

# Poor, Ignorant AND Violent

BY LUCÍA DAMMERT

Can  
Education  
Solve the  
Region's  
Crime  
Problem?



## **EDUCATION**

### **Improving education could reduce violent crime if it raises the incentives for youth to stay in schools and gives them marketable skills when they get out.**

**R**ising rates of violent crime, especially homicide, have turned Latin America into one of the world's most insecure regions over the past decade. Data from multiple sources estimate that an average of six people per day are murdered in Honduras, eight in El Salvador and 14 in Guatemala alone. Latin America's murder rates are currently the second highest in the world—but the situation is particularly grim for young people. Based on World Health Organization estimates, homicide rates among young males in countries such as Colombia and El Salvador are among the world's highest.

The drug trade and organized crime have aggravated the problem. In Rio de Janeiro alone, more than 6,000 children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 18 are estimated to be involved in the drug gangs that control most of the city's *favelas*. At the same time, most of the almost 4 million people incarcerated throughout the region are young, uneducated males with limited labor skills and little expectation of receiving state assistance for rehabilitation.

It makes sense, therefore, to tackle the region's crime and insecurity at its roots, where it can have the most impact: among the tragically high numbers of young people who have felt the brunt of Latin America's crime wave, both as victims and perpetrators.

What should persuade policymakers is that other approaches to improve public safety have so far failed. Ef



## EDUCATION

forts to attack police corruption and implement judicial reforms have had mixed results. Many governments in the region have adapted “tough-on-crime” approaches based on punishment and segregation of specific groups of the population, which have done more harm than good. Instead of trying to address the root causes, governments lowered the age of penal responsibility, increased the severity of punishments and introduced changes in youth detention centers emphasizing police control and punishment over rehabilitation or education.

Even with the best will in the world, Latin America’s traditional criminal justice institutions have been so beset by infrastructure problems that they have been unable to implement consistent policies, and they remain particularly ill-suited to address law and order challenges related to youth violence.

Crime trends have underscored the special burden on economies and societies throughout the region. Most Latin American countries now face the challenge of defining a new perspective on fighting crime, one that is based on educational opportunities and public-private partnerships, with the support of long-term political commitment.

Could improvements in education, particularly in school retention rates, therefore, make a difference?

U.S. research suggests there is a significant relationship between increased time spent in school and a reduction in the probability of incarceration and arrest.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite the importance of the question, there has been little debate on whether improving the quality of the region’s education would have an impact on Latin America’s rising crime rate. It’s time to have that debate, and to do the research required to inform such a debate.

Today, the current education picture is bleak. More

### The School That Changed My Life

Lucía Dammert

#### Colegio Cooperativo San Felipe, Lima, Peru

The whole academic structure of my school—the notion of having to defend your ideas, to discuss historical facts, to read Latin American fiction instead of the traditional novels and to debate religion instead of repeating ideas—affected my intellectual and professional life. If I had to recognize someone it would be the group of teachers that were involved in that academic experience; they made it unique. Most of them were our friends.

than 60 percent of those aged 30–35, and 49 percent of those aged 20–25 lack a high school diploma. This is explained in large part by the precarious economic situation of those age groups.

In many countries, secondary education is a privilege few can afford, and large numbers of young people are neither working nor studying. The percentage of teenagers (aged 12–17) who find themselves neither in a job nor in school is worrying: Honduras (16.4 percent), Nicaragua (13.8 percent), Guatemala (13.2 percent), and El Salvador (12.5 percent).<sup>2</sup> Another report estimates that around 25 percent of Mexicans aged 18–29 are in similar straits.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, unemployment rates among youth are more than double the general rate in the region. Young people from 15 to 29 years old account for about 50 percent of all unemployed workers in Latin

America.

What are those youth not working or studying doing? Nobody really knows.

But in most cases they are believed to be involved with informal and even illegal activities. Obviously not all are linked to violent crimes but there is a concern that a culture of illegality is developing among those working in the informal sector.

While there is anecdotal and basic evidence linking higher levels of undereducated youth with higher levels of violent crime, there has been little in-depth attention. Even in the case of the infamous *maras* (violent juvenile gangs in Central America), often described as violent gangs of undereducated youth, education (or the lack of) has so far not been studied as a factor in their increasing activities. The *maras* have been identified as important players in various criminal activities that coexist in the sub-region, including the trafficking of people, drugs and arms to the U.S.

The signs are everywhere. There is a clear need to focus on the relevance of education as an arena for the development of sound and effective policies that would also limit violence and crime.

