

There are no rigorous studies of preventive interventions to reduce youth involvement in gangs in low- and middle-income countries



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What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines why the implementation of preventive interventions to reduce youth involvement in gangs and gang crime may fail or succeed in low and middle-income countries. The review summarises findings from four studies conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean. These include findings from field observations and interviews with 63 former gang members in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, 940 respondents in 3 Jamaican communities, 24 participants in Nicaragua and 25 participants in Peru.

Youth gang crime poses a serious problem for low and middle-income countries costing billions of dollars in harm, loss of life and social disruption. Preventive interventions are intended to stop crime before it occurs, but there is no evidence as to their effectiveness in low- and middle-income countries.

What did the review study?

Youth gangs are commonly associated with high levels of crime and violence in low and middle-income countries. Gangs are often linked to youth trying to overcome extreme disadvantage and marginalisation.

Preventive interventions are intended to stop crime before it occurs, either by preventing youth from joining gangs or by reducing recidivism by rehabilitating gang members outside of the criminal justice system. This review examines the effectiveness of these preventive interventions in achieving their aims, as well as identifying factors behind successful implementation in low and middle-income countries.

What studies are included?

Included studies reported on youth gangs with participants aged 10-29 and were located in a low- or middle-income country. Effectiveness studies had to use a valid experimental or non-experimental design.

There were no studies that met the criteria for an evaluation of effectiveness.

Four studies evaluating the reasons for implementation success or failure were included in this review. Two of the studies used a purely qualitative study design while the other two used a mixed method study design. All four studies were conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean.



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How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies published until September 2013. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in November 2015.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary was prepared by Ada Chukwudozie and Howard White (Campbell Collaboration) based on the Campbell Systematic Review 2015:18 'Preventive Interventions to Reduce Youth Involvement in Gangs and Gang Crime in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review' by Angela Higginson, Kathryn Benier, Yulia Shenderovich, Laura Bedford, Lorraine Mazerolle and Joseph Murray (DOI 10.4073/csr.2015.18). The summary was redesigned, proofread and produced by Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration). Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.

What are the main results in this review?

It is not possible to make any conclusions regarding the effectiveness of preventive interventions.

Four factors may be important for intervention design and implementation:

1. Having a range of programme components that appeal to youth such as arts and sports.
2. Active engagement of youths and gang leaders in forming and implementing the programme.
3. Ensuring continuity of social ties outside the gang which are fragile and may not be preserved after short-term interventions.
4. Ongoing violence and gang involvement limits successful implementation so needs to be addressed.

What do the findings in this review mean?

Preventive gang interventions may be more likely to be successfully implemented where the four factors listed above are present.

The lack of rigorous evaluations of preventive gang interventions in low and middle-income countries means it is not possible to draw any conclusions about which interventions are most effective in reducing youth involvement in gangs in these contexts. More quantitative and qualitative research on the effectiveness of preventive gang programs is needed in order to determine the best intervention practice.

