuse of children and adolescents through literature reviews, legal analyses and studies surveying young survivors, parents, service providers and justice professionals.

The findings are used to create country-specific road maps with concrete recommendations for governments and civil society. These have already led to new protocols, legal reforms, prevention strategies and stronger capacity among police, law enforcement and social services to respond to online sexual exploitation and abuse of children and adolescents.

For Latin America and the Caribbean, findings will be released in early 2026. Research completed so far includes:

- legal and policy analyses on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in all four countries (by ECPAT International).
- engaging with national authorities in Colombia, Brazil and the Dominican Republic to better understand the scale of online sexual abuse and exploitation and assess law enforcement responses. This resulted in a confidential country report for Colombia, with reports for Brazil and the Dominican Republic under way (led by INTERPOL).
- nationally representative surveys with 4000+ children plus parents in Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico on their experiences of online violence and technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (led by UNICEF).¹⁴⁰
- Latin American and Caribbean countries creating multi-sector technical working groups to coordinate responses once findings are shared in 2025.¹⁴¹

IMPLEMENTING DIGITAL LITERACY, AWARENESS AND NORM CHANGE INITIATIVES

Online tools can play a powerful role in tackling online violence. They can help victims find support, gather evidence, learn coping skills, raise awareness and report abuse. These tools take many forms – websites, apps, games, interactive videos and online learning platforms.¹⁴² For example, Laaha, a virtual platform created by UNICEF, provides information on sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence and online safety (see Box 20).



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BOX 20: LAAHA: PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO DIGITAL GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ECUADOR AND VENEZUELA

Laaha was first piloted in Iraq and Ecuador and is now available in several other countries, including Venezuela. It aims to give women and girls safe access to accurate information on safety and well-being, while connecting them to local services if they need help.



Remember!

Being online is fun but comes with risks like cyberbullying, hate speech, unwanted sexting, and other harmful behavior. Tell a trusted adult, report it, and block the person. Check out our other modules for online safety tips: [Online safety](#), [Using social media safely](#).

Source: Laaha keeping yourself and others safe online <<https://www.laaha.org/en/keeping-yourself-and-others-safe-online>>

On the platform, users can learn about online safety, how to prevent online sexual abuse, cyberbullying, sexting and how to seek support or report online violence. Laaha also includes interactive features like a moderated forum and a chatbot. The content was shaped by what women and adolescent girls said they needed during the design process.

By August 2025, Laaha offered 140 modules covering sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, and online safety. In 2024 alone, the Ecuador platform received nearly 62,000 visits. Teacher training has also helped schools make use of the platform.

Looking ahead, there are plans to expand Laaha to Chile and Colombia by 2026 and to make it available in 25 languages.¹⁴³

“As a school brigadier, I talk to my classmates about the dangers of misusing the internet... I’m happy that the teachers from CHS Alternativo are raising our awareness on online safety.”

– 14-year-old girl, Peru¹⁴⁴

Some countries in the region have created online platforms designed with and for Indigenous adolescent girls and young women. Examples include ENLÁZATE (Link Up) in Guatemala¹⁴⁵ and CHS Alternativo (Capital Humano y Social Alternativo) in Peru.¹⁴⁶ CHS Alternativo supports Murui-Muinan children and adolescents with a culturally adapted mobile app – translated into Murui Bue – alongside workshops, psychosocial care and radio programmes led by trained adolescents. While the project has not yet been formally evaluated, early results show that participants are already sharing what they’ve learned about preventing online sexual exploitation with their peers.

Games are also a promising way to raise awareness about online violence and prevention. In Colombia, Toby y la Escuela de Cristal (Toby and the Crystal School) is a video game for children aged 8–13 that aims to help prevent cyberbullying, supported by classroom materials and teacher training.¹⁴⁷ In Brazil, the game Minha amiga Ana (My Friend Ana) (see Box 21) has already shown positive results in reducing online violence.

BOX 21: MINHA AMIGA ANA (MY FRIEND ANA) IN BRAZIL

The None-in-Three Research Centre in Brazil developed Minha amiga Ana (My Friend Ana), a computer game about a 15-year-old girl whose ex-boyfriend shares intimate images of her online without her consent. Players can take on different roles and make choices that shape the story. The game helps adolescents recognize healthy and unhealthy online relationships, challenge harmful attitudes (especially among boys), build empathy and practise safe online behaviours.