---

**Lucía Dammert** is executive director of the Global Consortium on Security Transformation ([www.securitytransformation.org](http://www.securitytransformation.org)).

## Education and Crime: What Is the Evidence?


Most European and North American literature on education and crime demonstrates a strong link between educational attainment and the probability of criminality. The specific direct relationship is still unclear, but studies appear to show that increasing levels of socialization, higher opportunity costs, increasing wage rates, and decreasing unemployment brought about by education help reduce the tendency to pursue crime.

Several studies done by Enrico Moretti of the University of California, Los Angeles showed that education has a positive impact over criminal rates. His analytical model showed that a 10 percent increase in male high school graduation rates would reduce homicide rates by 20 percent and auto thefts by 13 percent.<sup>4</sup> Education seems to have an impact even for those in prison. An analysis of the different experiences of correctional education in the U.S. showed that graduation from high school reduces recidivism.<sup>5</sup>

Applied research has also tried to identify the benefits of further investment on education compared to pursuing tough-on-crime policies. Some studies have concluded that public investment in education is more effective than building jails or hiring more police officers. A RAND Corporation report in 2009 concluded that “increases in educational attainment yield the greatest savings in incarceration costs among those who graduate from high school rather than dropping out,” reinforcing a perspective that public investment in education will have more important benefits for taxpayers.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, Latin American research is still scant, primarily due to the lack of public and accurate information on crime, and to the dearth of systematic, reliable information about education and educational systems in most countries in the region. Nonetheless the few studies done in recent years clearly indicate that violence will increase without the implementation of education improvements.

The decision to continue schooling is linked to



**Violence  
will increase  
without  
education  
improvements.**

general expectations of improvements in the quality of life. However, for many young people, crime rather than education is the fastest, most direct route to economic and even social success. Improved high school graduation rates do not necessarily lead to lower unemployment rates or higher wage rates. The quality of education is poor to begin with, and there is a wide gap between what is taught in schools and the job skills required in the labor market.

For instance, in less than four decades the number of Peruvians without a

high school diploma declined from more than 50 percent to 9 percent. But this trend still left many graduates unemployed or working in the informal sector. In fact, education’s slow evolution in content and methodology has limited innovation and failed to take into account labor market needs and technology in educational programs.<sup>7</sup>

We do not need more infrastructure for better schools. We need a new educational system that tackles the challenges of a new society based on knowledge but also on differential capacities.

Unfortunately the deck is stacked against even those who may seek a different life through education.<sup>8</sup> There is evidence that social environment is an important variable affecting school performance.

Sadly, those neighborhoods where crime is prevalent are not fertile fields for educational improvement. A recent paper based on Chilean data suggests that education policy should turn from an approach that uses the school as its main instrument to one that uses a more comprehensive public education approach. Children exposed to violent environments have higher dropout rates. Sound policy should therefore include urban renewal initiatives, family orientation programs, community participation, and other social policies linked to the general well-being of the population. Moreover, previous work by Harald Beyer (1998) in Chile pointed out that there is a direct relationship between family income and dropout probability.<sup>9</sup>

These results further confirm U.S. research indicating an individual’s neighborhood is a key determinant of



## EDUCATION

who gets better educational outcomes and as a key source of the incentives to get education and to participate in the workforce.<sup>10</sup>

Research has also demonstrated that family relations exert an overwhelming effect on test scores—even greater than parents' level of education. A report done in the U.S. by Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp highlighted the relevance of family ties and common values in developing strong educational results. Specifically, when parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better in school.

Also, when schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that improve student achievement. And when families of all types and communities organize to hold poorly performing schools accountable, studies suggest that school districts make positive changes in policy, practice and resources.<sup>12</sup>

Those results not only allow us to better understand the links between education and violence, but also generate recommendations for better and more effective public policies that would open a door toward an educational system that is inclusive and innovative.

### The Tough but Fertile Road Ahead

We should not have to wait for research to begin to improve education policy as a means to reduce crime. The sorry state of the region's educational system and rising crime rates have made this an urgent concern.

But this means more than addressing retention rates. Mandatory education will not significantly increase enrollment, especially in high school. If the quality of education and links to employment are not central concerns, the rational calculations affecting education will not change.

**Social environment is an important variable affecting school performance.**

Faced with the choice of educating themselves for an uncertain or stagnating labor market and opting for a potentially lucrative, though more dangerous career in crime, many young people will not be effectively deterred in the long term by the threat of imprisonment and punishment.

Critical debate on social policies should address both education and crime as pillars for democratic consolidation, state legitimacy and economic development. Without appropriate public policies, organized crime is likely to be the most attractive employer of young and poor Latin American males. Policymakers and research should therefore focus on younger people who are involved with small-scale illegal activities in the hope of turning them away from more serious careers in crime.

Specific programs should be implemented in high-risk, poor neighborhoods that could include public subsidies for those who graduated from high school. Involving the families should be a long-term goal: it will not only have an impact on a child's education performance but help instill a culture of legality that could reduce levels of street crime. An innovative approach should also include private-public partnerships that could help facilitate a better link between education and the labor market and develop flexible education curricula.

By moving away from rigid instructional templates and by adapting education to meet children's needs, teachers, staff and parents can adjust to the different personalities and learning styles of students. Another worthwhile initiative would introduce a diverse array of professionals as classroom instructors. Finally, more research on crime and education in most Latin American countries will help us develop the kinds of positive incentives that will keep teenagers in school, validate education as a way to succeed and transform schools into a path to constructive employment.

We don't need research, however, to tell us what will happen if we don't act. The region's accelerating crime already provides the tragic answer.

FOR SOURCE CITATIONS SEE:  
[WWW.AMERICASQUARTERLY.ORG/DAMMERT](http://WWW.AMERICASQUARTERLY.ORG/DAMMERT)

# PREVENTING CHILD LABOR

by Jason Alcorn

With more than 5.7 million child workers across Latin America, the exploitation of children is one of the region's most vexing problems. Tackling it requires more than cracking down on employers; it requires giving children a viable alternative.

*Proniño* (For the Child), an initiative launched by Spanish telecom giant Telefónica in 2005, gets kids out of the fields and sweatshops and into schools to ensure a healthier, more productive life. Offering programs in more than 4,000 schools from Mexico to Chile, *Proniño* is the region's largest private program focused on child labor.

It is also one of the most successful, thanks to the work of entrepreneurial leaders like Tania Silva, who oversees *Proniño's* \$7.2 million program in Peru. It's no accident, she says, that much of her work focuses on parents. "If we can show parents that the classroom is a useful place for their children to be, they will begin to value education more."

As in many other countries, youngsters of poorer Peruvian families are often put to work at an early age scavenging in garbage dumps, shining shoes, caring for livestock, and making bricks. Silva's

program first identifies local NGOs which are already working with the families. It then helps them improve local school facilities, create opportunities for teacher training and develop a variety of other service-oriented activities aimed at reinforcing the value of education.

The first step is often convincing families that it's worth the loss of income—in some cases, according to a *Proniño* study, as much as 20 percent—to put their children in the classroom. This study also found that for many poor families, the generations-old patterns of sending children to work rather than to school weigh more heavily than economic calculations.

But that too can be overcome. Silva recalls a single mother who had to be persuaded to send her son to a *Proniño* classroom, "but after three or four years [she] saw how he had advanced and what he had learned." The program's benefits didn't end there. Once the mother, who had not studied beyond primary school, realized that education could create new opportunities, she decided to enter high school herself.

*Proniño* is also concerned with the systemic issues raised by the widespread exploitation of children

for labor. *Fundación Telefónica* has joined with the International Labor Organization (ILO) to lobby for public policies that protect children at the local, national and international levels. The joint collaboration has had a larger impact than what either organization could have done separately, according to Elba Gámez of the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC).

But what happens at the grassroots is still crucial. The story of the Peruvian single mother

was six years old, public school officials told them she wasn't learning anything. "I felt so bad, I cried for my daughter," Valencia recalls. But three years after Ivis was enrolled in *Pan y Miel's* program, she was able to read, write and do basic math—accomplishments that Valencia attributes to the level of personal attention she was given.

"Students need individual attention when they come from a background with little history of formal education," notes Dagmar Thiel, vice

---

**The first step is often convincing families that it's worth the loss of income to put their children in the classroom.**

---

embodies an important facet of the *Proniño* approach: for children to make a successful transition from the workplace to the classroom, the school itself must be part of the relationship between a student and his or her family.

A *Proniño* school in Quito, Ecuador, operated by the *Fundación Pan y Miel* (Bread and Honey Foundation) used that approach to help Karina Valencia and her husband, José Espinosa. When their daughter, Ivis,

president of *Fundación Telefónica* in Ecuador.

The comprehensive approach extended to Ivis' parents. Valencia and her husband were invited to participate in school activities, including business classes. After attending a course taught by a *Fundación Telefónica* instructor, Valencia was able to get a line of credit from a local credit union and open a *cevichería*. "It's always been my dream to have my own business, my own restaurant," she says.