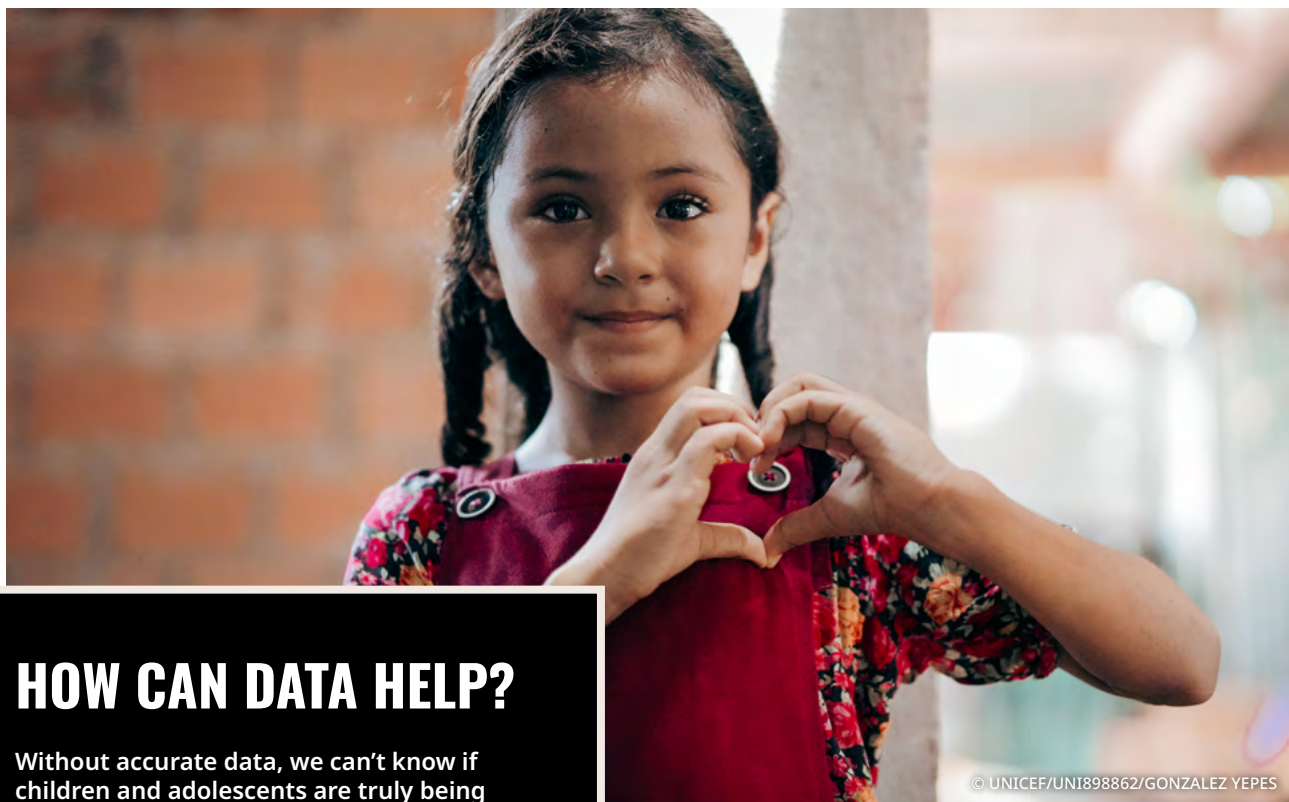
Implemented in schools from October 2022 to January 2023, the game was evaluated with adolescents aged 13–19. After playing, students were:

- less likely to see sexting as fun; and
- less likely to think it was acceptable to share sexual images without consent.

The impact was strongest among boys and when the game was followed by classroom discussions, rather than gameplay alone. Success also depends on involving teachers and parents, so they can reinforce lessons, answer questions and support children who disclose experiences of online violence.¹⁴⁸



7. CALL TO ACTION



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HOW CAN DATA HELP?

Without accurate data, we can't know if children and adolescents are truly being protected. We need better data on the scale and risk factors for different forms of violence, and on solutions that work. Governments in Latin America and the Caribbean must:

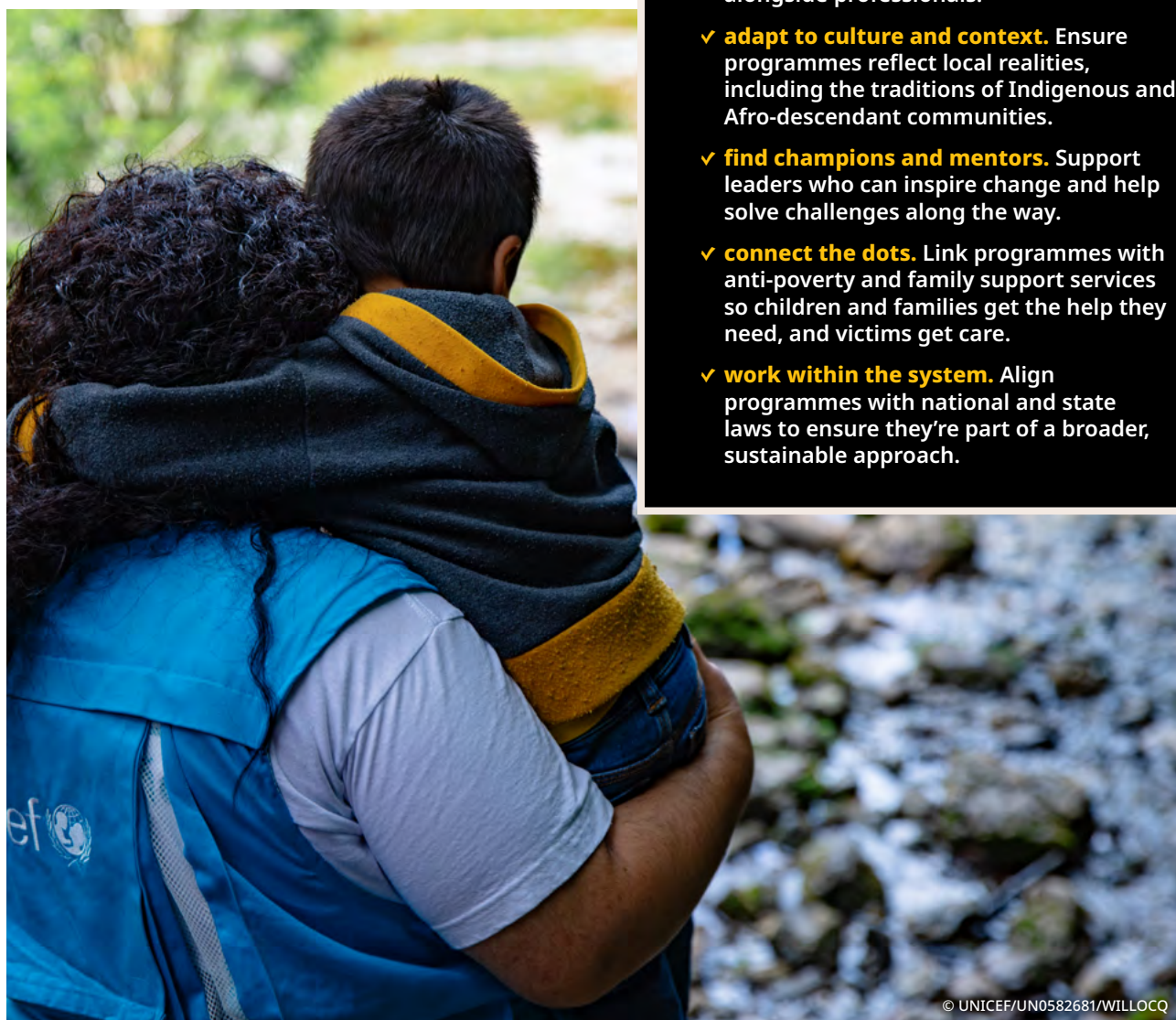
- **collect and publish more data** by asking the right questions in surveys like Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Democratic and Health Surveys, and Global School-based Student Health Surveys. Do this consistently, using the International Classification of Violence against Children (ICVAC), and make results public.
- **document cases of violence** reported to the police or identified by health care services to have better data on how many children and adolescents are affected.
- **document where, when, why and how survivors are using services** and use this data to improve access and quality of support.
- **evaluate programmes** to find out what really works, in which contexts, and strengthen efforts to keep every child and adolescent safe.
- **Better data means better protection.**

Children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean still face unacceptable levels of violence. But the region is also full of energy, innovation and commitment that can change this reality.

Together, we can protect children now and break the cycle of violence for generations to come by:

- **closing the gaps in laws** so every child and adolescent is protected from all forms of violence, online and offline.
- **equipping front-line workers** – police, judges, health staff, teachers, social workers – with the training and resources to support children.
- **supporting parents and caregivers, showing how to interact and establish boundaries with care and respect**, ending violent discipline and helping parents to protect kids online.
- **investing in safe and enabling learning environments for all children** where violent discipline and bullying are not acceptable.
- **scaling up response services across government departments** so every child can live a long and healthy life, get needed support, access justice and heal.

We know what to do. The tools exist. The time to act is now.



When working to reduce violence against children, try to:

- ✓ **create safe spaces for change.** Let participants think about their own beliefs about violence and commit to new ways of acting – in their homes, schools and communities.
- ✓ **offer real alternatives.** Train parents and teachers in positive discipline, and give at-risk adolescents access to education, skills and job opportunities.
- ✓ **design with children, not just for them.** Involve children and adolescents – especially survivors – in shaping initiatives alongside professionals.
- ✓ **adapt to culture and context.** Ensure programmes reflect local realities, including the traditions of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.
- ✓ **find champions and mentors.** Support leaders who can inspire change and help solve challenges along the way.
- ✓ **connect the dots.** Link programmes with anti-poverty and family support services so children and families get the help they need, and victims get care.
- ✓ **work within the system.** Align programmes with national and state laws to ensure they're part of a broader, sustainable approach.

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